Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT

Mercy College
Woodford
Co. Galway
Roll number: 63171I

Date of inspection: 4 May 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mercy College, Woodford, Co. Galway. 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 in the course of 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 and the subject teachers. 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

There is very favourable provision for the teaching and learning of Irish, as evidenced in the number of class periods provided and the distribution of these periods throughout the week. Although there are only four class periods per week for each year of the junior cycle, an extra provision has been made this year for first-years and the Junior Certificate class, after school hours. This extra provision is also available to sixth-year students. Management is commended for their support to raise the status of Irish in the school, at classroom level and throughout the whole school.

The number of class-groups in the different year-groups is very satisfactory regarding the average number of students in each group. The first-year and Transition Year (TY) students are in mixed-ability classes and are then streamed in second year according to the levels in the State examinations, based on a common examination. The vast majority of the classes are timetabled to run simultaneously, an arrangement which gives the students the opportunity to move between the various examination levels. The students are given every encouragement to follow the higher level course for as long as possible during each cycle. These practices are praiseworthy.

The school has approved exemptions from the study of Irish, according to the provisions of Circular M10/94, for nine point seven per cent of the total number of students. Two students had been educated outside the State and the other exempted students have been identified as having recognised learning difficulties. It was also reported that these students are given every encouragement and support to study the language and culture and six students are studying Irish even though they have an exemption. The school is highly commended for following this holistic philosophy.
All teachers who are teaching Irish in the mainstream classes are graduates of Irish. It is praiseworthy that the vast majority of the teachers are teaching at both junior and senior cycles, at the different exam levels and in the programmes available in the school. Members of the department have experience of correcting certificate examinations and working in Irish colleges. The management offers every encouragement and support to representatives of the Irish department to attend in-service workshops run by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) for Irish. There has been a good attendance by the teachers in the Mercy College at these courses since 2008.

The vast majority of the classrooms are used on a teacher-based and extra teaching and learning resources are stored in these rooms. The teachers have ready access to television sets, compact discs (CDs), digital versatile discs (DVDs) and overhead projectors (OHPs). There are data projectors in one of the rooms used for the teaching and learning of Irish. A broadband connection was provided in this room during the current year and the Irish teachers share the use of this room. There is also a computer room, which must be booked for use. It was reported that it is difficult to get access to this room, but the Irish department has decided to make more use of the computer room. There is no annual budget for Irish, but the management is generous in funding resources for the language. The teachers of Irish have developed good resources and these are regularly augmented. It is recommended that the resource-lists available on the SLSS website and on www.cogg.ie website be used as reference points when the department is gradually adding to the teaching and learning resources for the language in future. A central storage area or a common electronic file would facilitate the sharing of teaching resources and aids among the staff of the department of Irish.

A very broad range of co-curricular and cross-curricular events is organised to promote the language among the students. *Seachtain na Gaeilge* is celebrated in the school every year and various events are organised: including céilís, quizzes, debates and traditional music. A school magazine in Irish is published during *Seachtain na Gaeilge* also. Students are encouraged to attend Irish colleges and senior students speak to juniors about their experience of being in the Gaeltacht. This approach is truly praiseworthy. The school used to have a programme of scholarships to Irish colleges and the department of Irish has it as a priority to revive this provision. Other events are also organised throughout the year, among them a visit to the theatre and students are encouraged to take part in debating competitions. Musical events are held throughout the year and there is a very strong link between Music and Irish in the school. An Irish Club was founded this year and a very good annual programme has been planned for the club, with a noteworthy emphasis on oral proficiency, drama and singing. The school deserves the highest praise for what has been done and what has been planned to promote a positive experience of the language for the whole school community.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Planning for Irish at department level was of a very high standard, as were the curriculum-plans for the teaching and learning of the language in junior cycle. The department has developed aims and objectives which are comprehensive and challenging. The aims are expressed in terms of student learning outcomes, as is appropriate.

A co-ordinator for the department is appointed every two years and the department has agreed a role for the holder of this post. This is good practice. The department holds a formal meeting once a term and a short team meeting once a month. The staff has identified priorities for the current year, a plan of action has been designed, and duties have been allocated to staff members. The
Irish teaching staff is strongly congratulated on its professionalism and on its diligence regarding planning matters. It is recommended that the action plan be organised according to short, medium and long term priorities, which would provide a framework for developmental work and review.

Monthly curriculum plans for the teaching and learning of the language have been developed for all year groups and at the different examination levels. The most comprehensive work has been carried out in the plans for junior classes. The integrated skills approach arranged by theme across the various aspects of the syllabuses is employed. Assessment methods involving all skills are outlined, as well as a brief background of each class. It is also praiseworthy that differentiated planning has been done for gifted students and for those with special needs. This approach to planning is highly commended and it is recommended that planning for senior class groups follow this template. It is also good to note that an agreed literature programme is thematically taught during the first term in fifth year.

The TY plan is presented in general terms only. It is recommended that it be reviewed and be adapted to the mixed-ability context of this particular year, using the junior cycle plans as a guide to this work. It is also recommended that the plan for presentation of the chosen curriculum for the year be devised within the national aims of the Transition Year as set out by the Department. These guidelines are available on the SLSS (Second Level Support Service) website, www.slss.ty.ie. In this way, an innovative experience will be provided, in teaching and learning during the programme, in the resources that will be used and in the assessment methods that will be chosen to provide an opportunity for the students to show what they will have learnt.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good standard of short-term planning had been carried out for the majority of the classes observed during the evaluation. There was a developmental order in these lessons and a good pace to the teaching and learning. Planning and preparation of a high standard was carried out in one particular lesson. This lesson was an exemplar of an integrated thematic approach and included: PowerPoint slides, a tape clip, and a worksheet had been prepared which positively enhanced students’ active participation in the lesson. This work is highly commended and it is recommended that these teaching and learning techniques be more widely used by all members of staff. The other teachers had carried out good preparation in the form of worksheets and overhead transparencies, which enhanced the teaching and learning. In the case of half of the lessons observed during the evaluation, the pace was not appropriate and not all the learning possibilities within the students’ range of ability were achieved. It is recommended when short-term planning is being conducted for lessons that the learning objectives be differentiated to provide a scaffold to students from whom language learning is difficult and which will challenge more able students.

Higher learning targets must be set for higher-level students in the senior cycle, especially in the context of the breadth of the syllabus.

All the teachers shared the learning objectives with the students at the beginning of classes and at appropriate points during the lessons. In one class, a summary was carried out in question-form on what had been achieved in terms of learning objectives. This approach is commended as it promotes learners’ independence and it is recommended that wider use be made of this practice. It is also praiseworthy that the homework tasks arose naturally from the subject-matter of all the lessons and, in general, very good preparation had been made for the homework tasks. In the case of the TY class, a homework task was not assigned to the class and it was reported that it is not customary to set homework for this class-group. It is recommended that this omission be reviewed, since it contravenes the whole-school homework policy. Homework approaches should
be developed which would reinforce the class work, as well as affording the students an opportunity of demonstrating what they have learnt independently, in innovative ways.

In one poetry class, there was a good balance between teacher-input and student activity. A variety of questions was used which required a wide range and level of understanding. Good links were forged with students’ previous study of poetry, as well as linking the background of the lament to the literary history of the language. These are praiseworthy techniques to promote and ensure students’ thorough understanding and learning of the course.

Irish was used as the language of communication in every class and the vast majority of the teachers had a very accurate command of the language. Points of dialect and of grammar were woven into lessons and students’ attention was directed to syllables and sounds in their own dialect. All of these methods are praiseworthy in developing students’ oral and reading ability in a sustained way. The students’ own Irish was good and they were obviously accustomed to using Irish as the normal classroom language.

In those rooms where the teachers were predominantly based, stimulating learning environments had been created. Poetry, grammar charts and other posters were on display. The teachers are congratulated on this approach, because it provides a visual reinforcement of the students’ linguistic ability. The following three recommendations are made regarding the learning environment. The department of Irish is advised to consider the kind of vocabulary students need, to ask questions, make a request and explain their difficulties in the target language, during their Irish lessons. It would be helpful to display this particular vocabulary on charts on the classroom walls and to change these charts regularly. In this way each year-group will gradually acquire useful vocabulary, year by year. It is important that the teaching and learning charts on display should be accurate as should work sheets used to support teaching and learning.

All of the teachers showed very good class-management skills in the classes observed during the evaluation. This ensured that the vast majority of the students were on task. There was an encouraging atmosphere in all the classes and the teachers affirmed student participation in the lessons.

**ASSESSMENT**

The homework policy developed by the school is of a very high standard and the school is highly commended for the strategies and guidance included in the policy to develop good practice among the students regarding homework. Agreed guidelines for Irish homework are included within the whole-school framework. The vast majority of the students work on a system of homework-diaries, as is appropriate. The teacher who holds the post of year-head manages the homework-diaries and both the parents and teachers use the diaries as a method of communication. A random sample of students’ homework-diaries was collected and it was evident that these were used to record homework tasks that homework was being regularly set. It is recommended that a variety of tasks, including all the language skills, be included in the homework task. This approach would reinforce the student’s proficiency in all the language skills, in a more equitable manner.

Different correction practices were noted in the random sample of copybooks inspected during the evaluation. One series of copybooks had both mechanical correction of grammar mistakes and developmental corrections which offered a clear guide for learning. In the case of correction of syntax errors, good approaches, which were not excessive, were employed. The teachers are
congratulated on these techniques which enhance student learning. It is recommended that all staff-members use these practices. A substantial amount of work was evident in the majority of copybooks reviewed, which indicated a good level of development. It was evident, however, from a sample of TY copybooks that a limited amount of work had been completed since the start of the school year. It is recommended that this situation be reviewed immediately. A number of copybooks and textbooks also had significant amount of English in them. Teachers are advised to review the overuse of translation as a teaching method. Some of the teachers were promoting organisational skills in students’ recording of their learning, by systematically dedicating separate sections of the copybooks to different aspects of the courses. This good practice is commended.

The summative assessment of all students in the school twice a year consists of a mixture of common house tests and continuous assessment. This does not apply to students taking certificate exams, who take mock examinations in the spring. The department has implemented a project since 2008, which entails including the four main language skills in the assessment experience of all students. A report is sent to their homes based on the results of these assessments. It is recommended that an agreed mark be awarded for student participation in the target language, as part of the continuous assessment. It would also beneficial to specify a mark for oral skill, in the reports issuing to homes. The teachers are heartily congratulated on being pro-active in developing assessment instruments.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very favourable provision for the teaching and learning of Irish and school activities relating to Irish are well supported.
- Overall planning by the Irish department was of a very high standard, as were the curriculum plans for the teaching and learning of the language in junior cycle.
- A very good standard of short-term planning and preparation had been carried out for the majority of classes observed during the inspection.
- Good teaching and learning methods and practices were used in the majority of Irish classes.
- The school has developed a homework policy that is of a high standard, and assessment methods which take account of the four main language-skills in the assessment of all students in the school.

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 planning approach for the teaching and learning of the language at junior cycle at present be also employed for senior cycle classes and that the plan for TY is reviewed also.
- It is recommended that when short-term planning is being carried out, suitable learning targets and an appropriate pace be set, to suit the students’ range of abilities.
- It is recommended that, as a department, the teachers discuss effective teaching and learning strategies, in order to share the good practice already in use in the department, as well as developing all teachers’ reflective practice. It would be worthwhile to include practices in relation to corrections in this exchange of ideas.
Post-evaluation meetings with the teachers of Irish and with the principal were organised at the conclusion of the evaluation, meetings at which the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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