An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
 REPORT

Alexandra College
Milltown, Dublin 6
Roll number: 60910F

Date of inspection: 8 December 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Alexandra College, Dublin 6. 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 one day 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, deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Alexandra College is a voluntary secondary school with 549 female students. The study of a modern language is mandatory to Leaving Certificate and there is very good provision in the range of languages offered in the school. Students choose French, German or Spanish prior to entry into first year. French is offered as a module in Transition Year (TY) for students who have not taken it in junior cycle and there is the possibility of continuing it in senior cycle should a student be deemed to have an aptitude for the language. Spanish and Italian are also offered as TY modules, with the possibility of continuing them in senior cycle.

There is good provision for French in the allocation of time and timetabling. All lessons are timetabled in single periods and this ensures ongoing contact with the language. Classes are mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle and are set in senior cycle.

There are six teachers of French, all of whom are graduates in the subject and who teach to all levels. Whole-school commitment to teacher professional development includes the provision of funding for teachers wishing to pursue further study, payment of membership of the subject associations and timetabling facilitation where it is required. The teachers of French are all members of the French Teachers’ Association (FTA) and a number of them have attended the annual conferences held by the Association held in recent years. In order to ensure the fullest possible engagement with new developments in the teaching and learning of French, it is recommended that teachers inform themselves of and apply for the range of language-related scholarships, programmes and grants available. These include scholarships provided by the Department of Education and Skills and the French Cultural Services and by Léargas.

Many of the teachers of French have their own classrooms, some of which had good displays of French maps, posters and samples of students’ work. Furthermore, the seating arrangements in one of the rooms facilitated ease of movement for activities such as group work. It is recommended that, where relevant, teachers extend the language learning environment with charts of classroom language, key expressions and grammar points, and displays of students’
work. The creation of such charts could be completed by students as part of the TY programme for French.

There is very good provision of resources. There are designated CD recorders and fixed data projectors have been installed in all classrooms. Each teacher has an I-Book, which supports the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom. Materials include a range of books and magazines, CDs, videos and DVDs.

Students engage in a good range of co-curricular activities. Teachers organise a European Languages week in the school to coincide with European Languages day at the end of September. Other co-curricular activities include visits to the Irish Film Institute, visits from French theatre companies and participation in a number of French debating competitions. Students also participate in the annual table quiz organised by the FTA. Language trips to France are organised on an annual basis for TY students. Given the strong and commendable focus on ICT as a tool for teaching and learning, consideration should be given to promoting intercultural dialogue with some French schools through e-pals or interclass correspondence.

**Planning and Preparation**

A number of good practices are in place to support ongoing subject development planning. The provision of one timetabled period each week for planning purposes indicates senior management’s commitment to subject planning as a systematic and collaborative process. Furthermore, the meetings as members of a modern languages department in addition to subject planning for French reflects the value attributed to the teaching of all modern European languages. Co-ordination duties for French are currently carried out by the most senior teacher of the subject. It is recommended that a rotating position of subject co-ordinator for French be considered as this will afford all teachers the opportunity to develop subject specific expertise and to take ownership of the subject planning process. Minutes are kept of all meetings in line with good practice.

A very comprehensive subject plan has been developed over the years for the teaching and learning of French. It sets out the aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of the subject, with clear reference to the syllabus. It includes the school’s organisational and operating context, the resources available to support teachers in their work, the curriculum content, methodologies, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and assessment protocols. Documentation on provision for students with additional learning needs is also included. Good practice was also noted in the use of electronic recording of the school plan as it facilitates access for all teachers in addition to ease in recording changes and developments.

The compilation of a very expansive planning folder over the years reflects the extensive planning work carried out by teachers and this is commended. To further build on this very good work, teachers should now consider extracting the key points from the subject planning folder and incorporate them into a more succinct working document. This working document should outline the desired learning outcomes for each year group in terms of what the students will be able to do as a result of their learning. The resources, methodologies and assessment protocols to be used, should also be included. This approach would ensure that planning informs classroom practice. It would also support a self-evaluation process whereby teachers could review their work at the end of the year, share good practice and amend plans where appropriate.

A review of the TY plan indicates that teachers are cognisant of the principles underpinning an effective TY programme for languages and this is good practice. However, greater detail
regarding the learning outcomes and proposed methodologies for the different modules should be provided in the plan.

There was evidence of careful preparation for all the lessons observed. Examples of such evidence included the advance readiness of technical equipment and teaching materials.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Evaluation activities included the observation of five lessons; two at junior cycle, one Transition Year group and two at senior cycle. The opportunity for interaction between the inspector and the students in addition to a review of students’ copybooks was also facilitated. All lessons were competently taught.

Most lessons were well structured and paced and the content was appropriate to the needs and abilities of the students. Good practice was also noted where the teacher outlined the lesson plan at the outset. To further this good practice it is recommended that the lesson plan be shared with the students in terms of the knowledge and skills they are expected to have acquired as a result of their learning.

High standards of linguistic competency facilitated ongoing use of the target language by the teacher in most of the lessons observed. There were some occasions however, where the teacher reverted back too readily to the use of English to explain difficulties. While the need to support students of all abilities in the language learning process is acknowledged, alternative strategies such as repeating what was said more slowly, using visual supports or putting the new learning into a given context should be considered before translation. Such approaches will ensure that all students are optimally challenged to understand in the target language. There were some instances where students made good efforts to interact with the teacher in the target language and this should be extended to all lessons. Students in some lessons also demonstrated very good proficiency in spelling words in French, a practice which should also be extended to all lessons.

An integrated approach to the teaching of all the language skills was observed in some lessons and there were good examples of oral skills development and the effective integration of grammar into the body of the lesson. Much of the work observed, however, was revision and because students had already completed the aural component, the main focus in most lessons was on comprehension and grammar in preparation for the end-of-term written examination. While this was appropriate in the context, teachers should consider adopting an integrated approach to revision work in order to make students aware of the transferability of their learning from one skills area to another to support examination performance.

ICT was used in some instances to support the work of the lesson with good choices of text and the effective integration of cultural awareness. Active learning was promoted in many lessons where students were assigned pair or group work tasks. However, while many of these activities were effectively carried out, there were some instances where the nature of the tasks assigned did not necessitate group interaction. When devising pair or group tasks teachers should keep in mind the need for interaction if the desired outcome is the promotion of oral skills. In one case, however, greater use of active methodologies would have enhanced student learning. It is recommended that all teachers plan for the use of at least one student-based activity in every language lesson.

There was good classroom management and a positive learning environment prevailed throughout. Students engaged well with the lesson and applied themselves to the assigned tasks.
Their responses also indicated a good understanding of the work in hand. Students’ interactions with the inspector also indicated that most of them were confident and competent learners of the language.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment practices in Alexandra College include question and answer sessions in class, homework assignments, class tests and formal examinations. A review of students’ copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected. However, some of the homework assignments involved translation exercises. It is recommended that alternatives assignments to translation be given in order to afford students more opportunities for using language in different ways and in a wider variety of contexts.

Students sit a number of class tests in addition to formal examinations at Christmas and in the summer. Certificate examination students sit mock examinations in the second term. Common tests are set where appropriate. An aural component is also included in all formal assessments. Fifth-year and sixth-year students have an oral assessment as part of their formal examinations. Consideration should be given to extending this good practice to all year groups. Such assessments can be carried out formally or informally and should be included in students’ reports as a discrete mark. It is also recommended that as part of TY planning, assessment protocols should be developed to evaluate the full range of language and cultural skills promoted in the TY programme.

Parents receive four school reports each year. Contact is also maintained with parents through the annual parent-teacher meetings held for each year group and through phone-calls to parents. A review of results in the certificate examinations indicate very good uptake of levels and outcomes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole school provision and support for French in the allocation of time, timetabling and the provision of resources.
- Very good practices are in place to support ongoing collaborative subject planning. An extensive planning document has been developed over the years.
- There was good use of the target language by the teachers in most of the lessons observed.
- Varied methodologies including ICT and group work were used in many lessons to good effect.

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

- Teachers should further their good work in subject planning by creating a working document, outlining the desired learning outcomes for each year group, the methodologies and assessment protocols that will serve in a practical way to inform classroom practice.
- Teachers should use alternative strategies to translation, wherever possible, to support students’ comprehension.
• Teachers should consider adopting a more integrated approach to revision work in order to make students aware of the transferability of their learning to support examination performance.
• Some active methodologies including pair or group work should be incorporated into all lessons.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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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