

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of French  
REPORT**

**Skerries Community College  
Skerries, County Dublin  
Roll number: 76078Q**

**Date of inspection: 9 December 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**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Skerries Community College. 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. 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**

Skerries Community College is a large, co-educational, post-primary school with an enrolment of 927 students in the current school year. The school offers three curricular programmes; the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the established Leaving Certificate.

Prior to their entry to the school, students, together with their parents, choose their preferred optional subjects. Two modern languages, French and German, are included in the range of subjects on offer to first-year students. While many students opt to study one modern language, there is no obligation on any student to do so. A review of the figures submitted to the inspector indicates that over thirty-three percent of the 323 male students in junior cycle do not study any modern language. This figure rises to fifty percent in senior cycle. The potential long-term implications of such decisions are significant. Studying a European language extends career options, develops communicative skills and creativity and broadens cultural awareness. Accordingly, it is recommended that the practice of allowing a significant number of students to opt out of studying any modern language, at entry to second-level education, be monitored carefully and kept under review.

The allocation of teaching hours to French is in line with national norms. All students studying French, with the exception of those in TY, have at least one double-period lesson per week. This occurs because modern languages are set on the school's timetable against practical subjects, where double periods are often requested. Particular difficulties have arisen this year around the timetabling of French for one first-year group which has been allocated two double periods on two consecutive days. Accordingly, the group in question has no contact with the target language on three days of the school week. There is a need to review this allocation as regular contact with the language is very important for new learners. In the context of double period timetabling, it is essential that the class periods be spread evenly across the school week.

French is offered in three of the four option blocks in senior cycle. Mixed-ability groups are formed within each of these option blocks. The effective teaching of a foreign language requires

that particular emphasis be placed on the development of each student's oral skills. Working with higher-level and ordinary-level students in groups of up to thirty-one in senior-cycle classes can present challenges. The possibility of devising new timetable arrangements or different option blocks to facilitate separate higher-level and ordinary-level groups should be explored.

Although not all teachers of French work in a modern languages room, the provision of designated classrooms enables most members of the department to create a personalised, supportive learning space for their students. The language classrooms visited were bright, spacious and attractively decorated with well-chosen visual stimuli such as maps, posters, photographs, labels and projects. All classrooms are broadband enabled and equipped with a computer and data projector.

The town of Skerries is twinned with the canton of Guichen, a community of 20,000 inhabitants which is situated near Rennes, Brittany. Two teachers of French are members of the twinning committee. While the twinning initiative appears to have been in abeyance in recent years, there is scope to develop school-to-school links between Skerries Community College and a second-level institution in the Guichen area. The exchange of authentic materials such as photographs, school journals, yearbooks, projects and samples of students' work would be of mutual benefit.

The teachers of French are members of their professional subject association with the annual membership fee being paid by the school. It is commendable that the teachers have availed of continuous professional development opportunities both in Ireland and in France. Two members of the department are co-authors of a widely used junior-cycle French textbook. Some teachers have experience of correcting Certificate examinations.

The teaching of the language in the classroom is enhanced by a number of co-curricular activities such as performances by a French theatre group and the viewing of some French films. The French department has built up a significant store of DVDs which is regularly updated. The school benefited from the presence of a language assistant, a native speaker of French, during the school year 2008-09. TY students participated in a school tour to Paris in 2009 and in 2010.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school is actively engaged in the process of school development planning. In the course of the evaluation process it was clear that very good departmental subject planning is well established in the school and that the French department had progressed its planning practice to a high level. A considerable spirit of collaboration between members of the French team was noted. In line with good practice, a co-ordinator has been appointed and it is recommended that this position be rotated to enable all teachers of French to experience a team leadership role.

The French department's planning folder, presented during the evaluation, was of an exemplary standard. A School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) template has been used to provide a foundation for the subject plan where the mission statement and the broad aims and objectives of the French department are documented. A number of useful Department of Education and Skills (DES) documents such as the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate syllabuses, the Inspectorate's composite report on modern languages and two Chief Examiners' reports on the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations are contained in the folder. Statistical information from the State Examinations Commission on the results of certificate examinations is stored in the planning folder and the school's own certificate examination results in French are appended for the purposes of comparison.

School-specific documents include work schemes for each year group. Monthly schemes are developed for junior-cycle students, while senior-cycle schemes are laid out in two-month blocks. Commendably, the subject plan also documents some effective teaching methodologies which are linked to proposed learning outcomes. This assists teachers to focus on measuring students' learning. There is a comprehensive TY plan which, commendably, places considerable emphasis on French film and literature as a means of teaching the language from a different perspective. Planning for French in TY could also include ideas on how to advance the concept of self-directed learning, especially in terms of students accessing and using suitable language websites on a regular basis.

The schools' homework policy is kept on file and the French department's homework documentation complements the whole-school policy. The homework policy for French is practical and is enhanced by useful suggestions on how to encourage students to submit better quality homework. Assessment procedures are documented, additional resources are listed and the minutes of all department meetings 2005-2010 are maintained in the planning folder. This is very good practice as it enables teachers to measure the progress made in collaborative planning over a five-year span.

Plans to develop a shared electronic folder are still at an early stage of development. Given the high-quality subject planning accomplished to date, the French team is urged to re-activate the notion of devising a shared folder. Such a resource gives access to a greater variety of teaching material and it is recommended that various suggestions on how ICT could integrate with and enhance other teaching methodologies be written into the subject plan.

Individual short-term planning and preparation for lessons were good in the majority of lessons observed when teaching resources and additional worksheets were judiciously chosen and when colourful, stimulating Powerpoint presentations were prepared. Some generic worksheets, acquired from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS), were used imaginatively in a TY class.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

During the evaluation, six lessons were observed, of which two were double-period sessions. Lessons were competently delivered and a sense of purpose was quickly established in each class. Most classes began with the theme and objectives of the lesson being written on the board, and in some cases, reference was made to those objectives at the end of the lesson to assess what progress had been made. This is a good strategy which helps students to evaluate their own learning.

All lessons were focused on a single theme and the topics chosen were in line with syllabus requirements. This good practice was seen at its best when the chosen topic was relevant to the lives and interests of the teenage learners. In a senior-cycle class, for example, the discussion was focused on the impact of the mobile phone and students were keen and well able to offer their opinions. Students' comments were collated on the board, a teaching approach which added to the effectiveness of the lesson and ensured the engagement of the learners.

Links with previous lessons were created when homework was checked at the outset. In some cases, common mistakes were identified and corrected collectively on the board. This was an effective method of alerting students to potential and actual grammatical and spelling errors.

Most teachers included an aural component in the lesson. This inclusion of the important skill of listening proved productive and, in some instances, it would have been even more beneficial to students if the key words and phrases, heard on the CD, had been written on the board to reinforce learning.

Some lessons included pair-work sessions which were seen to be quite productive when students were given clear instructions on how to proceed. Such exercises are most effective when students refer minimally or not at all to a written script.

In common with other members of staff, the teachers of French have availed of training in differentiation. It was gratifying to see some teachers putting the principles of differentiation into practice in the classroom by distributing differentiated worksheets in a mixed-ability class. For example, in a doctor/patient role-play exercise, students in a junior-cycle class were given differentiated tasks which were tailored to suit the language capability of the students concerned. This is very good practice.

In one lesson observed, where the focus was on vocabulary building, students were instructed to copy down long lists of words from the board. The educational value of such a methodology is questionable, especially as much of this vocabulary was already available in an attractive format in the textbook. Valuable teaching time is lost when students are unnecessarily transcribing lists of vocabulary into copybooks. New vocabulary is best acquired through a more holistic approach where words, structures and grammar are taught in a communicative context. Language skills can and should be consolidated through active methodologies such as pair-work, role-play, brainstorming and games. Younger learners, in particular, respond best to colourful, stimulating material and they engage most productively when they are active participants in the learning process.

A salient feature of the teaching methodology used in all lessons was the extensive use of the target language. Teachers displayed a high level of oral competency, speaking clear, accurate French to their students. They made good use of mime and facial expressions rather than translation to assist students' understanding. Synonyms were used productively in some instances to explain words. Several strategies were employed effectively to promote good student pronunciation. Group repetition, when used wisely rather than excessively, appeared to work well. This strategy was in turn supported by the individual questioning of students. As the use of the target language is central to good language-teaching practice, it was heartening to observe the extent to which French was employed in the classroom, by all members of the department, in Skerries Community College.

Teachers were committed and professional in their approach to classroom management and the student-teacher relationship was positive and productive. A good work ethic was evident in all lessons observed. Students answered questions readily, showed an interest in their work and co-operated fully with their teachers.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The assessment of students' progress is a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process in Skerries Community College. Teachers of French maintain good records of students'

attendance and attainment. A combination of questioning, homework assignments, projects, and regular class tests is used to assess students' achievement throughout the school year.

Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students sit "mock" examinations in February each year and all other year groups have formal examinations at the same time. The teachers of French are unable to devise common assessments for students as the in-house examination timetables are set according to option bands. This means that each French class within a year group sit their French examination on different days, thus requiring different examinations to be set by each teacher. Common tests give a clear indication on how students are progressing in relation to their peers in other classes. The timetabling of all in-house examinations is a whole-school matter which could be reviewed with a view to cutting down on the unnecessary duplication of work for all teachers.

Management facilitates the holding of formal "mock" oral examinations for Leaving Certificate students by suspending the regular timetable of the teachers to enable them to examine each other's students over a two-day period. This is good practice. In order to emphasise the importance of oral proficiency for every year group, it is further recommended that a short, informal oral test be given to all students as part of the French department's assessment procedures. The systematic use of oral assessments affords students the opportunity to grow in confidence in relation to oral proficiency and it validates the use of the target language in the classroom.

Some students maintain specific vocabulary notebooks or folders. This is good practice as such a resource can be a most useful reference and revision aid to students provided that it is logically and thematically arranged. If students merely write down words and phrases at random in their vocabulary copybooks, there is little chance that they will be able to access them correctly and efficiently when revising. The good practice of integrating past Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examination questions with topics in the textbook, throughout the school year, has been well established.

Recognising that productive homework consolidates and extends learning, the French department has drawn up a comprehensive homework policy as referred to earlier in this report. In reviewing students' copybooks, it was good to note that productive homework exercises in the target language were regularly set, checked and corrected. The quantity and quality of work in most students' copybooks was very good. However, it was noted that some copybooks contained copious lists of verbs, some of which would be rarely if ever used in everyday communication. All verbs need to be taught and learned in a communicative context.

The textbooks used in junior cycle and in senior cycle have an accompanying CD for students. This enables teachers to assign listening exercises as homework which is a very good method of improving students' aural skills.

It is laudable that the results achieved by students in the certificate examinations are analysed, discussed at subject department level and used to inform planning and teaching for the following year.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school promotes collaborative planning and a formal modern languages department has been established.
- The planning documentation presented by the French department was of a very high standard.
- The thematic approach to lesson delivery ensured a good balance and integration of the four language skills.
- Differentiated tasks and accompanying worksheets were distributed to students.
- The target language was used extensively in all lessons observed.
- Productive homework, in the target language, is regularly assigned and corrected.
- Student-teacher relationships were positive and pleasant. Students worked well in class and they 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 practice of allowing incoming students to opt out of studying any modern language should be kept under review.
- Every effort should be made to distribute French lesson periods evenly over the week and the allocation of two double periods on consecutive days in junior cycle should be avoided.
- In order to engage students fully, it is important to incorporate active teaching methodologies into lessons.
- Grammar and new vocabulary should be taught and learned in a communicative context.
- Oral testing, either formal or informal, should form part of the assessment procedures for all year groups.

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.

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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 notes the details of the report and in general is pleased with the results.

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

In an effort to promote the uptake of Modern Languages Spanish is being offered to first years in 2011/12.

Efforts are being made to include oral testing in the assessment procedures for all years.