

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of Italian
REPORT**

**Saint Mac Dara's Community College
Templeogue, Dublin 6W
Roll number: 70260V**

Date of inspection: 30 November 2009



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ITALIAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Mac Dara's Community College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in Italian 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 teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and the teacher, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher's written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the subject teacher. 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

There is a strong commitment to the teaching of modern European languages in St Mac Dara's College: it offers French, German, Spanish and Italian. Modern European languages are compulsory in junior cycle. Incoming first-year students are asked to choose which language they wish to study and class groupings are formed on the basis of their choices. Modern European languages are optional in senior cycle, but the majority of students do continue with a language up to Leaving Certificate. Italian is offered in junior cycle, Transition Year and senior cycle.

Although Italian is well established in the school, and arrangements for student access to Italian are very good, the uptake at present gives some cause for concern. Only ten per cent of junior cycle students are studying Italian in the current school year, and eleven per cent in senior cycle. There is no first-year class at present, and at the time of the inspection it was doubtful (based on indications of subject choice from the incoming first-year cohort) if there would be one in the next school year. It would be a great pity if the school's tradition in Italian, going back almost twenty years, were to come to an end and if students' choice of languages were to be restricted as a result. It is recommended that school management, in collaboration with the language teachers, should actively promote diversity in the language offer and uptake in St Mac Dara's. Parents and incoming students should be made aware of the range of languages which the school offers and of the distinctive culture, characteristics and advantages of learning each language, so that they can make an informed choice. Materials such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's Fact Sheet on Modern Languages¹ or the Post-Primary Language Initiative's promotional materials (including the video *Scopri l'italiano*) could be used.²

¹Available at: www.ncca.ie/uploadedfiles/Factsheets/ModLang_factsheet.pdf.

² Available at: www.languagesinitiative.com.

Provision of teaching and learning resources for the teaching of Italian in St Mac Dara's is very good. The Italian teacher has a designated classroom, and can store resources and display maps, posters and students' work. There is a data projector in the classroom, and Internet access. The students may access Linguascope.Com, a web portal for language learning and practice. The teacher makes use of sites such as *Italiano in Famiglia* to source suitable teaching material, such as video clips. The school provides a laptop computer for shared use among the language teachers. The Italian teacher has also developed her own resources, such as board games and laminated charts. It is recommended that a school set of bilingual or monolingual Italian dictionaries be provided for the students' use during class.

The learning of Italian in St Mac Dara's is enriched and supported by the co-curricular and extra-curricular activities which are organised for the students. This year, for example, there was a school trip to Donegal Language and Adventure Centre.

The timetabling arrangements for Italian are generally satisfactory. The time allocation is: three forty-minute periods a week in second year, four periods in third year, two periods in Transition Year, and five periods in fifth and sixth year. In fifth and sixth year, the five periods are delivered as two doubles and one single period. The same arrangement applies to all the modern languages. While there are certain advantages to having double periods in senior cycle, care needs to be taken when drawing up the timetable to make sure that classes are distributed as evenly as possible throughout the week. For example, this year the sixth-year students have no contact with Italian between Thursday morning and the last period on the following Tuesday afternoon—hardly an ideal situation.

There is a full-time permanent teacher of Italian on the staff in St Mac Dara's. At the time of the inspection, the teacher was on leave and classes were being taught by a fully-qualified temporary teacher, who has a very good mastery of the language and has recently attended in-service courses in Ireland and Italy for teachers of Italian. An issue which naturally arises when a temporary teacher is given responsibility for a subject is the support which school management provides for him/her. This is especially the case in a one-teacher subject area or where the teacher is newly qualified. It is recommended that school management should be sensitive to this issue, and consider what support should be offered to temporary teachers—including, for example, mentoring and/or lesson observation by the principal or peers, as appropriate.

A recent subject inspection report on German in St Mac Dara's recommended that the school apply for a foreign language assistant under the Department of Education and Skills scheme. A language assistant provides authentic opportunities for the students to communicate in the language and can contribute greatly to the students' understanding of the country's culture. It is therefore recommended that school management consider applying for an Italian language assistant.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There are good structures in place for collaborative planning in St Mac Dara's College. There are regular meetings of the modern language teachers. Minutes of the most recent meeting noted the decision to outline the expected aims and learning outcomes to students at the beginning of lessons, and to devise check-lists to assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning. The minutes also refer to the challenge of mixed-ability teaching and to guidelines for student

homework in the context of Assessment for Learning. This focus on pedagogy is highly commendable.

Overall, the standard of long-term planning for Italian is very good. There is a common programme for junior cycle languages in St Mac Dara's, which outlines themes, tasks and learning outcomes for each of the three years. There is a general set of policies and procedures for Italian, as well as good, detailed plans for each year group. Particularly commendable is the fact that the year plans refer to the needs of individual students with specific learning difficulties and what measures are proposed to address them. Also commendable is the fact that the learning objectives are expressed in 'can-do' statements, such as "Students will be able to ... ask and say at what time something happens".

In reviewing and revising the subject plan, it is recommended that the question of teaching methodologies should be the main focus for development. To take just one example, the plan currently states that the "use of target language [is] a priority". Based on the lessons observed, it is suggested that some reflection on how exactly that aspiration is to be realised would be helpful. A revised subject plan could outline a strategy for making Italian the language of communication and instruction in the classroom and for reducing the reliance on translation. A good place to start would be the booklet, *Italiano in classe* (available from the Post-Primary Languages Initiative), which contains almost all the Italian words and expressions needed for classroom interaction. The revised plan should also provide more detail on student assessment—how and when the specific learning objectives are to be assessed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The content of the three lessons observed was appropriate and in line with the syllabus. The general aims were clear, and appropriate teaching resources had been chosen. In one of the lessons, a map was used to teach directions, and the students practised asking for and giving directions in pairs. Another lesson, with the Transition Year class, was based on a video clip from the website *Italiano in Famiglia*, and the students worked as a group to write a dialogue based on the theme of the video clip. The third lesson observed consisted of a team quiz to revise grammar in preparation for a test.

The standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was generally fair rather than good. There needed to be a sharper focus on specific learning objectives and on how the lesson would further the attainment of those objectives. The pace of lessons and management of time could have been better, and the students could have been challenged more to communicate in Italian without relying on translation and written notes. In one of the three classes, student engagement and motivation was good; in the other two, much less so. It is recommended that, in accordance with stated school policy, the learning objectives be shared with the students at the start of the lesson so that they can take responsibility for their own learning, and so that they and the teacher can evaluate progress at the end of the lesson.

The use of the target language is a stated priority in the subject plan for Italian. While the teacher did use the target language in giving instructions and asking questions, all too often the Italian was followed by translation into English. For example, "Volete ascoltare di nuovo? Would you like to hear it again?" If the students know that an English version will almost certainly follow, this defeats the purpose of using the target language. In the Transition Year class referred to above, the comprehension questions which followed the listening were asked and answered mainly in English. Overall, the teaching approach in the lessons observed tended towards the

grammar-translation method. It was clear that the students are building up their vocabulary and learning the elements of grammar, but this did not transfer into communicative ability. In general, there was too much use of English by the students, and not enough production of spoken Italian.

Examples of students' copies and folders from various classes were reviewed. In general, the quantity and quality of the written work was disappointing. It is recommended that students be required to produce authentic written Italian from the outset, as advised in the Chief Examiner's Report (Junior Certificate, 2005), "Students should be encouraged from First Year to produce simple written texts in Italian".

The recommendations under "Planning and Preparation" above would go a long way to improving the quality of teaching and learning.

ASSESSMENT

The Italian subject plan includes sections on assessment policy and procedure, and refers to assessment for learning strategies, continuous assessment and formal in-house exams. Examples of recent written tests were available for inspection. The content and presentation was generally good. However, in line with recommendations in the preceding sections of this report, assessment items should steer clear of translation and should include communicative writing tasks appropriate to the students' level. Assessment items should be closely linked to the 'can-do' statements in the subject plan, and students should be aware of the learning objectives and of the assessment criteria in each of the four language skills.

St Mac Dara's College has a comprehensive homework policy. It was noted during the inspection that the policy's prescriptions regarding the recording, presentation and correction of homework were being unevenly implemented in the case of Italian. In some of the student journals examined there was little evidence of Italian homework being recorded on a regular basis. Homework should be assigned regularly to all classes, should be noted by students in their journals and should be corrected with helpful comments, in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning which have been adopted by the language teachers in St Mac Dara's.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a strong commitment to the teaching of modern European languages in St Mac Dara's College, and there is a long tradition of Italian in the school.
- Curricular provision for Italian and arrangements for students' access to the subject are very good. Timetabling is generally satisfactory.
- There are good structures in place for collaborative planning by the language teachers, and the standard of long-term planning for Italian is generally very good.
- Provision of teaching and learning resources for the teaching of Italian is very good.

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

- School management, in collaboration with the language teachers, should actively promote diversity in the language offer and uptake in St Mac Dara's.

- In reviewing and revising the subject plan, it is recommended that the question of teaching methodologies should be the main focus for development.
- A strategy should be devised and implemented to promote greater use of the target language by the students, and the production of authentic spoken and written Italian.
- In accordance with stated school policy, the learning objectives should be shared with the students at the start of every lesson.
- Steps should be taken to ensure that the school's homework policy is fully implemented.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and the teacher of Italian at the conclusion of the evaluation, 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

Subject provision and whole school support- I wish to confirm that there will be a First Year class studying Italian in the next academic year 2010-2011

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

1. The College management will consult with the Italian department regarding the benefits of applying for a foreign language assistant under the DES scheme.
2. The College will continue to promote diversity in the language offer through the ongoing provision of four continental languages to Leaving Certificate level. In particular, the college will continue to encourage students to study Italian and, thus, maintain the above average take-up – by national standards- of Italian at Junior and Senior cycles.
3. The College will continue to monitor the implementation of its homework policy in the promotion of the learning of Italian
4. The College management will work collaboratively with the Italian department to promote greater use of the target language and to produce authentic spoken and written Italian.