

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of Irish
REPORT**

**Blackrock College
Blackrock, Co. Dublin
Roll number: 60030V**

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF IRISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Blackrock College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning of Irish and offers 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 the students and teachers, examined the 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

Blackrock College has no first-year class intake. Students come into second year in the school, the majority of them having attended Willow Park School, which is linked to Blackrock College. There is close association and collaboration between the teachers in the two schools and information is provided to the college about students who are entering second year in the school. Blackrock College is a large school and consequently classes are organised on a two-band basis at each year-level. Within these two bands classes operate at different levels in the core-subjects. Students may transfer easily between levels as appropriate, a commendable example of good practice.

One hundred and nine of the nine hundred and seventy students in the school have been given an exemption from the study of Irish. Forty eight of those are either students who received their primary education abroad, or are international students. The remaining sixty one students have learning difficulties as outlined in circular M10/96.

Five class-periods of Irish per week are allocated to second and third years, although it happens occasionally that one class group may only have four periods of Irish. This happens due to the organisation of the timetable. Five class-periods of Irish per week is also the allocation for senior cycle classes and four for Transition Year. The provision for Irish on the timetable is satisfactory.

There are eight teachers of Irish in the school. All are graduates in Irish and most have years of experience in teaching the subject. Classes are regularly exchanged among the teachers, so that each has an opportunity to teach classes at all levels.

A master's-degree student from a local university spends a few hours in the school each week. Students are withdrawn in small groups from sixth-year classes to attend conversation classes with the post-graduate student. It was reported that this arrangement is working well and that it provides considerable help to students in tackling the oral exam which is part of the Leaving Certificate Examination. The school management is commended for providing this extra support for sixth years in the area of oral Irish.

It was reported that a programme of events has been organised for 'Seachtain na Gaeilge' for the past three years. This programme of events is being gradually developed and it was reported that it is a highly successful undertaking, with all involved deriving great pleasure and benefit from the activities. Among the events organised are quiz competitions, debates with local schools, music sessions, a 'poc fada' (long stroke) competition and a dedicated chat room for the week, where teachers and students have an opportunity of getting together to speak Irish. Musicians and other visitors are also invited to visit the school during 'Seachtain na Gaeilge'. Groups of students are escorted to see plays in Irish which come to Dublin, to Gael-Linn debates and to events organised by Gaelchultúr. A radio station is broadcast in the college for a week during the school year. A radio programme in Irish was broadcast this year and, again, it was reportedly well received. The teachers of Irish are highly commended for their efforts in organising extra-curricular and co-curricular events outside the class-room for their students. Such events reinforce the work done in the classrooms and offer students an opportunity to experience Irish as a living language in a variety of situations. It is recommended that the development and fostering of such events in the school be continued.

It was reported that a dedicated annual budget is available to the teachers of Irish. The money is spent on 'Seachtain na Gaeilge', on school outings and on teaching resources. The aids and resources for teaching the language are stored in a designated corner of the staff-room, so that each teacher has easy access to them. This is commendable practice. It was clear that the school management is favourable to Irish and that appropriate support is given to the teachers of Irish. Some efforts have been made to ensure that school signage is bilingual and it was clearly intimated that all signage in the newly-built section of the school will be totally bilingual. This general support for Irish is commendable.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Posts as co-ordinator and deputy-co-ordinator of Irish are available to the Irish department. These are private posts of responsibility, funded by the school. The co-ordinator handles the administrative work of the department, including exam work and allocation of classes, while the deputy-co-ordinator assumes responsibilities such as organising 'Seachtain na Gaeilge' and promoting Irish in other ways in the school. The teachers of Irish are given an opportunity to hold regular meetings, at least once a month. Minutes of these meetings are recorded. The school management is commended for making teacher-time available for these meetings.

The teachers have done considerable work on formulating a comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of Irish in the school. The plan sets out the topics to be covered at each level in every year. It also outlines the resources available to the department, as well as an overview of the organisation of events for 'Seachtain na Gaeilge' and other efforts being made by the department to promote Irish in the school. It also contains an account of Transition Year, as well as the objectives for teaching Irish during that year and the methodologies used. The co-ordinator of the Irish department writes an end-of-year assessment; reviewing how the department fared during the year and indicating positive achievements as well as difficult aspects of the teachers' work. This kind of self-assessment of a year's work is indeed a valuable undertaking. The Irish department is highly commended for the comprehensive work it has done on formulating a plan for Irish in the school. It is recommended, however, that the plan be further developed to cater for the different year-groups, setting out the material to be covered as well as a list of the resources that might be used for the different lessons and a variety of methodologies. The Transition Year programme also could do with further development. It would enhance the plan considerably if strategies and various approaches for encouraging the reluctant learner were included. Teachers should discuss the problem of reluctant learners at one of the planning meetings and devise strategies for coping with them.

A progressive building programme is being implemented in the school at present. It is expected that state-of-the-art computing facilities will be available when the building work is completed. Links are being forged with computer companies and all teachers in the school are due to be supplied with laptop computers over time. Teachers are also being trained so that they will be able to use the new technology as a resource in the classroom. It is recommended that the teachers of Irish discuss this very important aspect of modern technology and in the plan for Irish, describe the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for teaching the language.

Teachers had made careful comprehensive preparation for all the classes observed. Worksheets and class-notes were distributed to the students and various tasks were set, to be completed in the classes, a strategy which allowed the work in general to progress at a good pace.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The use of Irish as the language of management, instruction and communication was excellent in the vast majority of classes observed. The teachers' enthusiasm in this regard is highly commended. On the whole, translation from Irish to English was avoided and a wide range of strategies was used to ensure that students understood the subject-matter of the lesson. This approach is highly commended. In one class observed, however, translation was used continuously: it is recommended that care, with regard to over use of translation, be taken in this instance.

In the majority of classes, students made commendable efforts to use Irish in communicating with the teachers, whether answering or asking questions, or offering excuses. It is obvious that Irish is the normal language of communication during Irish lessons and students are accustomed to this. The vast majority of students were willing to attempt speaking Irish on a continuous basis. Teachers required them to frame sentences containing a key word, rather than accepting an individual word as an answer. Students were also given an opportunity to read Irish excerpts aloud and, in general, grammar and pronunciation errors were corrected immediately. Teachers are advised to correct such errors on an ongoing basis in every class. It is recommended that correction should be done in a sensitive way, lest it upset the student's self-esteem.

The atmosphere in the classes observed was considered good and relaxed and it was obvious that students and teachers respected each other. On the whole, the students participated fully in the classes and discipline was excellent. Students were constantly praised for their efforts in class, a really effective approach.

Particularly noted also in the classes observed were the constant efforts being made to create communication opportunities for students. Pair-work, group-work and games were used in almost all classes observed. In one case, tasks were set for the groups to complete and this was done on a competitive basis. This ensured that there was healthy competition between students (it was reported that the groups involved were organised on a mixed-ability basis) and that the students were keen to complete the work quickly. It is recommended, however, that when communicative work is being done, especially by higher-level students, those students should be required, on occasion, to work without having their notes open for guidance. It is necessary to challenge them further by encouraging them to think in Irish rather than rely on notes.

Particular note was taken of the use of the textbook in class as a reference rather than as the mainstay of the teaching. A wide range of teaching methodologies was used, which helped to avoid over-dependence on the textbook. This approach is highly commended. It was also felt that the white/black board was continuously used effectively in the classes observed. Extra vocabulary was written on the board, as well as questions and homework.

It was reported that regular use is made of the Irish-language media in the school, as well as programmes such as *Turas Teanga* (recently purchased). In one case observed, use was made of part of a television programme. The students really enjoyed it and worksheets based on what they had seen were distributed, to be completed by the students. This methodology is very effective. The Irish-language media are very valuable resources and should be sensibly used to stimulate and develop students' interest in learning the language. It is also suggested that, when school building is complete, a wider use be made of other resources in class, to make the teaching and learning of Irish more interesting and more attractive to the students.

All class-periods in the school are of 45 minutes duration. It is therefore important that this time is spent in a beneficial way, that ensures that students do not get tired of the work. On the whole it was felt that this was very well handled. A series of different activities was organised for most of the classes observed, which emphasised the various language skills and ensured that students did not have a chance to lose interest in the class. Teachers are advised, however, to follow this course of action in all lessons. It is important for teachers to offer a variety of approaches and to organise a range of activities aimed at developing all the language skills.

ASSESSMENT

Mini class-exams are organised monthly in the school and monthly reports are sent home, based on the results of these exams and on the students' general progress. This is a commendable practice. Formal house exams are also organised at Christmas and at Easter.

External examiners come to the school to conduct oral exams with sixth-year students. It is planned to conduct oral exams with fourth-year students also this year. The Irish department is advised to discuss the possibility of assessing the communicative abilities of students in other year-groups too. As a start, oral exams might be conducted for fifth-years as well as fourth years and the whole process monitored. The procedure could be extended to include other year-groups by degrees. This suggestion is made on the basis that it is vitally important to illustrate to students how central communicative ability is to the process of language-learning. It is vital to introduce students to the skills of communication as early as possible in their school career. As students grow older, they become more diffident about speaking other languages.

It was evident from the copybooks examined that homework is assigned and corrected regularly. There was plenty of work done in the copybooks and it had been very carefully corrected, with a grade and mark awarded for the work. The teachers were highly commended for how meticulously they corrected the assignments. It is recommended, however, that they discuss the possibility of devising a common

approach to correction, to ensure that students learn from their mistakes. It is important that students derive the maximum and most effective benefit from the teachers' efforts in this regard.

The results of the state exams are analysed each year on a department basis. It was reported that every effort is made to encourage students to attempt the higher level, if that is within their ability-range.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The provision for Irish on the school timetable is satisfactory. It is evident that the school management supports the teaching of the language and the teachers' efforts.
- The extra support given to sixth year students in developing communication skills in the language is commendable.
- The efforts of the Irish department in devising a programme of interesting events for 'Seachtain na Gaeilge' and during the school-year in general, are highly commended.
- All the work done by the teachers of Irish on planning documents for teaching and learning the language is recognised and commended.
- Careful comprehensive planning had been done for all the lessons observed.
- The use of Irish as the language of management, instruction and communication was excellent, on the whole, in the classes observed.
- The emphasis placed on creating opportunities in the Irish classes for students to communicate is commendable.
- The manner in which the textbook was used in the Irish classes as a reference resource rather than as the main teaching resource is noted and commended.

The following general recommendations are made to enhance the strengths outlined above, and to identify areas for development:

- It is recommended that a programme of events be further developed for 'Seachtain na Gaeilge' and for the school-year in general.
- It is recommended that the plan for Irish be further developed, integrating the topics to be covered, methodologies and resources. It is also recommended that strategies to coax the reluctant learner and planning for the use of Information and Communication Technology be incorporated in the plan also.
- It is recommended that a wider range of aids and resources be used in the classes.
- It is recommended that the possibility of evaluating the communication skills of students in other year-groups besides fourth and sixth years be considered.

Post-assessment meetings with the teachers of Irish and with the principal were organised at the end of the evaluation, to present and discuss the draft findings and recommendations.