An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

St Anne’s Community College
Killaloe, County Clare
Roll number: 70901K

Date of inspection: 3 November 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 Anne’s Community College. 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; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Three modern European languages are offered on the curriculum in St Anne’s Community College, namely French, German and Spanish. Even though study of a language is optional at all levels, it is very satisfactory that almost all students study one language in first year with some students choosing to take two languages. Students are also facilitated in taking two languages to Leaving Certificate level. The school’s commitment to languages is commendable. At present, students have an open choice of languages in first year. However, given the growth in student numbers, the provision of an open choice should be kept under review in order to allow for the best possible use of resources.

Students are taught in mixed-ability classes in both junior cycle and senior cycle. In first year and second year, the subject is allocated two single periods and one double period per week. In third year, the language is timetabled for two double periods per week due to its position in the same option band as practical subjects. Consequently, students have a French class twice weekly. As frequent class contact is considered to be an important factor for successful language learning, it is suggested that the timetabling of the subject be kept under review in order to increase the number of days on which the students have access to French.

The study of French has been re-introduced into the Transition Year (TY) programme this year. This is a move that has been welcomed by the teachers as it allows for continuity in the learning of the language from junior cycle to senior cycle. French is now a compulsory subject in TY and is also offered at ab initio level for those students who have not previously studied the language. However, the subject is only allocated one period per week which is insufficient for the purpose of providing an interesting and substantial TY programme. It is therefore recommended that the timetable allocation for French in TY be monitored with the aim of increasing the allocation in the future.

Three single periods and one double period are provided for the language in fourth year, while in the final year, students have one single period and two double periods of French. Given the
increase in enrolment, the possibility of timetabling the language classes concurrently so as to allow for separate higher level and ordinary level groupings in senior cycle should be considered.

Procedures for identifying and providing support for students with additional learning needs are good. There is ongoing liaison with the learning-support team in order to ensure that students with additional educational needs receive support in their language learning. The teachers incorporate provision for differentiation in their teaching practice and ensure that all students receive positive feedback and encouragement for their work through the use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques.

Facilities and resources for the teaching of languages include a language laboratory and access to a computer room. As the teachers do not have designated classrooms, teaching resources for French are stored in the language laboratory or in a small storage room. The teachers are committed to the development of information and communication technology (ICT) in their subject and make use of the internet in their lesson preparation. Students are provided with opportunities for self-directed interactive learning. In first year, ICT is used to allow students to communicate with their French penpals on the eTwinning on-line forum. While there are language posters on display in some rooms, most notably in the language laboratory, it is suggested that these displays should be expanded so as to create an attractive language-learning environment. In particular the provision of a map of France for each classroom should be prioritised.

There are currently three teachers of French on the staff. A mentoring scheme is in place to inform and support new teachers. Under the scheme, a subject teacher acts as a mentor for a new teacher and mentor training sessions are provided in conjunction with County Clare Vocational Education Committee (VEC). This is very good practice as it facilitates the integration of a new teacher into the school and encourages professional discourse on teaching and learning. The school supports the teachers’ involvement in their subject association through funding their membership of the French Teachers’ Association.

There is good liaison between the French department and other language departments. Cross-curricular planning involves an annual project with the German department whereby first year students make presentations in the target language. There is also ongoing collaboration with other subject departments such as Art, History and Geography. The school has organised exchange programmes in the past and currently encourages students to avail of individual placements in France. A tour to Paris was organised in the previous school year. Future plans for the subject include holding an annual *Semaine Française* in order to promote the language within the school and the further development of links with a school in Brittany.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

One of the French teachers acts as co-ordinator for the subject and this role is rotated among the teachers. The co-ordinator is responsible for organising subject meetings and taking minutes as well as for the dissemination of information to staff members. The teacher also gives feedback to management on departmental issues. One formal meeting is organised at the start of the year and informal meetings are held on a regular basis. The school has a modern languages policy and a comprehensive subject-department plan is in place. Common written programmes of work have been prepared for each year group as part of subject planning. It is suggested that other relevant documentation such as the analysis of results in the certificate examinations could also form part of the subject plan.
As a means of building on the good work undertaken in planning to date, it is suggested that the teachers should look at ways of raising the profile of modern languages within the school. This might involve a celebration of the annual European Day of Languages in collaboration with colleagues in the other language departments or the drafting of an action plan for French focusing on a small number of short-term targets.

**Teaching and Learning**

There was very good use of French by the teachers for classroom communication and teaching purposes observed during the lessons visited. The roll call, instructions and explanations were regularly given in the target language. It was good to note the emphasis on the use of French grammatical terms and the simple explanations offered for grammar rules. In order to encourage student communication in French, it is recommended that more opportunities for students to use the target language be factored into individual lesson planning.

In a small number of lessons where the language laboratory was the setting for the lesson, the constraints of such a venue were apparent. While the availability of a language laboratory is a useful resource for language teaching, the fixed seating in such a room is not always appropriate for a traditional-style lesson. Students may be seated with their backs to the teacher or may be wearing headphones, and it may be difficult to retain their attention. In the lessons observed, methodologies such as whole-class teaching and individual student questioning by the teacher were less effective than when used in a normal classroom setting. This was especially evident when homework was corrected or when the students worked from their textbooks. In such circumstances, the lesson content and the methodologies should be chosen to suit the setting. In this case, structuring the lesson so that students have immediate access to the equipment may be of greater benefit than following the usual classroom routine. In order to make optimal use of the facility, it is suggested that the teachers of the different languages might collaborate on the sharing of good practice in this regard.

Careful attention was paid to the teaching of grammar in a number of lessons. Prepositions, pronouns and the rules for tenses all featured. Good practice was seen when the students were given clear examples to follow and when they had opportunities to engage in pair work based on the grammar structures. It was evident that students enjoyed any opportunity they were given to work together on an exercise in pairs or small groups. This practice should be extended and there should be a greater emphasis placed on the use of active-learning methodologies. In some lessons, there needed to be a better balance between time spent on teaching and the amount of time spent by students in completing exercises. Sometimes making more use of a short exercise or section of text would provide opportunities for interaction between the students and teacher and would allow for more active learning.

Activities for teaching vocabulary were suitably varied and included listening and reading comprehensions. In one lesson, students in junior cycle listed words related to the topic of the classroom under different headings in their copybooks while a listening exercise linked to the same topic provided an opportunity for them to work on their aural skills. Linking the activities by theme ensured a smooth transition from one exercise to the next. In order for students to gain confidence in pronouncing new vocabulary, it is suggested that time be spent on practising the pronunciation of new words in conjunction with the listening exercise. In the same way, introducing an activity with a strong visual focus such as labelling objects with the correct word,
would give students a chance to learn the new vocabulary during the lesson and would also allow them to work together in pairs or small groups.

The lessons observed were generally well structured and paced, and instructions were clear. However, in a small number of instances, more time could profitably be spent on preparation for an exercise before the students begin to work on it on their own. The modelling of answers or the use of a cloze-type exercise as a preliminary activity would provide support for students and would lead to a more successful learning experience. This is of particular importance when dealing with mixed-ability classes. Some students may need extra assistance from the teacher while the more able students could be encouraged to work independently by checking their answers against the relevant verb tables in the textbook. Monitoring students’ progress through checking whether students found an exercise easy or difficult would also help in gauging the effectiveness of an activity. Where students are found to be having difficulty with a particular concept or with a key element such as numbers in French, this could form the basis for a concerted effort by all the teachers to address the issue over a period of days or weeks.

The atmosphere in the classes visited was positive. There was good classroom management overall and the students were purposeful in their work. They received affirmation for their efforts as well as help from the teachers in organising their learning.

ASSESSMENT

A system of continuous assessment is in place for all year groups with the exception of TY, with monthly tests taking place in class. Students sit three tests during the first term and the results form part of their grade for the Christmas reports. A system of regular tests continues in the second and third terms and there is a common test for all classes at the end of the school year. Students in TY are assessed regularly on their project work. Since this is the first year that French forms part of the curriculum in TY, it is very positive that an assessment of oral competence in the language will form part of the annual assessment for TY students. This will help to highlight the importance of oral work during the year and will extend the current good practice of holding orals for students in preparation for the Leaving Certificate examination.

Students and parents are kept informed of progress through oral feedback, the school journal and the twice-yearly reports. An examination of a selection of copybooks showed that homework is assigned and corrected regularly. It was good to note that positive comments on students’ work are frequently included by teachers as a motivational factor. Students should be encouraged to do corrections on a regular basis in order to help them to learn from their mistakes.

It is recommended that an analysis of students’ achievement in the certificate examinations in comparison with national norms be carried out. This analysis could be used to inform planning for teaching and learning. The data could also be utilised to track trends in the uptake of languages within the school as well as the uptake by students of higher and ordinary level papers. This would be of benefit in light of the increasing number of students in the school.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
• There is a strong commitment to the provision of modern foreign languages in the school and the majority of students study a foreign language.
• A mentoring scheme is in place to assist new teachers.
• The target language is well used by the teachers for classroom communication and for teaching lesson content.
• The teaching of grammar is a particular strength.
• There is a good emphasis on oral assessment in senior cycle.

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

• It is recommended that the single period for French in Transition Year be kept under review and be increased when possible.
• Regular opportunities for students’ communication and interaction in the target language should be provided.
• The use of active-learning methodologies should be increased.
• Data relating to the uptake of languages and levels should be recorded and analysed in order to inform teaching and learning in the school.

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.