

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Christian Brothers Secondary School
New Ross, County Wexford
Roll number: 63600F**

Date of inspection: 16 November 2009



**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS SCILEANNA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SKILLS**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Christian Brothers Secondary School, New Ross. 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 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

Christian Brothers Secondary School New Ross is a voluntary secondary co-educational school with 227 students. School management has recently taken the praiseworthy initiative of making the study of a modern European language part of the core curriculum for first-year students. Traditionally students from second year to sixth year have had a choice between French or German. However, given the small numbers in each year group now, French and German will be offered on alternate years in the future. While the desire to maintain the viability of the two languages offered in the school is acknowledged and commended, school management needs to plan to ensure that students who opt for Transition Year (TY) will be able to continue the language they have chosen at the outset. Classes from first to sixth year are of mixed-ability groupings apart from the third-year cohort, where students have been divided into two groups of differing abilities. However, the current TY and fifth-year groups have a number of students who have not previously studied French. This needs to be reviewed as the needs of students new to the language learning process differ significantly from those who have completed three years or more studying the language.

There is good whole school provision and support for French in the allocation of time. However, it is recommended that classes at junior cycle be timetabled in single rather than double periods to afford ongoing contact with the target language.

There are currently two teachers involved in the delivery of French in the school, both of whom are graduates in the subject. Regular visits to France ensure ongoing linguistic upskilling for teachers and some teachers have attended seminars organised by the French Teachers' Association in recent years. This is good practice. However, in order to ensure the fullest possible engagement with new developments in the teaching and learning of languages, all members of the French department should inform themselves of and apply for the in-service

programmes available through the Department of Education and Skills and the French Cultural Services, and *Léargas*. They should also avail of subject related courses offered in local education centres.

Classrooms are teacher based and the main classroom visited had displays of maps, posters, samples of students' work and some key expressions. This is commended as working in a language-learning environment can enable students assimilate learning over time. As the year progresses it is recommended that the print-rich environment be extended to include more classroom language and key grammar points and expressions. These could be thematic and posted up for the duration of the topic being studied.

There is good whole-school support for the provision of resources. An annual budget is provided, based on the requests received from the different departments. The allocation of an annual budget is commended as it enables teachers to plan in a co-ordinated way for the purchase of resources and materials. Materials in the school include a range of CDs, DVDs, books, tapes and magazines. The school has recently installed data projectors in the classrooms and laptop computers have also been made available. Now that there is good access to information and communication technology (ICT) teachers should embrace ICT to support them in their work. As a start, the use of simple PowerPoint presentations, many of which are available to download from the internet, is recommended to enhance teaching and learning in addition to promoting cultural awareness. ICT is also very useful for the speedy correction of some homework or class exercises.

A broad range of co-curricular activities is in place to support the teaching and learning of French. The school has links with a French school in Bar-sur-Seine and exchanges have taken place between the two schools. Second-year students also correspond with the French students. This is commended as such contacts can promote meaningful intercultural dialogue. Now that there is ease of internet access, consideration could also be given to promoting e-pals or interclass dialogue using ICT. First-year students make 'crêpes' and students have also participated in a number of language-related events on European Day of Languages. Transition Year students are currently involved in the production of a French play. The French department's commitment to affording students the opportunity to engage in a range of enjoyable and memorable language-learning activities is highly commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject planning is ongoing in CBS New Ross. As a very small department, subject planning for French is carried out with the teachers of German, Music and Art. Working with the teachers of other modern European languages is good practice as it facilitates the sharing of ideas which are common to the study of all languages. To further the benefits of this collaborative approach it is recommended that a co-ordinator for modern languages be appointed and the position be rotated between the teachers of the different languages on a regular basis. Subject planning meetings are facilitated once a term. It is recommended that minutes are recorded of all meetings held and that a copy of these minutes are included in the subject planning documentation as this will help inform future departmental decisions.

A review of documentation for French indicates that considerable work has been achieved in subject planning for French. The subject plan outlined the organisational and operating context for the teaching and learning of French in the school. Curriculum content at junior cycle was laid out in terms of communication, grammar, pronunciation and culture. The topic to be studied, aural and oral work, grammar, letter writing and cultural awareness form the curriculum content

at senior cycle. A number of proposed methodologies were also included. The French department is commended for the work completed to date in subject planning. To further build on this work it is recommended that, over time the curriculum content be reframed as desired learning outcomes for each year group in terms of global 'can do' statements. This approach which focuses on the development of transferable skills will allow for greater variety in the topics studied in addition to making students more aware of their role in the teaching and learning process.

There was evidence of careful preparation for most of the lessons observed with the submission of individual lesson plans and the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Evaluation activities included the observation of three lessons, one at junior cycle and two at senior cycle. Interaction with the inspector and a review of students' copybooks was also facilitated.

There was varied use of the target language by the teachers in the lessons observed. French was used consistently by the teacher in one of the lessons and there were some instances in that lesson of students making efforts to interact in the target language. This is commended. In lessons where French was used to a lesser extent or where there was automatic recourse to translation, teachers should build up the use of the target language by giving all classroom instructions in French. They should speak first in French and then check whether or not students understand rather than automatically translating into English. Teachers should also encourage greater student interaction in the target language by providing them with the linguistic strategies to ask and answer questions, make requests and express difficulties in French. Greater use of the target language would challenge the more able students, while those experiencing difficulty in understanding would be enabled to express their need for help in French. It would also provide practice in aural comprehension and oral skills production.

Many of the lessons began with a recap on previous learning. In one instance the teacher had prepared a list of the common errors made by the higher-level students in the class and encouraged these students to recognise and correct their mistakes. This is good practice as it encourages students to pay greater attention to accuracy in their own work. It is recommended that this good practice be carried out with the entire class group as the common errors cited are made by all students. There was one lesson however, where a disproportionate amount of time was spent on revision, thereby limiting the time available to progress onto new learning. To address this difficulty, teachers should use a thematic and integrated approach where previous learning is channelled into and facilitates students' understanding of new texts or linguistic structures.

Pair and group work activities were observed in all lessons. The use of student-based tasks is good practice as it encourages active and independent learning. In some instances preparatory tasks were carried out to support the students in the completion of the assignment. This is commended. However, to maximise the benefits of such activities it is important to keep them short and focused and to have very clear instructions. The use of games as observed in some lessons is also commended as it affords students the opportunity to learn in a fun way thereby encouraging them in their learning. Students engaged in role plays in one lesson which again is good practice. However, the use of an aural text, vocabulary consolidation and pronunciation as

preparatory exercises would have facilitated greater comprehension and confidence among the students and thereby would have enhanced the benefits of the activity.

The presence of students taking both higher and ordinary level in the same class can present some challenges as the teacher tries to respond to the needs of each of the groups. In one of the lessons observed, the students taking ordinary level were assigned work to complete while the teacher worked with those taking higher level. This meant that the students taking ordinary level did not engage in new teaching and learning. To overcome some of these challenges, it is recommended that the teacher adopts a thematic approach using a number of common texts and differentiating through the choice of tasks based on the text. Higher-level students can be afforded the opportunity to study more difficult texts as part of these differentiated tasks. Oral and aural skills development and the written skills development common to all students can also be promoted in a similar way.

There was good classroom management throughout and students applied themselves to the work in hand. The higher-achieving students participated well in the lessons observed and their responses during the lessons and in interaction with the inspector demonstrated good levels of learning. There was one instance however, where learning could have been further advanced had students been given more time to assimilate the new material presented. Some students were more reticent in communicating. However, some of the earlier-recommended strategies relating to use of the target language should help them participate more actively in the lesson.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment practices is in place to monitor student progress. A review of students' copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected. However, one teacher reported difficulties in getting students to complete homework and it was noted that many of them did not record their homework assignments in their journals. It is recommended that this issue be addressed through whole school planning and the development of a homework policy to ensure that students become aware of the purpose and value of doing homework. Certificate examination students are given weekly tests and all students have end-of-topic tests. Formal examinations take place at Christmas and in the summer. Third-year and sixth-year students have mock examinations in the second term. It was also reported that continuous assessment marks are included in the overall Christmas result for students who are underperforming. While the practice of giving a continuous assessment mark is commended, it should be included as a separate mark or grade in the students' report to ensure clarity between examination outcomes and the student's ongoing progress. Students are also given aural and oral assessments during the year. This is good practice.

School reports are issued three times each year and annual parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole school provision and support for modern European languages including French through their inclusion as part of the core curriculum and in the allocation of time and timetabling.

- A range of very good co-curricular activities are in place to enhance the enjoyment of learning French.
- Considerable work has been completed to date in relation to subject planning for French.
- There was some use of the target language by the teachers in all of the lessons observed.
- Pair and group work activities which facilitate active learning were observed in all lessons.

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

- In view of the proposal to offer French and German on alternate years, school management needs to plan to ensure that students who opt for Transition Year (TY) will be able to continue the language they have chosen at the outset.
- The current class formation for French in TY and fifth year needs to be reviewed to take into account the number of students taking *ab initio* French.
- Teachers should extend their use of French as the language of instruction and communication.
- An approach which facilitates the integration of all the language skills should be extended to all lessons.
- A differentiated approach should be adopted in all lessons to respond to the challenges posed by the mixed-ability nature of the class groups.

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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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of CBS Secondary School is very happy and greatly encouraged by the report of the French subject inspection undertaken in our school on 16th November 2009. The Board is delighted that the hard work and planning of the French department are acknowledged in the report.

The Board on Management is also pleased that the provision and support for French is highlighted. It is particularly pleasing to note that the use of the language was commended as this has been a conscious decision of the Board and teachers

In this modern era of language teaching it is imperative that the students in our school actively use the target language in class and again, this has been acknowledged in the report.

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

In relation to the recommendations the Board of Management acknowledges and is actively exploring ways to ensure the continuity of French through the school. Already the concept of ab initio French in Transition year has been phased out.

All the other recommendations are currently being implemented and particularly the whole school differentiated approach to the challenge posed by mixed ability groups.

Overall the Board of Management is very pleased with the French subject inspection report which vindicates the very good work carried on in the department.