Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Christian Brothers College,
Monkstown, County Dublin
Roll number: 60180R

Date of inspection: 27 September 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Christian Brothers College, Monkstown. 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 one day, during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed the teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with the students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

First-year students in Christian Brothers College, Monkstown, are placed in mixed-ability classes. At the end of first year, the students are divided into three higher-level and two ordinary-level classes, based on the results of the summer exams. There are three ordinary-level and two higher-level classes in third year in the current year. The school management is giving extra support to Irish in second and third year by creating an extra class for these two years. In this way, extra support is provided for students who have difficulty in learning the language. The school management is commended for making this extra support available. There are two higher-level and two ordinary-level classes in Transition Year (TY). This pattern is continued in fifth year. The number of higher-level classes falls to one in sixth year and there are four ordinary-level classes in this year group. The number of students taking higher-level Irish in the state exams, especially in the Leaving Certificate examination, is very low, taking the school context into account. It was reported on the day of the inspection that the school intends to address this matter urgently and that the Irish-teaching staff and the management will consider ways of bringing about a radical increase in the number of students taking higher-level Irish. It was also reported that the three higher-level classes in second year at present indicates that an effort is being made to change the pattern. The management and Irish teachers are commended for their awareness that this problem must be tackled.

Five teachers are responsible for the teaching of Irish in the school at present, all with Irish in their degrees and with years of experience in teaching the subject. Under the guidance of school management, the various year groups and levels are rotated among all the teachers, taking continuity from year to year into account. This approach is commended because it gives every teacher experience of teaching all levels and year-groups.

Twenty-four of the five hundred and sixty three students in the school at present have exemptions from the study of Irish. Nineteen of these exemptions have been given on the basis of learning
difficulties and the remaining five have been awarded to students who received their primary education outside of Ireland before the age of eleven years.

Junior cycle classes have four class-periods per week for Irish, Transition Year students also have four and fifth and sixth-year students have five periods per week. The senior cycle provision is very satisfactory, but it is recommended that the school management investigate the possibilities of providing one extra class-period per week for one year at least of the junior cycle. This would help also with the above stated objective of increasing the number of students taking Irish at higher level in state examinations.

Certain efforts are made to raise the profile of Irish in the school and to give the students experience of Irish as a living language, by organising events during *Seachtain na Gaeilge*. Seachtain na Gaeilge has been celebrated in the school for the past few years, although it was reported that it was not as successful last year as in previous years. It is recommended that the Irish-teaching staff and the school management consider the possibilities of organising an enjoyable programme of events and occasions run through the medium of Irish throughout the whole school-year. Some suggestions regarding events that might be organised were offered during the inspection and the Irish-teaching staff will have their own ideas. It is extremely important that Irish be presented as a living language outside the classroom. A stimulating cross-curricular and extra-curricular programme would enhance the work done by the teachers in the classrooms.

The principal reported that an annual budget is set aside for the purchase of resources and materials for the teaching and learning of Irish. There are other ways also of accessing extra resources: applications from individual teachers and applications from the co-ordinator for Irish. It is recommended that an inventory be compiled of all the resources available in the school for the teaching and learning of Irish and that the inventory be included as part of the plan for Irish in the school. It is also recommended that the teachers access the websites of An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta at [www.cogg.ie](http://www.cogg.ie) and the Second Level Support Service for Irish at [www.muinteirgaeilge.ie](http://www.muinteirgaeilge.ie) to update their awareness of new teaching-resources and the latest publications on the market.

It was reported that a certain number of students attend Irish courses in the Gaeltacht every year, but exact numbers were not available on the day of the evaluation. The school management is advised to remind students and their parents of the advantages of spending some time at one of the Gaeltacht courses or on an Irish course. It is recommended that precise information be provided for parents about the Gaeltacht courses available, and about residential and other Irish courses available nearer home. The parents of students at the school should also be informed about the new marking system in operation for Irish in state exams and the extra emphasis now being placed on oral Irish. Transition Year students are taken on a visit to Connemara for a week and spoken Irish is particularly emphasised during that week.

Most of the teachers of Irish have their own classrooms. A certain number of posters or other materials relevant to the teaching of Irish were on display on the walls. These displays could be greatly enhanced in some cases, however, by displaying more materials which could be regularly used during Irish lessons as a support to teaching and learning.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The teachers of Irish meet formally as a group once a term and it was reported that they meet more often if necessary. One of the teachers of Irish is nominated as co-ordinator of planning for
the teaching and learning of Irish. This responsibility is assumed by different staff-members in turn, a commendable approach, which affords every teacher an opportunity to take a leadership role in planning for the development and promotion of the language in the school.

A plan for the teaching and learning of Irish was made available on the day of the inspection. The plan includes teaching aims and objectives, layout of classes, a reference to the medium of instruction in the Irish classes, a reference to the development of all the language skills and to the use of various teaching methodologies. The plan also contains information on the textbooks being used and general reference is made to the teaching resources and assessment methods normally used. Schemes of work for all the different levels and year-groups were also made available. Those schemes of work contain accounts of the topics to be covered, as well as aspects of grammar to be included and various activities to be undertaken in class. It was evident that time and trouble had been invested in the planning for Irish and the teachers are highly commended for this commitment. To build on the work already completed in relation to planning, it is recommended that more information be included in the schemes of work on the use of methodologies and teaching-resources to make the learning of Irish more relevant and more interesting for the students.

On the day of the evaluation, a plan was made available for the teaching and learning of Irish in Transition Year. Although the plan looks interesting and stimulating, the layout is not sufficiently defined. It is recommended that the TY programme be laid out on a modular basis and that it contain precise information on what the students would be doing from week to week and what strategies will be used to facilitate and develop students’ ability to communicate through Irish.

There was comprehensive planning for all the classes observed. Worksheets and notes had been prepared for distribution to the students during class.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The use of Irish as the language of classroom management, of communication and of instruction in all the classes observed was excellent. Teachers made great efforts to avoid the use of direct translation from Irish to English. Students were asked to explain various words and phrases in simple Irish, a praiseworthy approach. Teachers’ commitment to the use of the target language and their adherence to the objectives of the plan for Irish in that regard, are commended.

Pair-work and group-work were used during some of the classes observed. This is highly commended because it affords students the opportunity of speaking Irish in class and of making practical use of what they learn. It is recommended, however, that communication strategies be used in all Irish classes. All students should have an opportunity of speaking Irish during every Irish class as part of various activities, not just in answering questions asked by the teacher. In a couple of classes observed, the whole emphasis was on the written language. It is important that all the language skills – speaking, writing, reading and listening – be developed and promoted during every Irish class. Although writing skills must be developed in class from time to time, it is recommended that most of the writing be done as homework.

During some of the Irish lessons, good, effective use was made of various teaching-resources, among them being cartoons, charts showing memory-maps, film, an overhead projector and various books. The use of these materials was praiseworthy indeed. They greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the teaching and the enjoyment the students derived from learning and from the subject-matter of the lessons. Good use was also made of the white board also, to record and explain answers to questions, as well as to show new key-words and phrases. It is recommended
that a wider range of resources be used in all Irish classes, to put the subject-matter of the lessons, especially the literature course, in a contemporary context for the students. The use of extra resources such as music, film, clips from television programmes, podcasts, pictures, photos and DVDs is of considerable help in improving and developing students’ grasp of the subject-matter of the lesson. It is recommended that the Irish-language communication media be regularly used also.

The teachers were active and engaged during the Irish classes. Some teachers made valiant efforts to make the subject-matter of the lesson interesting and attractive for the students; these efforts are highly commended. The teachers showed patience and understanding towards students who had difficulty with learning the language. Some students had difficulty with Irish verbs and the various tenses. It is recommended that grammar charts and other support materials be used in the classrooms. As previously mentioned if such charts are displayed on the classroom walls, they can be referred to regularly and this supports students’ learning.

A few notable examples of good teaching practice were observed in certain classrooms visited. In one case, the teacher spent some time showing students how to illustrate character and character-traits through effective use of adjectives. Samples of work to be undertaken were illustrated on the whiteboard and the students, who were working in groups, were strongly encouraged to apply themselves enthusiastically to the work. In another case observed, mind-maps were used to test students’ knowledge of a story. Students, working in groups, were directed to illustrate elements of the story on charts around the classroom. This activity was successful. All of the students were working hard and it was evident that they had a good knowledge of the story they were studying. Teachers’ efforts to devise creative ways of presenting the subject-matter of the lessons to the students in an interesting and attractive way are commended, as are their efforts to encourage the students to undertake their work actively and enthusiastically.

In certain cases observed, mistakes in grammar and pronunciation were corrected; this is commended. It is recommended that this approach be adopted in all classes. Repetition can be used to ensure that students pronounce words and phrases correctly. The more aware students are of the correct pronunciation of the language, the more confident they will be in attempting to speak the language.

**ASSESSMENT**

In-school exams are organised at Christmas and in the summer every year. Some teachers organise mid-term tests also. School reports are sent to parents after the house exams and parents are informed about the results of other tests at the parent-teacher meetings organised annually for each year-group.

The principal reported that there are various practices in operation in the school regarding the organisation of oral exams for students. It is recommended that teachers agree a common policy regarding conducting oral exams for all year-groups and that this policy be incorporated in the plan for teaching and learning the language. Every student in the school should take oral tests from first year onwards. The results of those tests should be presented as a discrete mark in the reports sent to parents. This indicates to both students and parents how important oral skills in the language are.

There was a significant amount of work in the copybooks examined. There was a variety of practice in operation, however, regarding the correction of that work. Some copies were very carefully corrected, with a mark or grade awarded as well as a reference to the standard of the
work and to the student’s progress. It is recommended that the teachers agree a common policy on correcting copies and that that policy be part of the plan for teaching and learning Irish in the school.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The extra support for Irish provided by the creation of an extra class in second and third year is commended.
- The work completed to date on planning for the teaching and learning of Irish is commended.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, communication and instruction in the classes observed was excellent.
- Some of the teachers of Irish made great efforts to present lessons to the students in an interesting and stimulating way.
- Examples of good teaching practice and of the use of a good range of teaching resources were seen in some of the Irish lessons observed.

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

- It is recommended that an enjoyable stimulating, extra-curricular and cross-curricular programme for Irish be devised, to support teachers’ work in the classrooms.
- It is recommended that the Transition Year programme be laid out more precisely, indicating exactly what students would be doing from week to week.
- It is recommended that a wider range of resources be used in all Irish classes.
- It is recommended that, as well as the other language skills, communication skills also be assessed from first year onwards.
- It is recommended that the school management and the Irish-teaching staff consider various strategies for increasing the number of students taking higher-level Irish in the state exams.

A post-evaluation meeting with the principal was organised at the conclusion of the evaluation, to present and discuss the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation.

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**Appendix**
School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

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 Irish Department within the school are undertaking to implement the key recommendations within the report.