Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Coláiste Muire
Cobh, Co. Cork
Roll number: 62180E

Date of inspection: 6 May 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Muire, Cobh. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of learning and teaching in Coláiste Muire 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 learning and teaching. The inspector interacted with students and teachers and examined students’ work. 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 of the school 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

There are six teachers of Irish, with varying experience, in the school. Many of them are former students of the school. This reflects an influence the Irish teachers have had on their students whereby they foster in them a positive attitude to Irish. The teachers are commended for this.

The majority of students have daily contact with the target language, a practice that is commended. It was reported that the students are encouraged to study Irish at the highest level appropriate to their ability. The school’s mixed-ability and banding systems support this objective. Concurrent timetabling is commonplace and this facilitates the changing of levels by students if necessary. There is a balanced distribution of classes among teachers and this ensures an equal opportunity for all to teach at the various levels. This is a praiseworthy practice.

Thirty-six students are exempt from the study of Irish. This figure equates with 6% of the entire student cohort. Eleven of them received the early education abroad. The other students have special educational needs and therefore the majority of them do not study another modern language either. Every effort is made to provide them with learning support during Irish and modern-language lessons.

The majority of the teachers have their own classrooms and this facilitates the storing of resources. The teachers have made commendable efforts to create a stimulating learning atmosphere in their own classrooms. Examples of the students’ work were on display in the classrooms as well as charts with word banks, grammatical points, interrogative particles and directions. The management of the school encourages the teachers to make as much use as possible of information and communication technology (ICT). There are data projectors in many classrooms and three years ago the Board of Management provided funding to enable teachers to buy their own laptops.

School management recognises the importance of continuing professional development (CPD). Many guest speakers have come to speak to the Irish teachers on subjects such as ICT, classroom management, students with special educational needs, assessment of learning and multiple intelligences. The Irish teachers have attended workshops that are being organised by the Second
Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. While gaining an understanding of initiatives at national level is beneficial, it also evident that some department members have a particular expertise in developing students’ competence in Irish. It is therefore recommended that ways of enabling the department members to support each other be explored, and that the particular expertise developed by some teachers be shared with all members. A team-teaching project could be piloted or opportunities for peer-observation could be provided from time to time. Whatever approach is used, it is strongly urged that self-evaluation be an integral part of it.

A range of co- and cross-curricular activities promotes the use of Irish in the wider school community. It was reported that Seachtain na Gaeilge is a major event on the school calendar. A variety of competitions as well as other activities such as dance workshops and céiltíthe are organised during this week. The inspector was also informed of the strong link between Irish and Music and of the established practice of Irish songs being sung during school concerts. Leaving-Certificate students visit the Gaeltacht before their oral examinations. The effort made by teachers to ensure Irish has a place outside of the classroom is highly praised.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject-development planning is a central component of teachers’ work. The main planning documents are gathered in a booklet entitled Coláiste Muire – Múineadh na Gaeilge (Coláiste Muire - The Teaching of Irish). Updating this booklet as necessary is among the coordinator’s duties. The booklet is a valuable reference for management and for Irish teachers, especially for newly-appointed and substitute teachers. It contains comprehensive detail about the co-ordination of the subject in the school. It also contains accounts of effective methodologies and assessment strategies that promote variety in the students’ learning experience. The booklet is an indication of the specialist knowledge held by Irish teachers with regard to effectively facilitating students’ acquisition of the language.

The Irish teachers have formal meetings once per term. The minutes of these meetings were reviewed. It was noted that strategies for Assessment for Learning (AfL) have been discussed recently. This is commendable, and it is hoped that over time, this discussion would lead to other aspects of classroom practice being discussed. Teachers can learn much from each other and therefore it is recommended that discussion of classroom practice would feature to an even greater extent during meetings. Teachers could simply mention various strategies that worked in class or challenges that were, or have yet to be, overcome by them.

There are also schemes of work in the booklet for each year group. At Junior Cycle, the year’s programme is structured by topic and the relevant grammar points for the various topics are alluded to. This approach, in which grammar is taught in an integrated way, is particularly effective. As a further development of work done to date, it is recommended that the learning activities that pertain to every topic be identified, and that the same activities apportion equal weight to the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Related assessment activities should also be included.

The transition year scheme was reviewed. The scheme indicates an effort to create a new learning experience of Irish. This is commendable. The emphasis placed on the use of surveys as a means of encouraging students to use Irish in a practical manner is highly praised. The projects completed on placenames help to develop the students’ research and team skills. The link that has been developed between Irish and History is worthwhile in that it facilitates the organisation of heritage tours for students around the town of Cobh. Students also study some of the literature that forms part of the Leaving Certificate course. The amount of literature studied is significant
and it is felt that students would benefit more from a functional language programme that places an even greater emphasis on innovation and cross-curricular links. During future reviews of the TY programme, teachers should refer to the Transition Year Units that are being promoted by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Sample units and templates are to be found at www.ncca.ie

In almost all cases, teachers had prepared well for the lessons observed. Best practice was observed where the teachers had planned a variety of tasks. Excellent practice was observed in one instance. In this case the lesson was based on topics that were of particular interest to the students and students were set to undertake learning activities that they themselves enjoyed. As well as this, audio-visual resources, which elicited the participation of the students, had been prepared. This practice is commended, especially the importance attached to taking account of students’ experiences and needs when planning lessons.

Every lesson observed had a principal objective. For the most part, teachers envisaged that learners would practise and acquire new aspects of the language that pertained to a particular topic of the syllabus. This is in accordance with best practice. It is reasonable that teachers should expect that the proficiency of all their students will improve during every Irish lesson. Given that every student has the ability to learn Irish but that they do not all learn in the same way or at the same pace, it is necessary for the teachers to have differentiated objectives for students of varying abilities. As teachers look to introduce new AFL strategies, they are encouraged to consider sharing the desired learning outcomes with students at the beginning of the lesson. It would also be expected that time would be set aside at the end of the lesson so that everybody, including the teacher, could evaluate the quality of the learning that took place during the lesson.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Overall, the worthwhile learning outcomes of lessons observed indicated satisfactory classroom practices. Most students clearly had a reasonably good foundation in the language and it is particularly satisfying that the majority of the teachers are succeeding in continuously improving these students’ standard of Irish.

Generally speaking, there was a cooperative atmosphere in classrooms. Positive relationships existed between many students and their teachers and therefore students eagerly undertook their tasks. Teachers’ regular praise of their students instilled self-pride and self-confidence and also encouraged further participation in the lessons.

Irish was the primary language in use during lessons. Best practice was observed when the teacher addressed the students in Irish only. In these instances the students showed a good understanding of the teacher and made a praiseworthy effort to speak Irish to the teacher and to each other. Various strategies were used to create opportunities for students to speak Irish. Individual questioning was the most frequent strategy. This proved an effective method of assessing the students’ understanding and of assessing the extent to which they had acquired the newly-taught language.

Some teachers used pair-work effectively to get students to speak Irish to each other. The students enjoyed such interactive tasks for a number of reasons. Firstly, the attention of the class was not directed on individual student proficiency for the entire duration of the lesson. Students were also able to help each other and this that ensured that no individual student was left struggling with the subject matter of the lesson. A further benefit was the creation of opportunities for teachers to monitor the participation of individual students and to advise them accordingly. It is strongly
recommended that pair-work, or other interactive tasks, form an intrinsic part of every Irish
lesson. In this context, teachers are asked to devise tasks that will give students opportunities to
speak Irish to each other.

Of particular note was an ‘ordinary-level’ lesson where every student had the confidence to take
an active part in all lesson activities. Students’ understanding of the teacher was noted as was the
effort that every one of them made to speak whatever Irish they had. The work done to ensure a
positive experience of learning Irish for these students is highly commended. The selection of
lesson content that challenges students appropriately is especially praised. Another commendable
aspect of the practice is the understanding displayed of the language structures that students must
acquire so that they can engage in authentic communication through the medium of Irish.

The resources that were used in conjunction with the textbook were photographs, worksheets,
examinations papers and slides. Authentic materials such as pictures and diagrams were used
effectively to elicit students’ opinions. A number of teachers used data projectors as a means of
integrating ICT into lesson activities. As the school develops its ICT resources the teachers are
asked to maximise opportunities for their students to use ICT. There are numerous possibilities
for using equipment such as mp3 players, computers and digital cameras. Teachers are reminded
that it is possible to access new ideas, especially about the use of ICT, on the website of the

Grammar rules were discussed during some lessons. The most effective practice observed was the
explanation of the rule to students as they came across it during the lesson. Not only was a
context provided so that the students could understand the rule but opportunities were presented
in which they could practice certain grammar forms and revise them during the activities that
followed. Every teacher is advised to teach grammatical accuracy to their students in an
integrated way. It would be a good idea, especially in the case of senior students, to leave a space
on the white board to note the points that arise during lessons. A homework task could be based
on the points noted.

ASSESSMENT

Reference is made in the department booklet to the assessment strategies used in Irish lessons.
These practices are based principally on the assessment and homework policies of the school. The
booklet details possible homework tasks and guidelines are given as to the amount of time the
students in the various year groups should spend on homework. Of particular note was the
importance attributed to the learning of new language and also the emphasis placed on the good
practice of correcting homework during class.

The assessment policies of the department recognise the importance of assessing the four
language skills. Particular praise is due to the teachers for promoting the students’ proficiency in
the spoken language. The oral assessments of junior-cycle students are of particular importance
because they emphasise the significance of developing their speaking and listening skills. It
would be a good idea to award a mark for the effort they make to speak Irish during class.
Teachers conveyed their gratitude to the Parents’ Association for the support provided when
preparing students for the Leaving Certificate Oral Examination. The Association’s practice of
asking Irish speakers who live in the area to conduct mock oral examinations is of considerable
benefit to students.

Samples of the students’ written work were reviewed. Overall, as would be expected for the time
of year of the evaluation, students had completed a considerable number of various tasks. Regular
monitoring of this work was also evident. The practice of providing guidance to students about ways in which they could improve their work was also noted in some cases. These particular practices pertain to AfL and are being implemented at a whole-school level. Reference is made to AfL – peer-assessment, the quality of the feedback and so on – in the departmental booklet and there are also references to AfL in the minutes of departmental meetings. As teachers become more familiar with AfL strategies, it is expected that wider use will be made of assessment strategies that give the students greater responsibility for their own learning. One would hope, for example, that a grammatical error would be pointed out in the written work of a student and that he/she, or with the help of a fellow student, would find the correct form. Whichever approach is planned, each teacher is asked to ensure during class that students have a record of the learning that has taken place, that the homework is noted on the whiteboard, that the students record it in their diaries and that the students’ homework is continuously monitored.

Formal examinations are organised at various times during the school year. Common examinations are given where possible. Mock examinations are held for the certificate classes in the spring. Reports are sent home after all major examinations and parent-teacher meetings are held once a year.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable supports the teaching of Irish.
- An ongoing effort is made to integrate ICT with learning and teaching activities.
- The benefit of continuous professional development is recognised.
- The teachers take an active part in the subject development planning process.
- Classroom practice is discussed at departmental meetings.
- An atmosphere of cooperation was evident during the lessons observed.
- Many teachers praised students’ efforts.
- Irish was to the fore in the lessons observed.
- In most instances, opportunities were created for students to speak Irish during lessons.
- Many students took an active part in lesson activities.
- Effective use was made of a range of resources.
- A system of assessment is in place that keeps all the participants informed of progress being made.

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

- It is recommended that possibilities for establishing Continuous Professional Development initiatives among the Irish teachers be explored.
- It is recommended that the use of classroom practices that encourage students to speak Irish be extended.
- It is recommended that further use be made of Assessment for Learning strategies.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at which 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

The Board of Management welcomes this Irish Subject Inspection Report. The Board thanks the Irish teachers for their enthusiasm and professionalism in the teaching of Irish in the school and for their involvement in subject planning and in extra-curricular activities.

The report recognises an atmosphere of co-operation during the lessons observed, positive relationships between teachers and students and the positive encouragement and affirmation given by teachers to students.

The Board conveys its gratitude to the Parents’ Council for their ongoing support over many years of language teaching through the organisation of “mock” orals for 6th Years on an annual basis.

The Board also thanks the inspectorate for their professionalism and courtesy and thanks the teachers and pupils for their co-operation during the inspection.

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 will make every effort to implement in-school CPD initiatives.

The Board will continue to support the continuous professional development of teachers and staff.

Greater use will be made of Assessment for Learning Strategies.

Classroom practices which require students to speak Irish will continue to be implemented.

Some team teaching has taken place and this will be further developed in so far as school resources allow.