REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rockbrook Park School, Dublin. 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 and subject teachers. 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

Rockbrook Park School is a voluntary secondary school with 131 male students. The study of a modern European language is mandatory. French and Spanish are offered on alternate years to first-year students and French is currently set against Spanish in second and third year. However, the current first-year cohort of students will have the option of studying the two languages from second year on and it is planned that all students in the future will have access to the study of both languages. This is good practice. French is currently being studied throughout junior cycle and in fifth year. All classes are of mixed-ability groupings.

There is satisfactory whole school provision in the allocation of time for French. The timetabling of French in single periods is good practice as it ensures that students have regular contact with the language.

There are two teachers of French in the school, both of whom are graduates in the subject. The more established teacher has benefited from in-service programmes held in recent years for teachers of French. Both are also members of the French Teachers Association (FTA). In order to ensure ongoing contact with developments in the teaching and learning of modern European languages teachers should inform themselves of and apply for the range of in-service training programmes offered annually by the Department of Education and Skills in conjunction with the French Cultural Services. They should also consider attendance at the national and local seminars organised by the FTA.

Classrooms are subject based and both members of the French department have access to a classroom where a print-rich environment has been developed to support the teaching and learning of French. To further extend this good practice of supporting students’ language and
Cultural awareness teachers should extend the range of classroom language and grammar charts and ensure that all work posted up is visible from the back of the classroom.

There is good provision for resources for French. Teachers have designated CD recorders and access to televisions and DVD players. Materials to support the teaching and learning of French include dictionaries, magazines, newspapers, CDs and DVDs. The French classroom is also equipped with a computer and data projector to support the use of information and communication technology (ICT).

Co-curricular activities include the organisation of a French breakfast for students and a day when games of ‘boules’ a popular French pastime, are organised. Visits to the Irish Film Institute (IFI) take place during the annual French film festival. A project involving diffusing news in the different European languages is in operation at lunchtime. This is very good practice. There are currently no organised trips to France and the links that Rockbrook Park School had previously with a French school in Nantes are no longer in operation. However, teachers indicated that they are currently exploring the possibility of establishing contacts with a school in Paris. Teachers are encouraged to further develop these contacts with a view to promoting intercultural dialogue through e-pals and the exchange of documentation. The promotion of meaningful co-curricular activities is good practice as it raises the profile of French in the school in addition to affording students a range of enjoyable and memorable language learning experiences.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of French have embraced subject development planning as part of the whole school planning process. There is a subject coordinator for French which is a voluntary position. Teachers meet for subject planning each term. Subject departments do not currently keep written minutes of meetings. However, they do report back to the principal on issues which arise and changes which need to be implemented. In order to support continuity and the good management of a subject department, it is recommended that teachers keep a written record for themselves and for the school of their subject planning meetings.

The subject plan for French submitted on the day of the inspection indicated that teachers are making progress in subject planning. The plan contains information setting out the context within which French as a subject is provided for and taught in the school. Plans for each year group were also submitted. Some plans set out the aims for the year, the number of lessons per week, the topics to be covered, the approach to be taken and the manner in which the teacher would differentiate lessons to meet the needs of students. Plans for other year groups were set out in terms of the objectives, approaches to be used, grammar and language to be taught and assessment. Senior-cycle plans were presented in terms of the general objectives, texts and assessment procedures. The variation in the plans for each year group indicates the need for a more collaborative approach where the teachers work together to develop desired learning outcomes for each year group in terms of ‘can do’ statements. The linguistic strategies and proposed methodologies to achieve such outcomes should be included in the subject plan. While an awareness of the need for a differentiated approach to teaching and learning, as outlined in some plans, is commended, teachers should work together to develop a range of effective practical strategies which will meet the different needs of the student cohort.
There was evidence of careful planning for the lessons observed. Evidence for this included the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials for the different lessons visited.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Evaluation activities involved the observation of four lessons; three at junior cycle and one at senior cycle. Opportunities for interaction between the inspector and the students and a review of their copybooks were also facilitated. Teachers displayed good levels of linguistic competence and the quality of teaching and learning ranged from satisfactory to good.

The target language was used to varying degrees by the teachers in the lessons observed. In some instances the consistent use of the target language by the teacher was complemented by good efforts by students to interact in French. This is good practice. There were some lessons where the teacher began in French, but reverted back to English as the lesson progressed. In these instances, the use of the target language should be built up, by issuing all classroom instructions in French. Furthermore, when anticipating comprehension or grammatical difficulties, teachers should consider explaining first in French and then checking whether or not students understand rather than automatically explaining in English. To this end students should be given the necessary linguistic expressions to indicate difficulty, to seek clarification and to ask questions in French. Consistent use of French in the classroom will also develop students’ aural and oral skills.

The proposed content for the lesson was communicated to the students in some instances. This is good practice and should be extended to all lessons. There were some lessons where the sharing of a lesson plan would have provided greater clarity in terms of the specific outcomes to be achieved and would have enhanced the work in hand. To optimise the benefits of sharing the lesson plan, teachers should frame it in terms of the proposed learning outcomes for the lesson as this also devolves some responsibility to students for their own learning.

Lessons were generally well structured and paced and the content met the needs and interests of the students. There was one lesson where an apt choice of text fed into a well structured approach to the teaching of a specific written skill. This is commended. ICT was effectively used in one lesson to revise vocabulary, an activity which, in turn, fed into the revision of tenses. The judicious use of ICT should be extended to all lessons.

There were good efforts in all lessons to develop the range of different language skills. There were some examples of effective vocabulary acquisition, building up families of words arising from what students had heard in a listening text. This is good practice. However, there were some lessons where the different skills were promoted, but not in a sufficiently integrated manner. In these lessons a thematic approach should be adopted and texts should be chosen from which the relevant linguistic strategies can be identified and taught in context and where learning in one skills area can feed into and support the development of the other skills.

Pair work was observed in some lessons. The use of pair or group work is good practice as such activities engage the students and promote active and independent learning. This practice should be extended to all lessons. Teachers should plan for the use of at least one short focused interactive task in every lesson. Furthermore when engaging in pair or group activities, students should be asked to report back on their partners’ interventions as this will ensure that the required work is carried out within the group. The transition from using the first to the third person will also expand the students’ use of verbs.
There was good classroom management and students worked in an environment conducive to work. They engaged with the teachers and applied themselves to the work in hand. Their responses to questions in class indicated varying abilities and there was evidence to indicate that the students experiencing difficulty in understanding the work of the lesson would have benefited from a more differentiated approach. To this end teachers should consider the use of differentiated or graded worksheets to support the students in their efforts. There were some students who responded very well in their interactions with the teacher and with the inspector, and who indicated good levels of linguistic confidence and competence.

ASSESSMENT

Student progress in the Rockbrook Park School is monitored in a variety of ways. Formative assessments include the assigning and correction of homework, and short class tests. A review of students’ copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected. A comment was included in some instances. This good practice, which is both affirming and informing for students, should be extended to all lessons. Teachers should also consider including the recording of homework in French into students journals as part of the lesson.

Summative assessments are carried out through class-based tests given at mid-term and at Easter and formal examinations are held at Christmas and at the end of May. Certificate examination students sit ‘mock’ examinations in the spring. All formal examinations include an aural and oral component. This is good practice.

Student progress is also supported by means of a mentor system whereby students are assigned to a teacher who meets them every three weeks to discuss their work and progress. The mentor also meets with parents two or three times a year. This is very good practice. Further contact is maintained with parents through the parent-teacher meetings held annually for each year group. School reports are also issued following all school tests and examinations. A review of student results in the certificate examinations indicates that teachers should remain vigilant to ensure that students are choosing the highest level appropriate to their potential at junior cycle.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Whole school provision and support for French is satisfactory in the allocation of time and timetabling.
- Some good co-curricular activities are in place to support the teaching and learning of French.
- Subject planning has been embraced by the members of the French department and progress is ongoing.
- Teachers displayed good levels of linguistic competence and there was consistent use of the target language by the teachers in many of the lessons observed. Students in these lessons also made very good efforts to interact in the target language.
- A range of methodologies was observed and many were used to good effect.
- A range of good assessment practices are in place in the school.
As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- Teachers should work more collaboratively to develop desired learning outcomes for each year group in terms of ‘can do’ statements and include in the subject plan the linguistic strategies and proposed methodologies to achieve such outcomes.
- As part of collaborative planning, teachers should develop a range of strategies which will support a differentiated approach to teaching and learning thereby meeting the different needs of the student cohort.
- Where relevant, the target language should be extended as the language of instruction and communication.
- Teachers should adopt a more integrated approach to the development of the different language skills.
- As a means of promoting active and independent learning, teachers should include at least one student-based interactive task in 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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