An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

St Mary’s Secondary School, Newport
County Tipperary

Roll number: 65400H

Date of inspection: 9 February 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 Mary’s Secondary School, Newport. 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 of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

While two modern European languages are provided in the school, namely French and German, the study of a foreign language is optional. Prior to enrolment in first year, students are offered a list of nine optional subjects from which to choose four. This list includes both French and German. However, while it is positive that students have an open choice of subjects, it leads to a situation where a number of students do not study any foreign language during their second-level schooling. Although it is acknowledged that there may be various factors influencing the students’ choice of subjects and that due cognisance must be taken of the resources available, the lack of a foreign language has implications for the students’ ability to participate in third-level education at a later stage. This situation is a matter of some urgency in light of the projected substantial increase in student numbers in the future and it is recommended that it be addressed by management as a priority. It is therefore encouraging that the current position of foreign languages on the curriculum in junior cycle is under review. In senior cycle, option bands are generated from students’ preferences and the students receive advice on their subject choices from the guidance counsellor. This is good practice as it facilitates these students to make informed choices regarding subjects for Leaving Certificate.

The timetabling provision for the subject is good. Students in junior cycle are allocated two single class periods and one double class period per week, while students in senior cycle have three single class periods and one double period per week. The double period in junior cycle is necessitated by the timetabling of the language against practical subjects in the option blocks. Consequently, this reduces the number of days on which students have lessons in French. As frequent class contact is the preferred option for language learning, it is suggested that this timetabling be kept under review in order to optimise the number of single class periods in first year. Students are taught in mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle and in senior cycle.
The teachers are classroom based and use the rooms to store their resources. They have provided a very stimulating and attractive environment through the display of a wide range of visual and print materials including maps, posters, charts and samples of students’ work. A notable feature is the display of *Je me présente* posters done by first-year students which are displayed on the walls of the language corridor. This colourful exhibition helps to integrate new students into the life of the school and documents their progress in learning French. The school has a multi-media room, equipped with language-support software and French TV channels that is used for the teaching of French on a regular basis.

There is good co-curricular and extracurricular support for French through the provision of a range of activities including a *petit déjeuner* for junior students, visits to the cinema to view French films, a table quiz and *boules*. A French week for Transition Year (TY) students involves activities based on cookery, art and music. A sponsored French day is also organised in aid of charity and is an effective way of motivating students to speak the language.

**Planning and Preparation**

One of the teachers acts as subject co-ordinator and meetings are held regularly. As the school has a French language assistant this year, an informal meeting is held each week with the assistant to plan the week’s work. This is very good practice in that it promotes collaboration and ensures that the assistant has the time and information required to prepare her work.

The school has been involved in school development planning for some years and a comprehensive subject plan has been compiled. Common schemes of work form part of this subject plan as well as information on procedures, planning for students with special educational needs and effective teaching methodologies. Information is also provided on homework, assessment procedures and record-keeping. The projected increase in student numbers in junior cycle in the next school year provides an opportunity for the teachers to review and update the current subject plan. The aim should be to identify any policies that may need to be further developed or any additional planning that may need to take place to cater for this increase in numbers. It is therefore recommended that this be a focus of future planning meetings. As a first step, a move towards the inclusion of learning outcomes as part of the schemes of work is suggested.

There was very good preparation by the individual teachers for the lessons observed. A range of resources such as laminated cards, games, ingredients and handouts were ready. It was evident from individual plans that lessons were organised around a theme in line with syllabus requirements and that this theme was developed over a number of lessons. The integration of key language skills such as grammar, listening and written skills formed part of the plans. This approach is a positive way of building on students’ prior learning.

**Teaching and Learning**

There was very good use of French by the teachers for classroom management and teaching purposes. This was evident in both junior cycle and senior cycle lessons. As a result, it was noticeable that students were accustomed to communicating with the teacher in French and they replied to questions by giving complete sentences rather than one-word answers. Best practice was seen when students were encouraged to self-correct any mistakes they had made. An
effective strategy to help students to understand the target language was employed by the teachers in junior cycle classes where gestures, intonation and visual aids made any need for translation into English unnecessary.

In all lessons observed, the work was integrated around a theme such as mobile phones, food or parts of the body. The lessons were well structured and sometimes began with a revision of relevant vocabulary. The links with prior learning were often clearly made with students expected to contribute ideas or suggestions for phrases which were then expanded upon by the teacher. The careful selection of listening material, grammar, written texts as well as activities such as games, ensured that all elements were linked to the theme. This is good practice as it allows for a smooth transition from one activity to the next and enables students to improve their skills. This was demonstrated in the way that students were shown how to build a written paragraph from what they had been taught during the lesson. The use of visual aids such as cartoons and graphic organisers and the creativity shown in the choice of activities was particularly apt in the context of mixed-ability teaching. The methods used were effective in maximising learning and in encouraging all students to participate.

While the questioning in the lessons observed was sometimes teacher-directed, the energy and enthusiasm of the teacher and the fast pace of the questioning ensured that all students were actively involved in answering. It was very positive that students were also provided with opportunities to engage in autonomous learning either individually or in pairs. The activities included games, role-play and problem-solving. The reason for the pair work was explained and this helped students to focus on the task in hand and to understand its relevance. In order to encourage students to evaluate their learning, it is suggested that they should be asked whether they had found an activity difficult or not. This would also facilitate the teacher in monitoring their progress.

There was a high standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. The atmosphere was relaxed and conducive to learning and a positive rapport was established between teachers and students. Classroom management was very good and learning activities were well managed. The teachers had high expectations and encouraged students to do their best as well as affirming their efforts. The students were motivated and engaged by the variety of activities. They worked hard and demonstrated a clear understanding of the topic under study. The assistance provided by the French language assistant was well utilised to support students’ learning during the lessons. It was clear that a good working relationship had been established and the assistant’s input was integrated very successfully into the lesson.

**ASSESSMENT**

The teachers use a variety of assessment tools to gather information about student learning including class questioning, homework assignments and formal and informal tests. The progress of students in first year, second year and fifth year is evaluated by means of continuous assessment and class tests during the first term. Formal summer tests are held at the end of the school year and common assessment tests are used where appropriate. In TY, the modes of assessment include portfolio assessment, class tests, and formal examinations in February and in the summer. TY students also present their projects to junior cycle students. It is very good to note that an assessment of oral proficiency is included for all class groups with the exception of third-year classes. Students in fifth year and sixth year are further provided with practice orals as preparation for the certificate examinations. All students in junior cycle and senior cycle are
encouraged to study the language at higher level. An analysis of the results of the certificate examinations is carried out and this analysis is used to inform teaching and learning.

It is good to note that there is a subject-department homework policy with procedures in place for homework and assessment. An examination of a selection of students’ copybooks and files showed that homework is assigned regularly and that work is corrected. The good practice of including constructive comments is also noted as part of the teachers’ use of assessment for learning techniques. The awarding of prizes for students’ copybooks in first year is an effective means of motivating students to produce good work. Students and parents are provided with information about progress in the subject through regular feedback, reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Subject planning for French is well advanced and a comprehensive plan is in place.
- Individual lesson planning and preparation was very good.
- There was very good use of French for instruction and for classroom management.
- The standard of teaching and learning in French was very high in the lessons observed.
- Attractive displays create a stimulating language-learning environment and the resources available for the subject include a multi-media room.

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

- The status of modern foreign languages on the curriculum in junior cycle should be reviewed by management as a matter of urgency.
- It is recommended that subject planning for French should focus on reviewing the current plan in light of the projected increase in student numbers.

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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