Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Loreto Secondary School
Bray, County Wicklow
Roll number: 61820J

Date of inspection: 4 March 2011
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Loreto Secondary School, Bray. 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 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

Loreto Secondary School is a voluntary secondary school with 842 female students. There is good whole-school provision for the study of modern languages. Students choose two languages from French, German or Spanish as part of a first-year taster programme. Where there is sufficient demand, the opportunity to continue studying two languages to Leaving Certificate is afforded to students. There has been a decline in the uptake of French in recent years. Some good strategies - such as the creation of a customised first-year textbook - have been put in place to redress this decline. It is recommended that the situation be kept under review and that teachers continue to explore strategies that will encourage greater uptake of the subject.

There is good allocation of time for French, apart from in first year where students have only two periods a week. While it is acknowledged that this situation is redressed in second year with five periods, school management should explore ways whereby students could have three periods in first year as this may be a factor contributing to the lower uptake of the subject. Furthermore, French is timetabled for some first-year groups on Monday and Friday. A more appropriate spread across the week is recommended to ensure that students receive as much exposure to the language as possible.

Three teachers are involved in the delivery of French and they are all graduates in the subject. There is a strong commitment to continuing professional development from both school management and the teachers of French. They are members of the French Teachers’ Association (FTA) and attend the annual conferences hosted by the association. As teachers of a second European language, some have also attended in-service and have been involved in a number of projects or working groups aimed at improving the teaching and learning of modern European languages in general.

An attractive language learning environment, comprising maps, posters, grammar and vocabulary charts was noted in all of the classrooms visited. This good practice was further optimised by
reference during the lessons to the work displayed on the walls. Students were also seen to be using the displays as a resource for their own learning and this is commended.

A bank of useful resources has been built up by the members of the French department. Information and communication technology (ICT) is available in all classrooms and ICT was effectively used to support teaching and learning in the lessons observed.

Students are afforded exposure to a broad range of co-curricular activities, which enhance the enjoyment of the language learning experience and promote cultural awareness and confidence in speaking French.

**Planning and Preparation**

Good structures are in place to support effective subject department planning. The members of the French department work with the teachers from the other modern languages departments for planning purposes. This is a good approach as it supports consistency in planning and in the sharing of good practice. As it is a small subject department, the two teachers mainly involved in the delivery of French work together as subject co-ordinators.

The comprehensive subject planning folder submitted on the day of the evaluation indicates that considerable progress has been achieved in subject planning. The folder contains the long-term plan outlining the department’s aims and objectives, the school’s organisational and operating context, minutes of meetings, schemes of work and issues to be dealt with as part of future planning. Of particular note is the planning and work involved in compiling the attractive, learner friendly first-year textbook. As subject planning continues teachers should include more detail on the desired learning outcomes for each year group as part of their long-term plan for the teaching and learning of French. The relevant linguistic strategies, proposed methodologies and assessment protocols should also be included. Examination of the Transition Year (TY) plan for French also indicated a need for further detail on the proposed learning outcomes.

There was very good preparation for the individual lessons observed. All technical equipment was made ready in advance and teachers had prepared supplementary materials to support the work of the lesson.

**Teaching and Learning**

The subject evaluation involved the observation of four lessons; two at junior cycle, one TY lesson and one at senior cycle. The quality of teaching and learning overall was of a high standard.

The target language was consistently used by the teachers in all the lessons observed. In one instance, however, translation appeared to be used as a matter of course. It is important to become aware of this as recourse to translation diminishes the challenge for students, particularly in a mixed-ability setting. It is recommended that teachers communicate in French and, continuing in the target language, ask the students if they understand. Students’ learning can then be scaffolded if appropriate. As part of this approach teachers should also incorporate a general correction of student errors in both pronunciation and syntax.
Lessons were well structured and the content responded to the needs and interests of the students. The lesson plan was communicated by all teachers at the outset and there was one good example where the teacher highlighted the elements of new learning to be acquired during the lesson. To ensure student engagement from the beginning it is recommended that teachers communicate the lesson aims in terms of the learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve.

A topic approach facilitated the integration of the different skills and this is good practice. In one lesson, the use of a pre-listening exercise supported good comprehension of the aural text. This in turn led to an effective question-and-answer session promoting oral skills development and a follow-up written task. There were also some good examples of the effective integration of grammar into the body of the work.

A good balance between teacher interaction and student activity was maintained throughout, promoting active learning. Brainstorming, supported by visual aids and question-and-answer sessions, was effective in encouraging students to interact in the target language. Group work was used in all lessons and, where possible, was facilitated by seating arrangements conducive to such activities. Of particular note was the group activity observed in one lesson, where students were assigned individual tasks, which in turn had to be fed into a small group, before being communicated to the entire class group. This dynamic ensured active participation from all students in addition to meaningful oral skills development. Clear instructions were issued for all the tasks assigned. However, there were some instances where students were given too much time for the completion of the work. It is recommended that all student assignments are kept short and focused and that students are aware of the expected learning outcome.

A good example of team teaching was observed in one lesson where teachers interacted with each other in French, thereby modelling authentic oral communication. It is recommended that students be encouraged to role-play similar interactions as a means of promoting oral skills development and confidence.

A positive learning environment prevailed throughout and students applied themselves to the work in hand. Their responses indicated good understanding of the work in progress. Interaction between the students and the inspector indicated that many students were confident and competent learners of the language.

**ASSESSMENT**

Practices in place to assess student progress include question-and-answer sessions in class, homework assignments, class tests and formal examinations. An examination of students’ journals and copybooks indicated that homework is given, recorded and corrected. The inclusion of a comment in line with the principles of assessment for learning (AfL) is good practice. Where corrections do not necessitate a comment they should be signed or dated to indicate when homework is corrected by the teacher and when by the student. The work in some of the copybooks reviewed was not well organised. Students should be encouraged to organise their copybooks in such a way as to ensure ease of referral at a later stage.

Continuous assessment is used to monitor students’ progress and examinations are held for all students in the second term and in the summer. Common tests are given for French and include an aural component. Oral examinations are administered in the second year of junior cycle and to all year groups in senior cycle. It is recommended that the administration of informal oral
assessments be extended to all year groups. A review of the examination results indicates good student uptake of higher level and good outcomes in the certificate examinations.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is commendable whole-school commitment to the study of modern European languages and to teacher professional development.
- Good subject planning practices are in place and a comprehensive subject plan for French has been developed.
- The creation of the school text book for first-year students reflects teachers’ commitment to the teaching and learning of French.
- A number of methodologies were used to very good effect in all of the lessons observed.
- Active learning was promoted in all lessons through well structured and creative group-work activities.
- Effective use of team teaching afforded students additional opportunities for oral skills development.

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

- School management should explore ways to improve the allocation of time for first-year French.
- Teachers should reframe their aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of French in term of desired learning outcomes for each year group. The methodologies and assessment protocols to support these outcomes should also be included.
- The TY plan should be further developed.
- A general correction of student errors in both pronunciation and syntax 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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