Subject Inspection of German
REPORT

St Mary’s College,
St Mary’s Road, Galway.
Roll number: 62980N

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GERMAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St. Mary’s College, Galway. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in German 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

It is good that languages form a central strand of the school’s curriculum in St Mary’s College and school management is to be commended for its contribution to supporting language learning. St Mary’s College has a total student cohort of 422 and there is an open choice of modern languages on entry to the school, with a choice between French and German. Most students pursue the study of a modern language and only those students with additional educational needs are allowed opt out of the study of a language. While a modern language is designated core at junior cycle, at senior cycle the choice is between French, German and Geography. This may mean that some students do not continue the study of a modern language onto Leaving Certificate. Lack of a modern language in the Leaving Certificate may restrict students’ third-level options and school management should ensure that students are aware of this, and should review the option blocks with this in mind.

Of the ninety-one first-year students enrolled for the 2009/2010 school year, twenty-five opted for the study of German. This indicates an improvement in the numbers of students who opted for German compared to previous years and is a welcome development. To promote uptake of German, the German teachers have given taster lessons in German to pupils of local feeder primary schools in recent years. This is an initiative which requires commitment and effort on the part of the German teachers, the impact of which is evident in the increase in student numbers. The possibility of Transition Year (TY) students engaging in taster lessons in the feeder primary schools should also be explored, where pupils can experience the learning of the new language among their close peers. Further information in relation to ‘An Early Experience in German’ project can be found at www.mlpsi.ie by clicking on the primary/secondary link, where suitable materials for such an initiative are available.

The allocation of time to the subject is good and the distribution of lesson periods across the week is optimal, as it allows for regular contact with the target language at frequent intervals throughout the week, which facilitates student learning and progress, particularly in the mixed-ability setting which pertains. At junior cycle, four forty-minute periods are allocated to German
in first, second and third year. At senior cycle, three periods are allocated in TY and five in sixth year, but only four in fifth year. However, the splitting of the eighteen fifth-year students into two smaller groups mitigates the loss of time. The class groups for German are small with fourteen students in second and third year and just seven in the optional TY. Two class groups for German have been formed in first, fifth and sixth year. While this is understandable at senior cycle, where students are banded according to level being opted for in certificate examinations, the division of the class group in first-year is quite resource intensive and may not be sustainable over time. First-year students are best placed into mixed-ability settings initially and are encouraged to aim for higher level Junior Certificate for as long as possible. All students who wish to do higher level German in the certificate examinations are encouraged and facilitated to do so. The number of students attempting ordinary level is nevertheless high. The attainment at ordinary level indicated that some students could possibly be attempting higher level. Senior management and the German teachers are encouraged to discuss student expectation and the possibility of increasing the number attempting to take higher level in German, particularly at junior cycle.

The celebration of German festivals and traditions throughout the year forms part of the school’s German calendar. It is suggested that broadening the range of related co-curricular activities, both internal and external to the school, to maximise the exposure students have to the language would further promote German. The provision of a centrally located German notice board is recommended to facilitate dissemination of information relating to the target language countries, Germany, Switzerland and Austria, such as the possibilities for students to participate in language exchanges to German speaking countries or to attend language colleges and courses in Ireland. Attendance at screenings of German films suitable for young learners and participation in inter-school debating competitions are also activities which can serve to motivate students and improve their learning. School management regularly applies for participation in the Foreign Language Assistant (FLA) scheme, acknowledging the benefit of the native speaker in the German language classroom for both students and teachers. While the German teachers have undertaken regular visits to the target language country, these are not possible every year and participation in the FLA scheme provides the school with access to this very important resource.

**Planning and Preparation**

Subject department planning meetings are timetabled into the school calendar which accommodates two such meetings a year. Subject planning and review is an integral part of the preparatory meetings held at the beginning of the school year, where subject plans are reviewed in the context of the current student cohort and the examination results for the subject in certificate examinations are also analysed and reviewed. This is good practice.

There is no cohesive German plan and the German planning documentation examined at the time of the evaluation was compiled on an individual teacher basis. A collaborative overarching planning sheet had been developed which outlines the objectives for the subject and this could form the introduction to the German plan. This document opens with appropriate aims and objectives for the subject, with the primary focus being on the development of students’ communicative skills in German. Particularly praiseworthy is the objective of facilitating students’ enjoyment of German. The inclusion of excerpts from literature and the integration of song and drama at senior cycle are very laudable objectives. However, these were not observed in practice in the classroom on the day of the evaluation. Teachers should try to ensure that recorded objectives are implemented in practice in the classroom. The objective articulated in the plan in relation to the development of student social awareness is one of personal development and should be elaborated more clearly in the context of the language learning objectives.
It is recommended that a subject plan for German be compiled, drawing on the work completed to date and including the amendments and elaborations suggested above. This plan should become a collaborative working document.

Yearly schemes of work were presented for each year group. The plan for first and second year was outlined in terms of chapters of the textbook to be covered and in terms of strategies for examination preparation. Some of the textbooks listed are testing rather than teaching instruments and care should be taken that these are not introduced too early, as they are tools for assessment rather than learning. All topics in the syllabus are mentioned but in terms of how they will be tested rather than in terms of behavioural learning objectives. Related grammatical and lexical items are also listed but it is not clear how these are to be integrated. While the work completed to date is acknowledged, the focus would be better placed on student learning outcomes articulated in terms of can-do statements. A focus on what the students will be able to do would help ensure that the learning has taken place and that material taught is material learnt. In interaction with some students, it was clear that the material already covered in class by the teachers had not been fully internalised by all students.

The aims and objectives of the TY plan are appropriate and include such objectives as confidence building in the use of the language and the development of research skills. These are in line with the philosophy of and guidelines for TY. The inclusion of portfolio assessment is also commended and should be explored and elaborated further. There is an attempt to have cross-curricular co-operation and planning in relation to TY.

The senior cycle planning documentation refers to syllabus documents and to the themes to be covered in an integrated way. This is in line with the recommended approach for syllabus implementation. Teachers should note that the materials to be prepared for the oral assessment, picture sequences and role-plays, should also be integrated thematically. The plan also lists the linguistic structures required to realise the behavioural objectives. This is a good approach. There was little reference to methodologies in the planning documentation, other than the mention of the use of group and pair work which was observed on one occasion in the course of the evaluation. The German teachers are encouraged to use the findings of this report to guide them in recording accurately the range of methodologies to be deployed and the learning experiences provided for students. This would help to inform both students and parents about the learning of the language and provide a curriculum summary for ease of dissemination.

There are three qualified teachers of German, assigned to classes and levels on a rotational basis. This is in line with best practice. However, there is no designated co-ordinator or convenor for German. The creation of a rotating convenor for the subject would facilitate sharing of practice, approaches and resources. At the time of the evaluation, it was the practice for teachers to apply for resources for the subject on an individual basis. The German teachers are urged to discuss and agree on resource requirements during the course of planning meetings. The German teachers have access to the ICT resource room and the college’s multi-media room through a booking system. The effective use of this resource requires forward planning and collaboration. The fact that teachers have their own base classroom will facilitate the integration of ICT into teaching and learning. The engagement of the German teachers with ICT training is recommended, to ensure that technology becomes a teaching tool for the language classroom.

Good short-term planning, with worksheets and materials prepared in advance, ensured a good pace and structure to lessons.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

The most important resource for any language classroom is language competence of the teacher and the teacher who can effectively model the target language and community. This was the case in St Mary’s Galway. The teachers used accurate and idiomatic German with correct pronunciation which allowed the creation of an authentic German learning environment for students. In some lessons observed, teachers deployed some good strategies to sustain the use of German and to reinforce learning by using synonyms, by grouping words, and by isolating key German words in texts. This is commendable. In another lesson observed, individual students read their responses in German prepared as a homework exercise and it was good to hear consistent use of the target language by the teacher and students. In the teacher-based classrooms, the rooms were decorated authentically and attractively with charts, student work and German posters, creating a stimulating learning environment for the language. The attractive learning environment and atmosphere, the clarity of direction and well-structured lessons contributed to the effectiveness of some lessons. The approach observed was student-centred.

The German environment created was unfortunately not always sustained. It was regrettable to observe on one occasion that when the students spoke, they spoke mainly in English. On another occasion, instructions for tasks and activities were explained in simple German which is good practice. However, this was followed by translation which the students were clearly becoming dependent upon. The use of translation should be gradually decreased to ensure that the German environment created is sustained for the duration of the time available. Alternative linguistic scaffolding and support strategies should be employed to ensure student learning and understanding. This could be achieved through the use of visual stimuli, flashcards, realia and the inclusion and the integration of a range of media and resources including ICT. Additional strategies were discussed with the teachers at the time of the evaluation.

The teachers adopted an integrated approach in line with syllabus guidelines. Grammatical items were integrated with ease into the rhythm of the lessons. In one exercise observed, there was parallel focus on appropriate use of vocabulary as well as correct application of word-order rules. This is good practice. A systematic approach was deployed by the teachers to reinforce new structures being introduced; for example, practising the change of the first to the third person was facilitated by the use of short simple sentences. At senior cycle, themes were appropriate for examination preparation and syllabus content and topics in junior cycle lessons were appropriate to the students’ stage in learning and to their range of interests. An integrated approach should be applied to all lesson periods throughout the week and the dedication of a particular day to listening or grammar exercises should be avoided, as this serves only to isolate the language experience which in using language must be integrated.

In some lessons observed, teachers used a range of strategies to explain meanings. Differentiated worksheets prepared in advance by the teachers were distributed to students for the content of the day’s lesson. In another lesson, a well thought-out gapped exercise helped students to grasp the meaning of a listening text which they had just heard. The teachers were very supportive of students. The use of synonyms in broadening the vocabulary base of students was also effective. The strategy to learn adjectives of like meaning or opposites in pairs was a further effective strategy employed. Students were also encouraged to guess at meaning and thereby think independently. When introducing new vocabulary or revising vocabulary, it is important for the teacher to present the definite article with the lexical items at all times and the teacher needs to be vigilant in this regard to develop the good practice in the students themselves. When using the blackboard, the teacher must ensure that the writing is of a legible size. The use of ICT could
address this and would have further enhanced the lesson in question and the gathering of student responses.

Teachers were systematic in their approach to facilitating student language acquisition. When questioning students, it was good that the teachers required each student to answer individually as well as using repetition in unison to practise pronunciation and vocabulary. The use of a dialogue observed is a method which should be replicated throughout lessons to ensure reinforcement of language learning. The use of pair and group work, observed on one occasion, helped to ensure the participation of each student in applying new structures and linguistic items presented during class. The German teachers need to build on the range of methodologies they use to promote active student use of language. It is recommended that the teachers devise short tasks and activities in every lesson to ensure that students use and retain the language items covered.

The challenge is to sustain the German world created and to provide opportunities for students to use and generate the language themselves. The students need to be more active with tasks, worksheets, exercises, activities being assigned to them, placing the onus on the students to use the language themselves and to generate spontaneous language usage. Over time students need to take responsibility for their own progress and review on a regular basis the attainment of objectives set by their teachers. The range of ability of the students is acknowledged. This is alleviated by the fact that class groups are small and are set for ordinary and higher level. Analysis of the examination results indicates that from year to year a range of grades is achieved at both levels. As mentioned earlier in this report, it is also clear that students’ attainment at ordinary level is sometimes very good and that perhaps more students could attempt higher level.

ASSESSMENT

While there is no school assessment policy, there is a policy on homework and teachers are responsible for its implementation. Students are assessed regularly at Easter, Christmas and summer as well as having continuous assessment in the form of regular homework assignments and portfolio assessment in TY. Appropriate assessment modes are deployed for modern languages, including written, aural and oral. Students are given oral and written feedback on their work. Parents are kept informed of student progress through reports, the student journal and parent-teacher meetings. The principal carries out an analysis of certificate examination results and the teachers are informed in relation to their individual class groups and in comparison to national averages.

Sixth-year folders examined in the course of the evaluation were organised systematically on a thematic basis and showed that a range of appropriate themes had been covered. Lexical items and linguistic structures were recorded carefully by students. There was a focus on accuracy of endings in teacher corrections. In the first-year copy books examined, there was systematic reinforcement of linguistic structures introduced and practised. There was also evidence of translation being used as an exercise and this should be avoided. In another set of first-year copy books, there was good use of diagrams and colour coding which young learners find helpful. The use of pictures and visual media facilitates student retention of both linguistic structures and vocabulary and is the best practice for this stage of learning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
Languages form a central strand of the school’s curriculum in St Mary’s College and school management is to be commended for its contribution to supporting language learning.

A collaborative overarching planning document for German opens with appropriate aims and objectives for the subject, with the primary focus being on the development of students’ communicative skills in German. Particularly praiseworthy is the objective of facilitating students’ enjoyment of German.

Good short-term planning, with worksheets and materials prepared in advance, ensured a good pace and structure to lessons.

The teachers used accurate and idiomatic German with correct pronunciation which allowed the creation of an authentic German learning environment for students.

The teachers adopted an integrated approach in line with syllabus guidelines. Grammatical items were integrated with ease into the rhythm of the lessons.

Teachers were systematic in their approach to facilitating student language acquisition.

The use of pictures, diagrams and visual media in first-year copy books facilitates student retention of both linguistic structures and vocabulary and is commended.

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

- Senior management and the German teachers are encouraged to discuss student expectation and the possibility of increasing the number attempting to take higher level in German, particularly at junior cycle.
- Further promotion of the language through broadening the range of co-curricular activities, both internal and external to the school, relating to German is suggested.
- It is recommended that a subject plan for German be compiled, drawing on the work completed to date and including the amendments and elaborations suggested in this report.
- It is recommended that the teachers of German engage with ICT training, to ensure that technology becomes a teaching tool for the German language classroom.
- It is recommended that the German teachers devise short tasks and activities in every lesson, to ensure that students use and retain the language items covered, providing the students with opportunities for spontaneous language usage.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of German 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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