REPORT  
ON  
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH  

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Saint Leo’s College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Irish and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two and a half days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the deputy principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix to this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Students are divided between three bands in first year. There is a higher level and an ordinary level in each band and all students are given a fair chance to take either level according to their own wishes and those of their parents. School management is considering the creation of mixed ability classes for first year from September 2010 and it is recommended that this approach be undertaken. The current arrangements continue for second and third year. A seventh teacher is made available in third year to reduce the number of students in the Irish classes and this extra support is commended. Usually, half of the classes at junior cycle attempt higher-level Irish and the other half take Irish at ordinary level. Four out of the seven classes created in the current third year are taking Irish at higher level. Teachers’ dedication in encouraging students to remain in higher level according to their ability is commended. Again in Transition Year (TY) classes are mixed ability, a practice which is in line with the general philosophy of TY. There are six Irish classes in fifth and sixth year. There are three ordinary level and three higher-level classes in the two year groups.

There are eleven teachers of Irish in the school. They are all graduates of Irish and they all have years of experience in teaching the subject. The classes and the levels are rotated between all the teachers, under the direction of school management, so that everyone gets the opportunity to teach the various age groups and levels.

Eighty nine students are exempt from studying Irish out of a total of nine hundred and thirty seven students in the school. Forty seven students are exempt due to learning difficulties. Thirty nine exemptions are for students who came from abroad and three other students have exemptions due to the fact that they spent over four years living outside of the jurisdiction. School management gives every opportunity and encouragement to students who are exempt from Irish to learn the language. Three students who are exempt from Irish are learning the language at present. The positive outlook of management in this regard is commendable.
It was reported that every effort is made to develop and foster the students’ experience of Irish as a living language. Events are organised during Seachtain na Gaeilge, for example, a table quiz, a treasure hunt, a poster competition and a presentation of fáinní to the senior students. In addition, the students take part in Irish debates and plays and a theatre company is occasionally invited to the school to hold drama workshops for various groups of students. All these efforts are commended and the effort and time which is spent by the teachers is recognised. It is recommended that an attempt be made to further develop some of those activities and that consideration be given to the establishment of an Irish club for those who are interested in speaking Irish in an informal setting in the school. The Irish language competitions such as GLEO and G! could be entered which would give a focus to the work of promoting Irish in the school.

A certain number of students go to the Gaeltacht every year. The school is commended for its efforts in providing students and their parents with details of Irish courses and Gaeltacht courses available locally as well as those further afield. There is much benefit to be gained in informing students and their parents about the advantages of spending time on an Irish or Gaeltacht course. One student from the school receives a Gaeltacht scholarship each year based on progress and interest in Irish and the school is commended for this practice.

The Irish teachers are not classroom based which makes it difficult to create a simulating learning environment for Irish in the classrooms. Even so, some attempts had been made by teachers to display material relating to the teaching and learning of Irish and there were poster and, charts as well as students’ own work displayed here and there in the classrooms. This approach is commended and it is recommended that an attempt be made to ensure that as much signage as possible is displayed in Irish around the school so that the language has a high profile in St. Leo’s College.

The vast majority of the Irish teachers have attended one of the in-service courses organised by the Second Level Support Service for Irish over the last few years. Some suggested methodologies from the courses were employed in a number of Irish classes observed. These methodologies helped to make lesson content more interesting for the students and this is commended. The principal reported that teachers are given every opportunity to attend in-service courses and the registration fee for Comhar na Múinteoirí Gaeilge is paid by the school. It is recommended that all teachers take the opportunity of attending courses given by the Support Service if possible.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The Irish teachers regularly meet as a group. Minutes in Irish from these meetings were provided which recorded the main issues discussed including: allocation of students to classes, planning, Seachtain na Gaeilge, extracurricular and co-curricular activities, booklists and examinations.

One of the Irish teachers is nominated every year to take charge of planning for the co-ordination of teaching and learning Irish. The following are the main duties of the coordinator: agreeing booklists, calling meetings, examining levels in the various year groups, the departmental plan and planning Seachtain na Gaeilge with the help of the staff. It is clear that the coordinator has a very specific role and this approach is commended.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available on the days of the inspection. The plan gives a short description of the department’s general aims and objectives as well as a short description of the organisation of the classes and the Irish department. Reference is also
made to teaching methodologies, resources, planning for a multicultural society and cross-curricular planning. It is recommended that more detail be included in the plan regarding the allocation of students to classes, the banding system and the school’s approach to the promotion of Irish in general. The plan gives a description of the list of topics and subjects for each year group and for the various levels from third year. Learning objectives and aims are also included. The work completed on the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish is to be commended. It is recommended, however, that specific reference be made to the use of a range of resources and methodologies for the various classes and levels. It was reported that it is intended to equip all classrooms with a laptop computer and a data projector in the future. There should be a reference in the plan to the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in the Irish classroom. In-service courses in ICT, in the Irish classroom, are being held by the Second Level Support Service for Irish in education centres all over the country and it is recommended that the Irish teachers take the opportunity to attend one of these courses.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in TY was provided as part of the Irish plan during the inspection. It is clear that a good effort is being made to provide an interesting programme for students during that year. It is recommended however, that more details be included in the plan which would demonstrate exactly what is being carried out by the students on a weekly basis and that the course might perhaps be designed around various modules. It is recommended that the teachers continue to locate interesting sources and materials for the students during that year. It is further recommended that the focus would always be on giving students experience of Irish as a living language.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Extremely good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, instruction and communication in most of the classes observed. The teachers made every effort to avoid the use of translation as much as possible by using gestures, explanations in Irish and other strategies to ensure that the students understood the lesson content. The teachers’ dedication to using the target language and avoiding translation is commended. One case was observed, however, in which everything said during the lesson was translated into English. The approach in this case was an impediment to language acquisition. It is recommended that the policy of the Irish department in relation to use of the target language be clearly defined in the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. In this way, all teachers will be enabled to adopt the same approach in the interests of continuity and appropriate language acquisition.

Worthwhile efforts were made in most classes observed to provide the students with opportunities to speak and communicate in the target language by using group and pair work. This approach is highly commendable. It is essential that the students be given regular opportunities to practice and use what they learn in class on an applied basis. It should be ensured, however, that the learning objectives of the group and pair work be achieved. For example, it can be effective sometimes to allow students to work together on filling the gaps in written passages but it is not an effective approach for encouraging students to speak in the target language. Due consideration must be given to the goals of class activities as well as regular review of the learning outcomes of those activities for the students. Although the students had opportunities to use the target language in most of the classes observed, some cases were observed in which the students were given no opportunity to speak except to answer the teachers’ questions. It is recommended that the students’ language skills be effectively developed in every class. It is not good practice, for example, to spend an entire lesson period on one aspect of language learning such as listening comprehension or written work.
The teachers were energetic and diligent in the lessons observed. The teachers circulated around classrooms ensuring that work was being completed and that the students understood what was required. A good rapport and mutual respect between students and teachers was evident. The teachers succeeded in encouraging students to work diligently for the most part and discipline was excellent. Students were continually praised for their efforts during the lessons.

Teachers sought answers to their questions in the target language in many of the classes observed and that approach is commended. Repetition was employed in some classes to ensure that the students were able to pronounce new words and sentences and pronunciation was corrected. This is good practice as students are more confident in speaking when they are confident in their pronunciation. It is recommended that the abovementioned practices regarding repetition and correction of pronunciation be applied to all classes.

Use was made of other resources as well as the textbook in some classes observed. For example, a photograph was used to elicit conversation from students about current affairs, ICT was used to present a picture and music to students on different slides and in another case some materials were brought into the class as props to help the students to compose stories based on those props. In those instances the work of the teachers in relation to preparing interesting and stimulating material for the classes is commended. It is recommended, however, that an even wider range of materials and resources be used in the Irish classes in order to make the context of the lessons relevant for the students and to make learning the language more attractive for them. Music, photographs, television programmes, podcasts, the printed media, DVDs and pictures may all be used to contextualise lesson content for the students. If pictures, music or other resources are used, they should be up to date and clearly legible so that the students can fully benefit from them. It is recommended that the teachers include the range of resources to be used when they plan lessons in future.

Effective use was made of the whiteboard in the Irish classes to display keywords as well as questions and answers. Students’ grammar mistakes were corrected in certain classes observed and that practice is commended.

ASSESSMENT

House examinations are organised in the school in the summer and a report is sent to parents after those examinations. Regular contact is maintained with the parents through parent teacher meetings, the school newsletter, the school’s website and the school journal.

A significant amount of work was evident in most of the copybooks observed. It was evident that homework is assigned and corrected on a regular basis. In the main, the copybooks were very carefully corrected. It is recommended, however, that the teachers agree a system of correction which would ensure that the students learn from their mistakes and that a similar system be implemented in all classes.

Mock oral examinations are held for students in sixth year and TY. Students in TY are given the opportunity to apply for the Fáinne examination as part of the year’s assessment and that practice is commended. If it is not already the practice to assess oral skills in all year groups, it is recommended that the oral ability of all students be formally assessed from first year. It is recommended that the results of that assessment be shown as a separate mark in the school report sent to parents. In this way, students and their parents should be made aware of the importance of this aspect of language learning from the outset.
A high number of students take the Irish higher-level papers in the state examinations at Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level. There is very good attainment at both levels. A very small number of students take the foundation level Irish paper from time to time and they do well.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The seventh teacher provided as an extra support to lessen the numbers of students in classes in third year is commended.
- The efforts of the teachers in relation to providing a programme of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities in Irish which allows the students to experience Irish as a living language are commended.
- The work completed on the plan for the teaching and learning of Irish is commended.
- Extremely good use was made of Irish as the language of classroom management, instruction and communication in the majority of the classes observed.
- The way in which opportunities of communication were created for students in the target language by using pair and group work is commended.
- It was clear that a good relationship existed between the students and the teachers and discipline was excellent.
- A high number of students take the higher-level papers in the state examinations at Junior and Leaving Certificate level, and there is very good attainment at both levels.

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 extra-curricular and co-curricular work for Irish be expanded and that new initiatives be implemented to promote the language in the school such as the establishment of an Irish club.
- There is much benefit to be gained in informing students and their parents about the advantages of spending time on an Irish or Gaeltacht course.
- It is recommended that the plan for teaching and learning Irish in the school be further developed and that more details be included about different methodologies, as well as the use of resources, the use of ICT and the creation of opportunities for target language communication in the class.
- It is recommended that a wider range of materials and resources be used during Irish lessons.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and with the deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

*Published June 2011*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of St. Leo’s College welcomes the Inspection of Irish and the subsequent Report. The Board is particularly appreciative of the many aspects commended by the Inspector during the two and a half days she spent in St. Leo’s College.

As a school we are extremely encouraged by the very positive statements contained in the Inspector’s Report such as:

1. A good rapport and mutual respect between students and teachers was evident.
2. Teachers were energetic and diligent in the lessons observed.
3. They are all graduates of Irish and they all have years of experience in teaching the subject.
4. Discipline is excellent.
5. The teachers’ dedication to using the target language and avoiding translation is commended.
6. Exemptions-positive outlook of management in this regard.
7. Students were continually praised for their efforts during the lessons.
8. Every effort is made to develop and foster the students’ experience of Irish as a living language.
9. Copybooks were carefully corrected.
10. One student receives a Gaeltacht scholarship each year based on progress and interest in Irish and the school is commended for this practice.
11. Teachers’ dedication in encouraging students to remain in higher level according to their ability is commended.
12. Regular contact is maintained with parents.
Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board equally welcomes the 4 recommendations contained in the Report. The Board acknowledges these recommendations as exemplars of good practice which will improve the standards of excellence in St. Leo’s College. The Board commits itself to the implementation of these recommendations.

1. As a school we have already commenced Mixed Ability Grouping in this academic year 2010/2011 and it is working particularly well.

2. The Irish Department confirms its ongoing commitment to further expand the provision of extra-curricular and co-curricular activities throughout the school to include the establishment of an Irish club.

3. The Irish Department also confirms its commitment to further develop the plan for teaching and learning Irish to include more detail about various methodologies, resources and the use of ICT. To further facilitate the use of ICT every classroom in the school will have been equipped with a PC and a Data Projector before the commencement of the Academic Year 2011-2012.

4. The Irish Department currently shares many materials and resources. In keeping with the Recommendations the Department confirms its commitment to further expand its range of materials and resources.