Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Saint Attracta’s Community School
Tubbercurry, County Sligo
Roll number: 91512Q

Date of inspection: 4 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Attracta’s Community School, Tubbercurry. 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. 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

St Attracta’s Community School is a co-educational community school with 566 students. The study of a modern European language is optional. Two modern European languages, French and German, are offered as both junior and senior cycle subjects. While the majority of students take one language, the opportunity to study two modern European languages is afforded to all students. This is very good practice. However, the number of current first-year students who chose French shows a certain decrease on previous years. This suggests that school management needs to keep the uptake of modern languages under review to ensure that incoming first-year students and their parents fully comprehend the implications for their future educational choices of not having studied a modern European language.

There is satisfactory provision for French in terms of the allocation of teaching time. The timetabling of French is good in most instances as it affords students regular contact with the language.

There are three teachers of French in the school, all of whom are graduates in the subject. Some have benefited from in-service training programmes for teachers of French in recent years. The teachers are also members of the French Teachers’ Association (FTA). The initiatives undertaken to date to maintain good standards of linguistic and pedagogical competency are praiseworthy. To further support their commitment to continuing professional development, the teachers of French should research and consider applying for some of the language-related scholarships, professional visits, courses and seminars made available for teachers of modern European languages. Teachers should also avail of the subject-related in-service courses offered in local education centres.
Classrooms in St Attracta’s are teacher-based. All rooms visited had attractive language learning environments with displays of maps, posters, up-to-date newspaper articles, grammar charts and samples of students’ work. The creation of a print-rich environment is good practice as it promotes both linguistic and cultural awareness.

There is good whole school provision for resources to support the teaching and learning of French. These include CD recorders, television and DVD players. The materials available include dictionaries, books, DVDs and magazines. Requests for resources are made through the subject co-ordinator and an annual budget is provided in accordance with departmental needs. All classrooms are equipped with data projectors and there was evidence to indicate that information and communication technology (ICT) is used by the members of the French department to support teaching and learning. This is good practice.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject planning has been embraced in St Attracta’s Community School. There is a co-ordinator for French, a position which is voluntary and rotates. Subject department meetings are facilitated three times each year and minutes are kept of meetings. These are good practices.

The subject plan submitted on the day of the evaluation outlines the aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of French in each year group. The aims and objectives are articulated in terms of the vocabulary, phrases and grammar relevant to a range of identified themes and, in some instances, are grouped into two major blocks of work. The materials to be used in each year group are also included. While the work completed to date is acknowledged, the plan is not sufficiently developed to inform and support optimum practice and there is evidence to indicate that teaching and learning in some instances is not progressing in accordance with the plan. A more comprehensive long term subject plan for the teaching and learning of French needs to be expedited. To this end it is recommended that teachers work together to develop their subject plan, documenting the desired learning outcomes for each year group with the linguistic strategies and the proposed methodologies to support such outcomes. These outcomes should be articulated in terms of what the students will be able to do as a result of their learning. A comprehensive subject plan should also include planning for resources, for ICT and for differentiation to support teaching and learning that will best meet the needs of all students. A collaborative approach to developing protocols around assessment to be included in the plan is also recommended. A well developed long-term plan can then be broken down into programmes of work to be completed within given time frames.

A Transition Year (TY) plan was also made available. The TY plan provides for the study of four modules and outlines the intended topics for each module. While the programme includes proposals for project work, it was unclear as to whether these projects are completed in the target language or in English. Furthermore since there was insufficient detail in the TY plan regarding the methodologies to be used, it is unclear whether or not the current programme includes approaches which reflect the curriculum principles underpinning an effective Transition Year programme as set out in the document *Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education and Science: 1995). Teachers should revise the current TY plan and establish learning outcomes using methodologies which are in accordance with Departmental guidelines.
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**

The subject evaluation involved the observation of five lessons: three at junior cycle and two at senior cycle. Interaction between the students and the inspector took place during classroom visits and a review of students’ copybooks was also undertaken. Teachers displayed good standards of linguistic competence and there were a number of lessons where very good and creative teaching practices were observed. However, greater clarity of purpose was needed in some lessons to optimise the learning outcomes for students. In other lessons, a review of the methodologies used is recommended to enhance the teaching and learning of the subject. Improvements in these areas would best be brought about by the teachers working collaboratively and in support of each other on an ongoing basis.

The target language was used throughout by the teachers in most of the lessons observed. This is universally recognised as the most effective approach to the teaching of a language. However, there were some instances where the lessons began in French and, as the work progressed and more traditional methodologies were adopted, greater use was made of English as the language of instruction and communication. Where there is risk of this occurring, teachers should become more conscious of the importance of using methodologies which will support ongoing use of the target language. To this end, and to extend the use of French as the language of the classroom, teachers should ensure that students acquire the linguistic competence to ask questions, express difficulty or make requests in simple French as soon as possible after they begin studying the language.

Many of the lessons observed were well structured and appropriately paced and the content responded to the needs and interests of the students. There was one lesson however, where the time spent preparing an activity was disproportionate to the time allocated for its completion, while, in another lesson, new learning needed to be progressed in a more timely manner. In order to ensure a well structured lesson, all teachers should begin by sharing the lesson plan with their students in terms of the proposed learning outcomes for the lesson. This enables teachers to progress the lesson in accordance with planned outcomes and helps them to better meet their long-term planning goals. It also engages students as partners in the work on hand.

There was one lesson where a very apt choice of related texts and corresponding tasks facilitated good student engagement with the work in hand. In another lesson a listening text was creatively used for the purpose of promoting discussion and oral skills development. The practice of using a listening text for purposes other than testing is very good and should be extended to all lessons. In another lesson, however, where a listening text was used for revision and testing purposes, it would have been more effective if students had been asked for their responses prior to the answers being projected onto the board.

ICT was embraced in all of the lessons observed. Visual supports, including ICT, were used effectively in some instances to support and monitor student comprehension. ICT was also used to guide students in the completion of the assigned tasks and for the integration of cultural awareness. This exemplified very good practice. The use of games was also observed in some lessons. While this is an approach which can afford students enjoyable language learning experiences and is therefore recommended as a teaching methodology, in one instance the
proposed language learning outcomes were not communicated to the students and the overall purpose of the activity remained unclear. It is important to guard against this.

Question-and-answer sessions were used in all of the lessons observed to elicit information and to initiate oral interaction. This is good practice. However, teachers should include all students in this activity and, to this end they should target those individual students who do not volunteer answers. Pair work was assigned in all of the lessons observed. The use of pair or group work is commended as it engages students and promotes active and independent learning. However, there were many instances where the students failed to interact with their partners and they completed the tasks individually. When preparing pair or group activities, teachers need to ensure that the tasks assigned necessitate interaction. They should set tasks where students have to ask and answer questions of each other. Teachers should also extend their use of active methodologies to include brainstorming, role plays and other such activities. The use of such methodologies would afford students greater opportunities to interact in the target language and thus respond to some of the earlier-mentioned recommendations.

There was good classroom management in all of the lessons observed. Students were well behaved throughout. Most students engaged well with the work of the lesson. Their responses to the questions asked by both the teacher and the inspector indicated that they had a good understanding of the work in hand and that they were confident and competent learners of the language. However, the more teacher-directed approach as observed in some lessons contributed to the disengagement of significant numbers of students. Some of the earlier-mentioned recommendations such as extending the use of the target language by students and widening the range of active learning methodologies should help these students engage more productively in their language learning endeavours.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment techniques is used in St Attracta’s Community School to monitor student progress on an ongoing basis. These include question-and-answer sessions in class, homework assignments and class tests. A review of students’ copybooks in some lessons indicated that a lot of the work completed by the students focused on vocabulary acquisition and translation exercises. It is recommended that teachers prepare class-work assignments which afford students more opportunities for using language in different ways and in a wider variety of contexts.

Students’ homework copybooks indicated varying practices in relation to the nature of homework assignments and to the extent of teacher corrections. There was evidence in one of the lessons observed that homework is assigned regularly and corrected. Copybooks in another lesson indicated that homework assignments had been assigned and corrected at the beginning of the academic year, but there was no evidence of more recent corrections. It was reported that students transfer their corrected work into folders which are kept in school. While it is good practice to organise one’s work into a folder for ease of reference, students should have these folders home with them for use when needed. There was one class group where students’ copybooks contained no evidence of homework assignments or corrections. In this instance it was stated that the students are given regular oral assessments. However, no evidence for such assessments was available. The practice of giving and correcting homework needs to be addressed forthwith. As part of the lesson students should record their homework assignments in French into their journals. Homework should be assigned on an ongoing basis and all work corrected by the teacher should be signed and dated. Where appropriate, a comment should be included to affirm
and inform students of their progress. It is recommended that the French department reviews its policy and practice in relation to homework and agrees to adopt a consistent approach with immediate effect. This approach must prioritise the learning needs of students and be in line with wider school policies in this regard.

Students from second year to sixth year have class-based mid-term tests and all students sit formal tests at Christmas and in the summer. Certificate examination students have mock examinations in the second term. Insufficient information was provided concerning the provision of aural and oral assessments for students taking French. Therefore it is not possible to make an evaluative statement concerning such provision. However, teachers should ensure that students’ aural and oral competencies are adequately assessed through the inclusion of an aural component in all formal tests and an oral assessment, either formal or informal, for all students at a minimum of one point in each school year.

A review of student results in the certificate examinations in French and the emerging trends over recent years suggest a need for greater vigilance in relation to the uptake of levels and achievement. Teachers should conduct an annual audit of the uptake of levels, results and trends for French in their school and use them to inform future planning. This would help ensure that all students are being appropriately challenged to reach their full potential.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- There is good allocation of teaching time for French.
- The provision of resources to support the teaching and learning of French is good.
- Teachers displayed good levels of linguistic competence
- ICT has been embraced by all members of the French department and it was used effectively in all of the lessons observed.
- The French department demonstrates significant potential to extend the range of creative and innovative approaches to the teaching and learning of French; this provides a solid basis for future development.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- A more comprehensive long term subject plan for the teaching and learning of French needs to be expedited; the successful completion of this will require the teachers to work together in a spirit of collaboration and mutual support and on an ongoing basis
- The members of the French department should work together to revise the current TY plan, establish learning outcomes and plan for methodologies which are in accordance with Departmental guidelines in relation to the Transition Year curriculum.
- When planning their lessons teachers should clarify the learning objectives and share these with their students in terms of the specific expected learning outcomes for the lesson.
- Teachers should ensure that the methodologies used in lessons support ongoing use of the target language and active learning.
- Teachers should assign and correct written homework on an ongoing basis and all corrected homework should be signed and dated.
• The members of the French department should develop and implement forthwith a common homework policy for French which prioritises the learning needs of students and is in line with wider school policies in this regard.

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

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The BOM welcomes this report and expresses its appreciation to the inspector and to the teachers involved. However, the teachers involved wish to state that during this inspection, due to Union Directives and Industrial Action, they felt unable to fully engage with the process as they were directed not to co-operate with the inspectorate. They feel that the final report is not wholly reflective of their work and efforts.

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

Many of the recommendations have already been implemented or are being worked on with a view to their early implementation.