

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Coláiste Dhúlaigh Post Primary School
Coolock, Dublin 17.
Roll number: 70330Q**

Date of inspection: 24 November 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Dhúlaigh Post-Primary School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in French 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Dhúlaigh is a co-educational, post-primary school with an enrolment of 424 students in the current school year. The school offers a wide variety of curricular programmes, namely the Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Transition Year (TY) programme, the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. This broad range of programmes amply addresses the diverse educational needs of the student body.

In junior cycle, French is a core subject for all students except for those in the JCSP classes of first year and third year. TY is compulsory for students who wish to progress to the established Leaving Certificate, the LCVP or the LCA programmes and again, French is a compulsory subject in all senior-cycle programmes in this school.

The allocation of time to French is good with all lessons being single periods of thirty-five or forty minutes duration. Junior-cycle students have four periods of French per week. There are three periods of French in Transition Year while senior-cycle students have five class periods per week. As the French class groups in fifth year and in sixth year are not timetabled concurrently there are students of mixed ability in both groups. This arrangement needs to be kept under review.

The French department has commendably engaged in cross-curricular activities to extend the learning opportunities outside the classroom. Co-operative initiatives with the home economics department for the preparation of traditional French pancakes and with the music department for a carol service have been especially successful. Students of French also participated in the school's Maths Week in October 2009. Such activities contribute to students' knowledge of French culture and they enrich and broaden the learning of the language. It is recognised that it may not be possible or practicable to organise a school tour to France. It is recommended, therefore, that consideration be given to organising some in-school language and cultural activities for students. Many activities, such as an e-mail exchange with a partner school in France, the showing of a French film, a table quiz in French, a project on French football teams and French food tasting can be organised, on site, at minimum or no cost.

The school has a broadband-enabled computer room to which teachers of French have access. While ICT has not yet been widely used to teach French, teachers are aware that much stimulating, up-to-date material is available for downloading from the internet. Such material is invaluable in supplementing textbooks that can date rather quickly. In choosing suitable material it is important to bear in mind the interests and life experiences of the young learners. The portal website www.french.ie would be a good starting point for teachers and students alike as it contains links to many interesting, student-friendly, French language sites.

The provision of designated classrooms allows teachers in Coláiste Dhúlaigh to create an attractive learning environment for their students. The French classrooms visited were bright, quite spacious and well decorated with maps, posters and charts. The commitment of the teachers of French to provide a supportive language-learning space for their students is warmly acknowledged. The language classrooms were equipped with good-quality white boards and the imminent provision of a computer and a data projector for each classroom will be of valuable assistance to teachers, enabling them to prepare material in advance and to access some excellent authentic material on the internet.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School development planning had been initiated in the school some years ago but it had fallen into abeyance until recently. In some subjects, department planning is therefore at an early stage of development and the concept of collaborative subject planning is not yet an established feature of every subject department in the school. It is acknowledged that, over the past four years, due to retirements and personal leave, there have been changes in the personnel who make up the French department. This, in turn, has made the process of collaborative subject planning more difficult. However, with the return of the two permanent members of the French team, the opportunity now exists to develop a comprehensive plan for French. The teachers of French are aware of the benefits of a structured approach to planning and they were very open to advice and suggestions on how to progress. It is envisaged that the French team will have the opportunity to meet formally once a term and informally on occasions, and that one teacher will act as co-ordinator of the subject. This is a very positive measure.

Some good work has already been accomplished and an outline subject department plan was presented during the evaluation. This plan provides broad statements of aims and objectives, information on timetabling arrangements, planning for students with special needs and cross-curricular planning. The department plan also lists the textbooks and additional resources to be used in the teaching of French. Procedures relating to record keeping, homework, use of ICT and the use of the target language in class are also documented.

Taking cognisance of the school context, it is recommended that the French department reflect on the particular needs of students and plan accordingly. In further developing a subject plan for French, the teaching team should place particular emphasis on the identification of learning targets for each year group and should be very specific in stating what these learning targets are. It would be helpful to consider and document the teaching and learning approaches to be employed in order to achieve such targets. The French syllabuses for junior cycle and for senior cycle, available on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) web site, should be consulted in order to identify specific learning outcomes for each year group. Subject planning should focus on teaching methodologies and learning strategies that engage and motivate students to the fullest extent possible. The documenting of proposed learning outcomes

also helps teachers to focus on the most effective ways of measuring students' learning. It is recommended that the teachers of French draw up work schemes for each year group with a view to setting out in detail the work to be done in each term.

A full programme for the teaching of French in TY needs to be devised by the department. The existing very brief outline plan is inadequate and could not be considered as being an acceptable, informative programme for the teaching and learning of the language in TY. Appropriate learning goals and well defined objectives need to be documented and adhered to if TY students are to benefit from spending an additional year learning French. Suitable materials need to be sourced and used in class to enable TY students to lay a solid foundation for their Leaving Certificate studies.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Inspection activities undertaken included the observation of lessons and the opportunity to interact with students. Some lessons had been well prepared and began with a productive revision exercise on work done the previous day. Teacher questioning, in these instances, elicited a good response from students.

Some effective strategies observed involved the teaching of grammar, which, if done in isolation, can fail to interest and motivate students. However, by drawing on the experiences of some students who had recently visited the Dingle peninsula and by linking that event with the use of the past tense, the teacher successfully engaged the learners. Good use was made of the white board to collaboratively revise various relevant verbs. Students were then shown how the verbs and phrases relating to the school trip to Dingle could be used to describe other situations and events. The lesson was well paced and well structured and there was good evidence of student learning.

Cultural awareness was skilfully introduced to a junior-cycle class. Students were keen to take turns reading a passage on the famous monuments of Paris. A colour poster on the classroom wall helped them to visualise the various monuments and students made a good effort to answer the questions on Paris. The work book in use during the evaluation was almost entirely in English and, while useful for stimulating interest in France and its culture, it would need to be supplemented, in each lesson, with a basic, colourful French language textbook and worksheets.

In some senior-cycle lessons observed, participation in the learning process was well below optimal level as the content of the lesson was far too basic for the age-group concerned. While it is important to affirm students in relation to the language they have already acquired, it is equally important to bring them to the linguistic level expected of a particular age or ability group. Senior students, in particular, need to be challenged and to experience a sense of progression in the language. It is essential, therefore, to plan lessons thoroughly, to choose topics judiciously, and to pitch the content of lessons at a level that is appropriate to the age and to the standard of French which students have already reached. Best teaching practice was evident where lessons were built around a single theme, as recommended in the syllabuses and in the NCCA guidelines for the teaching of modern languages.

It is advisable to use a wide variety of language activities to ensure optimum concentration and engagement and to develop the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills of students. Additional resources such as photographs, brochures, pictures and articles downloaded from the

internet do much to make French relevant to the lives and interests of teenage learners. In order to gradually improve students' listening skills, a brief aural component, based on the lesson topic, should be seamlessly incorporated into each lesson. It is important to remember that the aural component of the Junior Certificate French examination accounts for more than forty per cent of the total marks. It is essential, therefore, that students listen to appropriate, syllabus-based material on a very regular basis. Words and idiomatic phrases can be extracted from the listening exercise and used to broaden and develop students' vocabulary. For younger students in particular, the use of vocabulary games, songs, raps, word searches, crosswords and interactive computer work are practical and effective means of learning a new language.

Use of the target language was quite good in some lessons observed. Where good practice was seen, affirmations and instructions were given in French and it was clear that students understood both the tone and content of what the teacher said. In other lessons observed, English was used extensively, and in some cases exclusively, as the language of classroom communication. Such methodology is not good practice as it represents a lost opportunity for students to hear accurate, clear French. If French is never used in the classroom, then, obviously, students' attainment levels in both oral comprehension and production will be disappointing. It is recommended that, both in junior-cycle and in senior-cycle classes, the target language be used as much as possible as the language of interaction in the French classroom. Listening to their teacher speaking the target language will help students to develop their aural skills, while responding to questions in French will help them to improve their oral skills. Students of all ability levels can be encouraged and enabled to understand and to speak some basic French in the classroom context. The display of frequently-used phrases and words over the white board would help students to understand and respond. The integration of brief, focused, pair work sessions which allow students to ask questions of each other in the target language would help to foster confidence. For most students in the school, the only exposure they have to French is in the language classroom. It is essential, therefore, that they get every opportunity to hear and speak French during the lesson period.

The systematic implementation of the recommendations made in this report, in relation to the teaching and learning of French, should help to raise levels of motivation and to deliver better outcomes for students.

The classroom atmosphere was positive and supportive and most students responded well to the sensible and sensitive approach to classroom management adopted by the teachers. The use of affirmation and encouragement worked particularly well and students were co-operative and courteous in their interactions with their teacher and with the inspector.

ASSESSMENT

The range of assessment methods used to monitor student progress in Coláiste Dhúlaigh is appropriate. It includes regular questioning in class to check students' understanding and recall, the assignment and correction of homework, class tests and formal school examinations. First-year, second-year and fifth-year students have formal examinations at Christmas and in summer, while third-year students and sixth-year students sit "mock" certificate examinations in the spring. To prepare students well for the certificate examinations it is recommended that past examination papers be used throughout the full school year and integrated thematically with the textbook.

In order to ensure steady progress in modern language acquisition, it is essential that all students be assigned regular homework exercises in the target language. Manageable, syllabus-based tasks such as the writing of postcards, messages, letters, diary entries and personal opinions enable

students to practise and improve their writing skills. Short reading comprehensions in the target language also reinforce classroom learning.

It was reported that, given the school context, particular difficulties regarding the completion of homework arise. It is suggested, therefore, that a portion of each lesson period be devoted to the development of writing skills. It is also good practice to set differentiated tasks for homework particularly with a view to challenging the more able students in a class group.

All homework assignments should be corrected, dated and signed by teachers. If students are to make meaningful progress in French, teachers need to write in the correct spellings and grammatical structures in the students' copybooks. Students should then be required to re-write the corrected passage and to ensure that they understand all corrections made. Positive, formative comments from the teacher in copybooks would also help to guide and motivate students to succeed. Some senior-cycle students had useful, personalised grammar notebooks which were well maintained.

Leaving Certificate students sit a "mock" French oral examination administered by a teacher other than their own. This is good practice. In relation to the actual Leaving Certificate oral examination, students, under the guidance of their teacher, prepare individual documents for discussion with the external examiner. Again, this is very good practice as borne out by one Chief Examiner's Report on Leaving Certificate French which states: "Examiners are overwhelmingly positive about the value of a well-chosen and well-prepared document to candidates of all abilities. It helps students at all levels to progress more confidently through the test."

In Coláiste Dhúlaigh, the formal testing of oral competence is confined to the Leaving Certificate group. Considering the importance of gradually developing the oral competence and confidence of all students, it is recommended that the testing of oral skills be carried out in all year groups in the school. Such testing can be conducted informally within the classroom setting and it could form part of the French department's overall assessment policy and procedures.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable makes good provision for the delivery of French and all year groups have appropriate time allocation.
- A formal modern languages department has been established and planning for the subject is ongoing.
- Good use has been made of authentic materials to create a stimulating environment in the classrooms.
- The thematic approach to lesson delivery, as observed in some lessons, ensured good student engagement.
- The teaching of grammar was skilfully related to an event in the students' lives.
- Students worked well in the lessons observed and co-operated fully with their teachers.

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

- The subject plan should be further developed to include a description of achievable learning outcomes for each year group and a focus on how those learning outcomes will be achieved.
- A comprehensive programme for TY should be drawn up and implemented.
- Work schemes for each year group should be collaboratively drawn up in order to make certain that sufficient syllabus-based material is covered in each term.
- A systematic and focused approach to lesson delivery, ensuring that topics and language content are appropriate to the age and linguistic ability of the students, should be adopted by all the teachers of French.
- French should be used, as much as possible, as the language of communication in the French classroom.
- Regular homework in the target language should be assigned and all students' work should be corrected, dated and signed.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the teachers of French and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.