An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Maryfield College
Drumcondra, Dublin 9
Roll number: 60840K

Date of inspection: 26 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Maryfield 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 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 to the subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Irish enjoys a high status as a curriculum subject in the school, due to the efforts made by the teachers in the subject. From the outset students are encouraged to take Irish in the Junior Certificate examination at the highest level appropriate to their ability. A review of statistics shows a very significant number of students taking the examination at higher level. This number decreases quite considerably in senior cycle in the Leaving Certificate examination for reasons relating to subject choice for third level. There is no foundation level class in junior cycle and only a very small number of students take this level in the Junior Certificate examination. A small number of students take foundation level in the Leaving Certificate examination. In addition to these very positive figures the number of students with an exemption from Irish is low – five per cent of the total student population. It is recommended that the school investigate all the reasons why a significant number of students who take higher level in junior cycle drop down to ordinary level in the Leaving Certificate examination. It would be worthwhile encouraging more students to undertake the subject at higher level in light of the changes coming into effect in 2010 in the marks to be awarded for oral Irish.

The Irish department is well organised and all the teachers of Irish are diligent in their work. They are conscious of and well informed about the learning needs of incoming students and good links have been established with the feeder primary schools. A few years ago a number of teachers from the primary schools were invited to the school to explain the objectives, methodologies and assessment system of the revised primary school curriculum for Gaeilge. This initiative is to be commended and teachers have gained a better understanding of the continuity which is necessary in the subject.
Teachers are particularly interested in students who display good general ability but who did not perform well in Irish in the primary school. Irish classes in first year and up until Christmas time in second year are of mixed ability. This arrangement enables these students to improve and to gain satisfaction from making fresh progress in the subject. At Christmas time in second year classes are divided into two bands, one at an ability level higher than the other. Higher level Irish is provided in both bands and another ordinary level class is offered concurrently in both bands. In this way students are facilitated to take ordinary level from second term onwards, or at a later stage, as they wish. This arrangement is continued in third year. The Irish department is to be commended for the efforts being made to renew the interest of first year students in the subject and to set high expectations for them in the subject. The school is succeeding in its objective of encouraging students to take on the challenge of higher level in the Junior Certificate examination.

School management strongly supports the promotion of the subject. At the outset this is evident from the timetabled provision for Irish which is good in both junior and senior cycles. Provision of resources for the subject such as CD players, tape recordings and Irish medium newspapers is also good. Information and communications technology (ICT) resources for the subject are being well developed. At the time of the evaluation one of the teachers was undertaking a course in the use of ICT resources in teaching Irish, organised by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) and this information was being shared with colleagues. Among the six teachers of the subject in the school, the three principal teachers of Irish have their own designated classrooms where a stimulating atmosphere, supportive of learning is provided.

Extra support is offered to Leaving Certificate students in their preparation for the Irish oral examination. On a Saturday, shortly before the oral examinations take place, ‘Lá na Gaeilge’ (Day of Irish) is organised and the teachers of Irish help students to practise for the oral. Students contribute a fee to engage teachers from outside the school to act as examiners. The teachers of Irish organise all the activities of the day without any recompense for themselves. This day of preparation and support has been organised for a number of years and attendance is always high. This is a further example of the endeavours of both teachers and students to make the very best effort in the subject.

All the teachers of Irish are afforded equal opportunity to teach higher level and as a result all six teachers have broad experience of teaching the subject and all teachers are appropriately qualified in Irish. One teacher has experience as an assistant examiner of the Leaving Certificate higher level examination while other teachers have experience as examiners of oral Irish at Leaving Certificate.

**Planning and Preparation**

The planning work presented was of a high standard. There is collaboration and co-operation among the teachers of Irish and all the teachers actively participate in the planning and review work. This year there is a trainee teacher in the school who is studying for the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). It is a good sign of the organisation of the Irish department that the work of this teacher is also included in the subject plan. It is evident that this teacher is being supported and is being given constructive guidance.

The co-ordinator of the Irish department is the most senior teacher of Irish and undertakes these responsibilities in a voluntary capacity. This teacher is one of two teachers who are currently the
main teachers of Irish. The duties of the post are being carried out effectively which gives the other teachers a very clear picture of the responsibilities of the department co-ordinator. It is recommended that the position of co-ordinator be rotated among all members of the department in order to develop capacity among them. It would be even more beneficial if each co-ordinator would plan to set out a programme of improvements as an objective for their term, even if it were only one aspect to be improved. This would introduce freshness and a leadership role into the position.

It is evident from the record of minutes that meetings of the Irish department take place every six weeks approximately. The subject plan shows that teachers reflect on their work and that this forms an integral part of collaborative planning meetings. The subject plan for 2009/10 contains an account and an analysis of the work of the Irish department for the previous year 2008/09. Attention is paid to the positive aspects of that year’s work and focus is placed on the future for the year 2009/10. Among these is the aim of greater recognition for Irish on a whole-school basis. Additional activities are targeted for Seachtain na Gaeilge (Irish Language Week) and a writing competition in Irish to be introduced for second and third years. It is planned to publish the winning entries in the school newsletter. The primary aim of this initiative is to encourage students to express themselves through the medium of Irish and in this way to increase their confidence in the language. All these efforts are highly commended.

Minutes of meetings also show other efforts which are ongoing to improve the subject area. For example, extra work has been invested in providing a stimulating learning environment in the classrooms where Irish is taught. Teachers of Irish collated their PowerPoint presentations to form one resource and a copy was made available to each teacher on a USB memory stick. Currently the introduction of material in Irish on the school’s website is being considered. The subject plan contains a good account of collaboration with other subject areas such as Art, History, Geography, Music, Home Economics, Modern Languages and Computing, in the interest of linking Irish with the wider school curriculum. These activities are a positive testimony to the planning work in the Irish department.

The mission statement of the Irish department shows that emphasis is placed on oral proficiency. This statement is in the form of an injunction to the teachers themselves. It reads ‘Múin an teanga trí mheán na Gaeilge’ (Teach the language through the medium of Irish) and ‘Labhair Gaeilge sa rang’ (Speak Irish in class). These directives were put into practice in all the lessons observed.

The schemes of work for the different year groups are well set out. Appropriate focus is placed on developing all the language skills. Student learning objectives are stated. This section should be further developed and should include an outline account of the skills which students will acquire as well as exemplars of the best efforts already achieved at that level. This work could be carried out collaboratively by teachers. For example, the best essay presented by a student the previous year could be included; a recording could be made of the most fluent speaker in the language and copies of these could be prepared for the other teachers. The use of the publication European Languages Portfolio is recommended as a guide to identifying the standard of the different language skills appropriate to Junior and Leaving Certificates levels. It is recommended that consideration be given to including a language passport in the planning for Transition Year (TY) in order to help these students to take responsibility for their own learning.

All the schemes of work contain a timeframe for teaching and show a good understanding of the topics listed in the syllabuses. Schemes also include a worthwhile description of the forms of assessment used with each year group.
The subject plan provides a very good account of the benefits to be derived from attendance at in-service events for Irish organised by the SLSS. It also contains a guide for all teachers on how to make the best practical use in class of what had been presented to them. Among these is a guide on the use of podcasts of current radio and television programmes as a stimulus for listening skills. The resource *Vifax* is specifically stated as a valuable listening resource for TY. There is also a very detailed description of the resources that have been collected by the Irish department, including ICT resources. This is a further example of the very good planning work that is ongoing in general.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The standard of teaching was good in the vast majority of the lessons observed. Teachers were confident in their teaching and the target language was used throughout. In all lessons observed teachers were diligent and enthusiastic in their teaching. Lessons were well prepared and additional typed material was available in every case. This extra material was very helpful in making progress within the lesson and achieving learning outcomes. Good use was made of ICT resources in all the classes.

Lesson objectives were clear in all cases and were in keeping with the content and aims of the syllabuses and the schemes of work. The lesson objective was clearly expressed at the beginning of class and was focused on throughout the lesson. On the whole student proficiency was given appropriate consideration in the planning work. Good efforts were made to motivate students to engage with the lesson content and to actively participate in the lesson activities. These efforts were successful for the most part.

These efforts were very successful in two senior cycle classes in particular. A joint lesson with two TY classes was highly commended. This lesson, involving two mixed-ability class groups, took place in the hall and the teachers shared the work of the class effectively. One part of the lesson was an oral presentation by three students on a trip they had made to India during the Easter holidays. The presentation was shared equally among the three students and included high quality photographs which they displayed on the screen as they described their trip. The content was of a high standard and the accompanying photographs had Irish subtitles. This approach was very helpful for the audience and the presenters were more at ease since all the attention was focused on the photographs and not on them. Throughout the presentation one teacher assisted the three students with the ICT equipment while the other teacher provided support to the students in the audience. The latter were asked to prepare and write out questions during the presentation. Students were allowed to confer. Later in the lesson the three presenters took questions from the floor and answered them then and there. In the second half of that lesson students were asked to complete some challenging listening comprehensions. Authentic material from a radio programme was used. Both parts of this lesson were exemplars of effective integration of all the language skills.

Another senior cycle lesson involved appropriate preparation work for the Leaving Certificate examination. One part of the lesson comprised an exploration of an aspect of literary history and another part consisted of writing an essay. As in the case of the lesson referred to above, this lesson had variety of content, methodology and resources. A very good presentation had been prepared on the importance, in the context of Irish literature, of the Irish College in Louvain in the seventeenth century. The teacher successfully avoided delivering a lecture-type lesson and students were encouraged to respond to the content and display all the information they had about the subject. Students were confident in their oral Irish and responded well to this invitation. For
example, one student gave an account of what is to be found in the College from a visit she had made there with her family. It was clear that this input had not been prepared in advance. In the second part of the lesson suggestions were sought from students for a challenging essay title for higher level. This was followed by a brainstorming session in which all the students participated. One student was nominated to input all the ideas into the computer in front of the class and these were then shown on the screen. The students then worked collaboratively to choose the best titles. This type of lesson could be didactic with only the teacher providing the information. However, this was not the case; every member of the class was actively involved in the lesson and an interactive atmosphere was prevalent throughout. This lesson is highly commended.

Good efforts were made in junior cycle classes to stimulate student interest in lesson activities by showing high quality photographs of media personalities on the screen and in handouts. This was a good indication of how comfortable teachers are with using ICT resources. It was obvious that students enjoyed the content. In some cases it was difficult to elicit any response other than a very basic description from some students and consequently most of the oral input of the lesson came from the teacher. It is recommended that teachers be vigilant in these instances and seek to create regular opportunities for student input into the lesson, even though this limits the amount of work that can be achieved in the lesson period. Short answers were accepted. This is not necessarily inappropriate in certain cases however, efforts should also be made to elicit more comprehensive answers from students. It is recommended that a range of questions be included and students of higher ability should be set a greater challenge than the other class members, especially in a mixed-ability class.

In one junior cycle lesson the methodology was considered to be too demanding for the students. An effort was made to discuss the weather and after practice of basic vocabulary a poem relating to environmental protection was presented. This link was worthwhile however the students in the class did not have the level of proficiency necessary to discuss this subject. By the end of the lesson students were still unable to engage with the subject matter, despite the best efforts of the teacher. It is recommended that the lesson content chosen and the vocabulary required be adapted to reflect the proficiency of the students. It is to be commended that challenging material was used however, in this instance, the content was too difficult.

All the lessons were well managed with common methodology. Examination of homework was the norm in lessons and the homework assigned was appropriately linked to lesson content. A positive learning atmosphere prevailed with all teachers receiving total co-operation from students. Mutual respect was evident between students and teachers. Progress in learning was most evident in lessons where there was good oral proficiency and confidence of expression. In other classes learning was more evident in student copybooks. However, teaching was effective in all the lessons observed and it is evident that all students are being well prepared to meet examination requirements.

There is good co-operation and collaboration among teachers in the Irish department. In the interests of promoting good practice and increased co-operation it is recommended that teachers consider observing lessons delivered by colleagues from time to time and that teachers also be willing to demonstrate sample lessons.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good provision is made for assessment in the subject. To begin with, student progress is monitored by assigning homework regularly. Some copybooks from all the lessons observed were
examined. The standard of the work is highly commended. The work was neat and well organised and fully in keeping with what was set out in the schemes of work. Teacher recognition of the work was prevalent in the copybooks. Particular diligence was evident in the work in copybooks belonging to one class preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination. These copybooks showed that students were being well prepared in all aspects of the course.

Student progress is also monitored through class tests at the end of every topic. Teachers maintain a very good account of student progress in their diaries. Particular reference is made to assessment for learning in the subject plan and teachers are given guidance on what is involved in this method. Feedback to students on their strengths and areas for improvement are recorded. This is to be commended.

Teachers are very mindful of carrying out analyses of student participation and achievement rates in the certificate examinations. A comprehensive analysis of both these aspects in the different levels in the Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations, going back over several years, was presented to the inspector. This analysis was both comprehensive and thorough and shows that Irish has a strong foundation in the school and that both students and teachers are rewarded for their efforts.

It would be worthwhile to explore why the very significant numbers taking higher level in the Junior Certificate examination decline for the Leaving Certificate examination. It is the finding of this subject inspection that students are receiving high quality teaching in the subject. Therefore, more students should be encouraged to undertake the subject at higher level in the Leaving Certificate. It is now opportune to carry out such research in light of the fact that a new Leaving Certificate course is being introduced where forty per cent of the marks will be allocated to oral Irish.

Particular attention is paid to assessing and recording student oral proficiency in Irish in senior cycle and assessment of this skill is incorporated as an integral part of the assessment throughout senior cycle. Proficiency in oral Irish is developed from the very beginning of junior cycle even though the same formal recognition is not evident in assessment work. Therefore it is recommended that, in junior cycle assessments, teachers consider recording in the house examinations’ results the specific recognition given to student oral proficiency in Irish. This does not necessitate individual oral examinations. It is recommended that teachers monitor student progress in the spoken language during lessons. Other opportunities exist for developing co-operation among teachers, for example providing a second opinion of student progress in this essential skill. It is also recommended that consideration be given to entering students for the optional oral examination in the Junior Certificate so that they may gain relevant experience of the new allocation of marks for oral Irish before undertaking the Leaving Certificate course.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Irish enjoys a high status as a subject in the school, due to the efforts made by the teachers in the subject.
- The objective of encouraging a high number of students to take up the challenge of higher level in the Junior Certificate examination is succeeding.
• The subject planning work presented was of a high standard. Co-operation and collaboration exist among the teachers of Irish and they all take an active part in the planning and review work.
• The subject plan shows that reflection on their work is ongoing by teachers and forms an integral part of collaborative planning meetings.
• It is the finding of this subject inspection that a high standard of teaching in the subject is provided to students.
• A joint lesson in Transition Year was an exemplar of effective integration of all the language skills. Teaching was effective in all the lessons observed and all students are being well prepared for examination requirements.
• There is good provision for assessment in the subject. Student work in copybooks was neat and well organised and completely in keeping with the work set out in the schemes of work. Teacher recognition was widespread in these copybooks.
• The comprehensive and thorough analysis carried out on participation and achievement rates in the certificate examinations shows that Irish has a strong foundation in the school and that both teachers and students are rewarded for their efforts.

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

• Learning objectives in the subject plan should be further developed. It would be worthwhile focussing on the skills to be acquired by students by the end of a year’s study and exemplars of the best efforts previously achieved by students should be included.
• It is recommended that teachers be alert to avoiding the overuse of teacher oral input, even with a weak class. Opportunities should be provided for regular student input into the lesson, even if this limits the amount of work achieved in the lesson.
• It would be worthwhile to explore the reasons why the very significant numbers taking higher level in Junior Certificate decline in the Leaving Certificate examination.
• It is recommended that, in assessment in junior cycle, focus be placed on providing specific recognition of student oral proficiency in Irish within the results awarded in house examinations.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of Irish and 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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

BOM thanks the Inspectorate for its thoughtful and professional evaluation of Irish in the school.

The Board is especially pleased to note the acknowledgement of
- the high status of Irish in Maryfield College
- the high standard of subject planning and teaching
- the confidence, enthusiasm and use by teachers of the target language in the classroom setting.

In the area of assessment the Inspector noted
- the high quality of work in pupils’ copies
- the monitoring and recognition of this work by teachers
- the assessment and recording of oral proficiency particularly at Senior Cycle.

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 recommendation to rotate the position of subject co-ordinator has been implemented.

The issue of take-up levels of Higher Level Irish at Leaving Cert is the subject of discussions between the Irish Department and school management. These discussions centre on perceptions of Higher Level Irish among students, allocations of teachers and size of classes.

The use of Irish on the school website will be extended, based on the existing levels of Irish in the school magazine.

A writing competition for 2nd and 3rd Year students is already under way and the TEG programme has been accessed and considered for Transition Years.