An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileannaa

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Coláiste na Coiribe
Tuam Road, Galway

Roll number: 71330V

Date of inspection: 27 February 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING OF FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste na Coiribe. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning of 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 the 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 na Coiribe was founded in 1992 under the auspices of Galway Vocational Education Committee. The aim of the school is to provide second-level education through the medium of Irish and therefore Irish is given pride of place in school events. Great support is also given to modern European languages and French is a core subject in the school. Furthermore, Spanish is available as an optional subject in the Junior Cycle and is a compulsory subject in Transition Year. This means that every student has the option of taking two modern European languages if they wish. This central place afforded to languages in the curriculum is commended.

There are two classes in every year-group. Junior Cycle students and Transition Year students are in mixed-ability classes in Coláiste na Coiribe. First-year students were shared among the four teachers this year, so that no French class would exceed fifteen students. This is a great advantage to the teachers and to the young students learning a new language. Students are streamed according to ability in Senior Cycle: the higher-level class and the ordinary-level class are timetabled to run simultaneously, so that students can move from one level to another if necessary.

There is a favourable allocation of time on the timetable for the teaching and learning of French. Four class periods per week are allocated to Junior Cycle and Transition Year classes and five class periods, one a double, per week to Senior Cycle classes. The amount of time allocated to French is very satisfactory. The majority of Junior Cycle and Transition Year classes are single periods and this allocation is commended because students gain the optimum benefit from a regular daily contact with the target language.
There were four teachers of French in Coláiste na Coiriabe at the time of the evaluation. All are graduates in French, two with master’s degrees. One of the teachers had not yet got her Higher Diploma in Education and it is vital that every effort be made to encourage her to gain that teaching qualification, as soon as possible. Meanwhile, advice and support are available from her qualified colleagues. The whole French team is quite new to the school as every one of the four joined the staff since September 2007.

The teachers of French do not have their own dedicated rooms, so it is difficult for them to create a stimulating environment, with displays of posters, maps, photographs and students’ work, for the students. There are particular problems with using visual aids because the students are based in three different locations. There was an overhead projector in some rooms and the teachers used these resources. In certain cases, however, the text was not clear on the whiteboard and the students could not see it properly. On the whole, the classrooms observed were uninspiring and the teachers of French are at quite a disadvantage trying to teach large classes in them.

There is support outside the classroom situation for the teaching of French. Among the co-curricular and extra-curricular events provided are a visit to a French restaurant in Galway, exchange of letters and e-mails with junior classes in schools in France and a drama group was due to perform in the school in the month of March. Fifth-year students took part in a television programme to be broadcast in France, in which they sang the song ‘Les Lacs du Connemara’. The transition-year students will be playing and singing other songs ‘Aux Champs Elysées’ in the school concert. The teachers are congratulated on providing these pleasant events for the students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The school has been working for some time on department planning with the support of the School Development Planning Initiative. Although none of the teachers of French has served for more than two years on the staff, it was evident that there was a good level of co-operation among them and they have made great progress in writing a subject plan for French. They deserve great credit for the amount of work done to date. Included among the planning documents are the school’s mission statement and clear aims and objectives. The plan for French is a long-term one, with references to learning content, class work, homework and assessment. It is recommended that the joint-planning process be extended by degrees, and that in future the subject-plan would also encompass the following aspects of the work: teaching methodologies, various strategies to encourage students to participate in the classes, strategies to develop students’ oral ability and provision of resources and aids for the teaching of French.

As part of planning for French, it is recommended that a new language course for Transition Year be devised. The course should develop the skills which will be of most importance in the senior cycle. An interesting communicative course should be set out, so that Transition-Year students would have an opportunity of approaching language-learning in a variety of ways. It was reported that some films and accompanying information-sheets are already being used to teach different themes and various linguistic skills. This approach is praiseworthy. There are plenty of French books and magazines available also which would suit Transition Year students. This was discussed with the teachers during the evaluation. Topics suited to the age and linguistic ability of Transition Year students should be selected and then taught at a level which is suitable and challenging to the students.
Coláiste na Coiribe has formulated a comprehensive Information and Communication Technology (ICT) policy. Two computer-rooms are available, with 15 and 17 computers respectively. There are also 20 laptop computers and 11 data projectors in the school. Training sessions in ICT have been provided for the school staff. During the evaluation visit, no teacher of French was observed using ICT in teaching the language, but it was reported that first-year students work on computers once a week during French classes. It is recommended that the teachers of French consider various ways of making more use of ICT as an aid to teaching the language. Since some of the teachers of French have specialist knowledge of the use of technology in teaching the language, this specialist knowledge could be utilised for the benefit of the students. There are many websites suitable for young learners and the teachers could easily access language sources to augment the subject matter in the textbooks. Information and links to many websites are available at [www.french.ie](http://www.french.ie).

A report on the professional development of the teachers was observed in the subject plan. That report showed that great efforts had been made and were being consistently made by the teachers of French to keep abreast of developments in the teaching of the subject. The teachers are commended for continually improving their linguistic and teaching skills. Some of the teachers have experience as examiners in the state written and oral examinations.

The teachers of French hold formal meetings a few times each term and they also have informal meetings. It is good that this new team meets regularly and are now functioning effectively as a department. They now have an opportunity of setting out agreed learning objectives and consulting one another, on active teaching and learning methods in particular.

**Teaching and Learning**

Six classes were visited: two in the junior cycle, two Transition-Year classes and two in the senior cycle. There was evidence of short-term planning and preparation done for all the lessons observed. Various resources, such as worksheets, textbooks, tapes and pictures, were used to enhance the teaching of the language. The good practice of recording attendance was noticed in all classes.

The French lessons started in a variety of ways. In some classes, the students were asked to give the day’s date in French. A short conversation about the weather was conducted in one class. Key words were listed on the whiteboard in another class. These are good practices because they help students to focus on French, having come from other classes where Irish is the medium of communication. In some classes, the students were informed, at the start, what the topic of the lesson would be. This is commendable. It is recommended that the proposed learning outcomes be shared with the students also at the start of class. This would help the students to monitor and assess their own learning.

Because no teacher of French has her own dedicated room, the difficulty of creating a French atmosphere or environment in the French classes is recognised. It is recommended, however, that teachers consider the possibilities of using articles, advertisements, or pictures from magazines, brochures or newspapers or flash-cards to illustrate to the students the connection between French language and culture. Resources could be stored at a central location, so that they would be readily accessible. Authentic resources are very helpful in stimulating students’ interest and enthusiasm for learning. It might be possible to request materials from, or exchange them with, schools in Lorient, the town in Brittany which is twinned with the city of Galway.
It is acknowledged that when students are learning a new language, time must be spent teaching grammar. In some of the classes, however, too much time was spent explaining and dealing with points of grammar, without any reference to their use in ordinary speech. It is always better to teach grammar in a communicative context, so that students get a clear sense of the practical value of grammar. It is recommended that grammar be woven into a lesson, that students’ attention be directed to the functional use of grammar, and that a full class-period should not be spent trying to explain an abstract point of grammar.

It is recommended that the four language skills be integrated within each lesson, in accordance with the principles of the syllabus and the NCCA guidelines. In classes where an integrated approach was used, all the language-skills were effectively developed. For example, in one junior cycle class, the lesson was based on prominent buildings in a town and on directions. Reading comprehension, listening comprehension, acquisition of vocabulary, conversation and homework were all based on that theme. This approach is praiseworthy. Student independence was also encouraged in that class, when they were shown how to locate new words in the dictionary. In some classes, although there were various activities in progress (listening comprehension, grammar, writing), those activities were not based on a common topic. As a result, there was no continuity and no visible link between the different aspects and parts of the lesson.

The mastery of the language among the teachers of French in Coláiste na Coiribe is recognised and commended. Each member of staff in the French department had a remarkable accent and fluency in the language. French was used as the language of classroom communication and instruction in all the lessons observed. Irish was used judiciously as required, but it was seldom needed. It was evident that students were well used to using the target language during class. There was an emphasis on students’ accuracy and fluency. In some classes, pair-work was used to afford the students an opportunity of speaking the language. This good practice is commended because of its many advantages as a teaching methodology. The student’s self-confidence is greatly enhanced because talking to a fellow student is less stressful than answering the teacher in a whole-class situation. Many of the students in Coláiste na Coiribe, especially the seniors, were impressive in their ability to communicate in the target language.

An atmosphere that was supportive of learning was observed in every lesson. The teachers moved around the classrooms, helping individual students. The students were praised for their work. All the students were polite and showed enthusiasm for their work and it was evident that there was a good relationship between the teachers and their students.

**ASSESSMENT**

Student’s work and progress are assessed through class questioning, correction of homework, continuous assessment and formal examinations. Students who are not sitting the certificate examinations are formally assessed twice a year, at Christmas and in the month of May. Common house exams are set within year groups, as far as possible. Third and sixth-year students sit house examinations at Christmas and ‘mocks’ in the spring. An external teacher comes to the school to conduct a ‘mock’ oral examination with the Leaving Certificate students. This good practice is commended, because it is a great help to the students to be afforded an opportunity of speaking French to a different teacher. First-year students take an oral examination in French in the month of May. It would be worthwhile also to conduct a short informal oral test with the students in every year group, to give them experience of speaking French and to emphasise the importance of the spoken word. A report on each student’s achievements is sent home to parents four times a
year. Two of these reports are based on examination results and the other two on the student’s
general progress in the subject. Parent-teacher meetings are held once a year for every year group.

Students’ copybooks and portfolios were examined and it was observed that homework is
regularly set and corrected. A lack of accuracy in the use of the language was noticed in some
copybooks, but when students’ class work and homework are regularly monitored, focusing on
the main errors, their accuracy of language will improve gradually. In some copybooks, as well as
corrections, the teacher had written words of commendation and notes of advice. This correction-
system is praiseworthy because it gives students clear guidance on how to improve their work.
Information on Assessment for Learning is available online at www.ncca.ie.

It was observed that the teachers of French were developing the students’ organisational skills by
encouraging them to retain various aspects of the courses in their copybooks and portfolios under
a variety of headings. Therefore, most of the class work and homework observed were well
ordered and organised and the teachers are commended for the great effort expended in
developing the students’ organisational skills.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

• The central role assigned to modern languages in the school curriculum is commended.
• Good provision is made for French in Coláiste na Coiribe.
• A range of extra-curricular events is organised to support the learning of French.
• The teachers of French, although all recently appointed, have formulated a very
  satisfactory subject-plan.
• There is a good level of co-operation among the teachers of French.
• There was an affirmative atmosphere in the classroom, with obvious mutual respect
  between the teachers and their pupils.
• French was the normal language of communication and instruction in all the classrooms.
• Lively methodologies such as pair work and singing were used in certain classes.
• The students’ class work and homework was well ordered and organised.

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

• A new programme is needed for the teaching and learning of French in Transition Year.
• It is recommended that teaching methodologies, which actively involve the students, be
  used in all classes to encourage student participation.
• It is recommended that the teachers integrate points of grammar into the lessons rather
  than devote a full class period exclusively to teaching grammar.
• Attention should be paid to the integration of all four language-skills, as far as possible,
  within each lesson.
• Because the classrooms do not provide a stimulating environment, the teachers of French
  should collect authentic materials from France and use them in teaching the language.
• It is recommended that oral skills be included in the house examinations for every year
  group.
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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