

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Loreto Secondary School
Kilkenny**

Roll number: 61580P

Date of inspection: 1 December 2009



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | 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 Loreto Secondary School, Kilkenny. 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 report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Loreto Secondary School, Kilkenny is a voluntary secondary school with 763 female students. The study of a modern European language forms part of the core curriculum to Leaving Certificate. All first-year students are offered a taster programme in both French and German and at the end of the year they choose one as one of their core subjects. Students also have access to the study of a second language. School management is highly commended for its provision for modern European languages. Classes are organised in mixed-ability groups. While it is acknowledged that the mixed-ability groupings at senior cycle facilitate the breadth of subject choice, senior management should explore ways whereby the blocking of senior-cycle French could support the creation of discrete higher and ordinary-level groupings.

There is good whole-school provision for French in the allocation of time. However, it is recommended that lessons be timetabled in single rather than double periods at junior cycle to facilitate greater contact with the language.

There are six teachers of French, all of whom are graduates in the subject and all of whom teach to all levels. Some teachers have attended the national seminars organised by the French Teachers' Association (FTA) and one teacher has benefited from a language course in France. The school has had, in previous years, a native French speaker on the staff and, according to the teachers, this enabled them to maintain their standards of linguistic competency. The school has also engaged in a number of whole-school in-service activities in recent years including differentiation, co-operative learning and information and communication technology (ICT). Commitment to continuous professional development (CPD) is commended. In order to maintain good standards of linguistic and pedagogical competency, all teachers are encouraged to research and avail of the number of language-related scholarships, courses and seminars made available

though the Department of Education and Science and the French Cultural Services. They should also source opportunities for CPD through *Léargas*, in addition to the in-service training offered in local education centres and by the subject associations.

Most teachers have their own classroom and this facilitates the creation of an appropriate language learning environment. The classrooms visited had attractive displays of maps, posters, charts containing vocabulary and some classroom language and samples of students' projects. In one instance the Transition Year (TY) students have undertaken the project of painting a 'Paris by night' theme in the classroom. The creation of a print-rich environment is commended as it promotes cultural awareness in addition to facilitating a stimulating learning environment. As the year progresses teachers should extend the range of posters and charts to include key expressions and grammar charts to support the work in hand.

Resources include CD players, in addition to television and DVD players which are available in some classrooms. Teaching materials include CDs, DVDs, novels, crosswords and magazines. These are kept in a resource cabinet assigned to the French department. Information and communications technology (ICT) is still relatively limited. The school has two computer rooms and a small number of data projectors. However, broadband has only recently been installed and there are currently no other ICT facilities in the general classrooms. This has meant that, to date, ICT is only used for downloading materials and for students researching work on the internet. As soon as ICT becomes more accessible teachers should embrace it, initially with simple PowerPoint presentations, many of which can be readily downloaded from the internet. Students, in turn, could be encouraged to make their own oral presentations using PowerPoint. ICT can also be used for the speedy correction of some homework exercises.

A broad range of co-curricular activities is in place for French in Loreto Secondary School. A French party is organised for first-year students and TY students are currently planning a French breakfast for their peers. Visits from French theatre for school groups are also organised as a TY activity. Teachers reported that plans are currently in place for a trip to France and for a French quiz for second-year students. Commitment to co-curricular activities is commended as it affords students opportunities to engage in culturally enriching and enjoyable language learning experiences. To further the benefits of co-curricular activities, the members of the French department should consider establishing links with a French school for the purpose of exchanging documents and promoting intercultural dialogue.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The members of the French department have actively embraced subject planning as part of the whole-school planning initiative. There is a subject co-ordinator, a position which is voluntary and rotated in line with good practice. A formal subject planning meeting is facilitated at the beginning of the school year and, as the need arises. Teachers also reported having regular informal meetings. Minutes are kept of all formal meetings. It is recommended that a brief record also be kept of all key decisions taken at informal meetings.

A review of the documentation submitted on the day of the inspection indicated that considerable work has already been completed in subject planning for French. The plan outlines the aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of French and the organisational and operating context. The curriculum content set out in terms of learning concepts was also included. Teachers are commended for the very good work completed to date in subject planning. As the planning process continues teachers should further build on the work completed to date by reframing the

learning concepts in terms of desired learning outcomes for each year group identifying what the students should be able to do as a result of their learning. This approach focuses on the development of transferable skills and allows for greater variety in the choice of topics and texts.

The Transition Year plan submitted on the day of the evaluation was also reviewed. While the plan indicated a range of activities to be completed in TY, there was insufficient detail to indicate that the proposed methodologies reflect the curriculum principles underpinning an effective Transition Year programme as set out in the document *Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education and Science: 1995). Examples of such approaches include negotiated learning and the development of personal responsibility in learning. When planning for TY French it is important to ensure that the programme offered and the teaching approaches and methods are in accordance with the educational aims of the TY programme rather than becoming a three-year Leaving Certificate programme. To this end the members of the French department should consult the TY guidelines available on the Second level Support Service (SLSS) and National Council for Technology in Education (NCTE) websites.

There was careful planning for the individual lessons observed with the preparation of individual lessons plans in many instances and the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Evaluation activities involved the observation of six lessons, three at junior cycle, one Transition Year lesson and two at senior cycle. Interaction with the inspector and a review of students' copybooks was also facilitated. Good practices were noted in all of the lessons observed and indeed there were many instances where the quality of teaching and learning was of a very high standard.

The target language was consistently used by the teachers in all of the lessons observed. This is commended. There was also good evidence of students in many lessons being actively encouraged to interact in French. This is also commended. In order to extend this very good practice, teachers should ensure that all students have the necessary linguistic strategies to ask questions, express difficulties or make requests in simple French. Good attention to spelling in French and to correct pronunciation was also noted in some lessons. This commendable practice should be extended to all lessons through the use of regular pronunciation drills.

Most lessons were well structured and appropriately paced and the content responded to the needs and interests of the students. In many instances the teacher began the lesson by outlining the topic to be studied or the work to be completed. To further the benefits of this good practice all teachers should share the lesson plan in terms of the proposed learning outcome for the lesson as this will make students more aware of learner expectations. There was one lesson however, where a disproportionate amount of time was spent on revision. It is important that an appropriate balance is maintained between the consolidation of previously learned work and the progression of new learning. There was another lesson where the planned work took less time than envisaged. In such instances teachers should make provision for any spare time remaining.

A thematic approach facilitating the integration of the different language skills was observed in most lessons. This is commended. While teachers attributed due importance to the development of all the language skills in many of the lessons observed, there were some instances where greater focus on oral skills development should improve students' communicative confidence. Teachers should also be judicious in the time they allocate to the completion of listening

exercises. Where a text is very long or there are an undue number of examples it is not always necessary to complete them all. Furthermore, teachers should look at alternative listening texts and ways of exploiting them so that there is an appropriate balance between the use of listening texts for learning and for testing.

Flash cards were effectively used in some lessons to support learning. Very good use of the board was also noted in some lessons where teachers used mind maps to expand the topic being studied or categorised vocabulary and expressions under different headings. Such practices are recommended for all lessons. In one lesson, where students engaged in revision, the use of a brainstorming approach or mind map would have made students more aware of the benefits of previous learning.

Pair or group work was observed in most lessons. This is commended as it encourages active and independent learning. In some instances however, the time allocated for the completion of the task was too long. In another instance the value of what was a very interesting and active task was somewhat diminished by not explaining in advance the purpose of the activity. It is recommended that at least one pair or group activity be incorporated into all lessons and that they should be kept short and focused with clear understanding as to the purpose of the task. To further the benefits of the pair or group activities, students should report back on what their partners have said, thereby moving from speaking in the first to the third person.

There was very good classroom management throughout and students applied themselves very well to the work of the lessons. Their responses indicated a good understanding of the work in hand and many students interacted very effectively in the target language. A more differentiated approach for mixed ability groupings in senior cycle should be considered to support students who are less proficient in their oral skills development. Interactions with the inspector revealed many students to be confident and competent learners of the language.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment practices is in place to monitor student progress. These include question and answer sessions in class, homework assignments, class tests and formal examinations. A review of students' copybooks indicated that homework is given in all instances. Some good practices were in evidence with the inclusion of helpful comments in the corrections. This practice should be extended to all corrections as appropriate. Where corrections don't necessitate a comment they should be signed or dated to indicate when homework is corrected by the teacher and when by the student. Many students had hardback copybooks in which they took notes and these were well organised for ease of reference. Some students did not have copybooks with them in class. It is important that all students have their copybooks with them to record the work completed during the lesson.

Students have informal tests at mid-term and class-based examinations at Christmas and Easter. Certificate examination students have mock examinations in the second term and all other students have formal examinations in the summer. An aural component is included in all formal assessments. Leaving Certificate students are given a formal mock oral French examination in addition to informal practice interviews given by the teachers in their free time. In the interests of actively promoting oral skills development from the beginning teachers should consider introducing an informal oral assessment for all students of French and that the mark awarded be included as a separate mark on the school report. A review of the examination results indicates very good student outcomes in the certificate examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good access to the study of modern European languages and good whole school provision and support for French in the allocation of time.
- The members of the French department are at an advanced stage in the subject planning process.
- French was used throughout all lessons as the language of instruction. Many students also made very good efforts to communicate in French.
- There was good integration of the different language skills in most of the lessons observed.
- Pair and group work were used in all lessons to promote active learning.

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

- Senior management should explore ways whereby the blocking of senior-cycle French could support the creation of discrete higher and ordinary level groupings
- Where mixed-ability groupings continue in senior cycle, a more differentiated approach is recommended to support students who are less proficient in their oral skills development.
- With the recent installation of broadband and availability of data projectors, teachers should make greater use of ICT to support teaching and learning.
- When engaging in pair or group work teachers should ensure that activities are kept short and focused and that there is a clear understanding of the purpose of the activity.

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.

Published November 2010.