

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Saint Mary's Academy CBS
Carlow
Roll number: 61120E

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Mary's Academy CBS, Carlow. 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, deputy 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

St Mary's Academy CBS is a voluntary secondary school with 582 male students. Two modern European languages, French and German are offered in the school. Incoming first-year students have a taster programme for the first month and then choose between French and German. In the current year the option to continue with both languages has been facilitated for the students who have requested it. This initiative is commended. The study of a modern European language becomes optional from the beginning of second year. It is strongly recommended that this policy be reviewed as students at this age may not fully understand the implications of not having studied a modern European language for their future career choices.

There is good whole school provision and support for French in the allocation of time and timetabling. This ensures regular contact with the target language. *Ab initio* modules of French and German are offered at senior cycle for those who have not taken a language in Junior Certificate. This is in fulfilment of the modern language requirement for the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

There are two teachers of French in the school, one of whom is replacing a teacher on leave in the current academic year. Both teachers are graduates in the subject and both are teaching to all levels. The more established teachers have attended some local in-service meetings for French. However, in the interests of maintaining good standards of linguistic competence and keeping up to date with developments in the teaching and learning of modern languages, all teachers should keep themselves informed of and apply for the range of scholarships and courses available to teachers of French. Since the school pays the annual membership of all subject associations including the French Teachers Association (FTA) the teachers of French should consider attendance at its annual conference.

Classrooms are teacher based and the rooms visited had charts of classroom language, key expressions and grammar posted up on the walls in addition to displays of students' projects. This is commended. In order to extend students' cultural awareness and knowledge of the geography of France, it is recommended that some posters or postcards of France also be displayed.

Students could write away for such posters in addition to other relevant materials as part of their work on formal letter-writing. French-related information was also displayed on a notice-board in the corridor and this is also commended.

There is good whole school provision for resources. An annual budget is allocated to the French department and this is used to purchase class sets of dictionaries and magazines, CDs, DVDs and games. These materials are kept in a cupboard in the staffroom and are accessible to all teachers of French. All classrooms are equipped with computers, and data projectors have been installed in a significant number of rooms. There was evidence during the course of the evaluation that the use of information and communication technology (ICT) has been embraced by the members of the French department. This is commended.

Co-curricular activities include the organisation of a French breakfast prior to the students' oral examination and a French food day. The organisation of such events is commended as they afford students a number of enjoyable language learning experiences. Teachers should consider extending the range of co-curricular activities to include the organisation of quizzes, board games, films and drama. Some of these activities could be organised by the students as part of their learning. Visits have been organised in recent years to Dôle in eastern France, the town which is twinned with Carlow. St Mary's Academy is currently awaiting a study visit from teachers in Dôle with a view to establishing interschool links. This is commended as such links can facilitate the exchange of authentic documents and promote intercultural dialogue. They also provide opportunities to develop cultural awareness for students who do not have the opportunity to travel to France.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The teachers of French and German in St Mary's Academy work together as a modern languages' department. This is good practice as a collaborative approach to the teaching and learning of modern languages is of benefit to both language departments. There is a co-ordinator for modern languages, a position that is voluntary and rotating in line with good practice. Formal subject planning meetings are facilitated at the beginning of the academic year and during the year, as the need arises. Minutes are kept of all subject-planning meetings. A review of these minutes indicated that teachers divide their time between dealing with issues of an immediate or practical nature and forward planning for the subjects. The minutes of the meetings also reflect the teachers' engagement with the self-evaluation process. This is highly commended.

A review of subject-planning documentation indicates that the members of the modern languages' department have actively embraced subject planning and that good work has been completed for French as part of that process. The subject plan for French sets out the school context and its organisational and operating context. Planning for teaching and learning is established in terms of the desired learning outcomes to be achieved for each year group. This is very good practice. To further support this good work, the teachers of French should establish time frames which will facilitate the timely progression of work and ensure that the learning outcomes for each year group are achieved. As part of subject planning teachers should also work together to develop strategies which will support teaching and learning in a mixed-ability setting.

There was evidence of careful preparation for the lessons observed with the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Evaluation activities involved the observation of four lessons, two at junior cycle, and two at senior cycle. The opportunity to review students' copybooks and to interact with them was also facilitated. Good standards of teaching and learning were observed in all of the lessons evaluated.

The target language was used by the teachers in all of the lessons observed. There were some instances where the teacher reverted to translation from French to English to ensure students' understanding of lesson content. While the need to scaffold students' learning is acknowledged, it is recommended that the teacher challenge students first by asking them in French whether or not they understand rather than automatically translating. All students in turn, should be encouraged to communicate in French. To this end teachers should provide them with the linguistic strategies to ask questions, express difficulties and make requests in simple French. Greater use of the target language will improve students' confidence and communicative competence.

All lessons observed were well structured and paced and the content was appropriate to the needs and abilities of the students. In most instances, the teacher began by outlining the proposed lesson plan. This is good practice. To further the benefits of such practice, it is recommended that the teachers communicate the lesson plan in terms of what the students should know and be able to do as an outcome of their learning. This will make students more aware of teaching and learning as a shared role.

A thematic approach facilitated the integration of the different language skills and there were some good examples where the teaching of grammar was effectively integrated into the body of the lesson. There were some instances however, where the integrated approach could have been extended to ensure the development of all the language skills.

A range of methodologies was observed in the course of the evaluation. The use of brainstorming in one lesson is commended as it helped to engage the students from the outset. It also made them aware of the value of their previous learning. Consideration should be given to expanding the benefits of this strategy by using brainstorming as a catalyst to build up families of words. Students could also be asked to brainstorm as a group activity. ICT was used in some lessons to support learning. This is also commended. However, as observed in one lesson it is important, to have an alternative plan in place should technical difficulties arise with the use of ICT.

Pair work was successfully used in some lessons to engage students in active learning. This is commended. In order to ensure an appropriate balance between teacher instruction and student activity, at least one pair or group activity should be incorporated into every lesson. It is also recommended that students be asked to report back on the answers given by their partners as this will ensure that the task has been carried out in addition to expanding students' use of the different parts of verbs.

There was good classroom management throughout and students applied themselves well to the work of the lesson. There was evidence to indicate that students had a good understanding of the work in hand. Furthermore, some of the students displayed very good competence in their answers to questions asked. To encourage all students to participate orally, it is recommended that teachers make sure to target the less vocal students when engaging in question and answer sessions. Interactions with the inspector revealed many students to be confident learners of the language, while the above-mentioned recommendations concerning the use of the target language by students should support the less vocal students.

ASSESSMENT

Student progress is monitored in a number of ways including question and answer sessions in class, homework assignments, end-of-chapter tests and formal examinations. A review of students' copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected. While it is not always appropriate to include a comment, it is recommended that teachers sign and date corrections in order to differentiate between work corrected by the teacher and work corrected by the students. Students sit formal tests at Christmas and in the summer. Certificate examination students sit mock examinations in the second term. An aural component is included in all formal tests. This is good practice. Students in Transition Year and in fifth-year have an oral assessment as part of their end-of-year examinations, while sixth-year students are given a formal mock oral examination. This good practice of giving an oral assessment, either formal or informal, should be extended to all year groups.

Students receive four reports each year, at mid-term, Christmas, Easter and in the summer. The reports at mid-term and Easter reflect an overall comment relating to students' attendance, application and work, while Christmas and end-of-year reports comprise a grade and a comment. These reports are communicated through the E-portal system to which students and their parents have password protected access. In addition a hard copy of the Christmas and summer reports is sent to parents. Contact with parents is also maintained through the annual parent-teacher meetings held for each year group.

A review of results in the certificate examinations indicates that the uptake of levels and the outcomes at both junior and senior cycle are appropriate to the student cohort.

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 French in the allocation of time, timetabling and the provision of resources.
- Good work has been completed to date in subject planning for French.
- The target language was used by the teachers in all of the lessons observed.
- ICT has been effectively embraced to support teaching and learning.
- The methodologies observed were used to good effect.
- Many of the methodologies used were effective in promoting active student engagement and learning.

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

- School management should prioritise the review of the policy whereby the study of a modern European language is optional for all students from second year on.
- As part of ongoing subject planning the teachers of French should establish time frames which will facilitate the progression of work to ensure that the learning outcomes for each year group are achieved.
- Students should be given the necessary strategies to encourage them to interact more in the target language.
- Where relevant, greater use of pair or group work is recommended to further promote active learning.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of French and with the principal and deputy principal, at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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