Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk
Tralee, County Kerry
Roll number: 68070E

Date of inspection: 27 April 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mercy Secondary School Mounthawk. 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 and examined students’ work. 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. The board of management of the school 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

Provision for modern foreign languages is very good. Three languages are offered to students in first year and all students have access to the three languages. In first year, the study of one language is compulsory, and for timetabling purposes, French is set against Spanish and German in the languages option. In addition, students may decide to take a second language and in this case the three languages are included in the option band with all the other subjects. In second year, the study of a foreign language becomes optional. However, it is good to note that all students are encouraged to continue to study a language and two languages may be taken to Leaving Certificate level. A series of supports is in place for students to help them in making their choices. Prior to enrolment, students receive a prospectus and subject-options booklet, and during the Open Day they meet with the language teachers. With regard to subject choices for second year and for senior cycle, a subject-information evening is held for parents and students so as to assist them in making an informed choice. Option bands are generated on the basis of student preferences with an open choice for students from all subjects. The bands are generated on the basis of a best fit model. It is very positive that the school’s subject choice documentation and the guidelines for the different curricular programmes highlight the importance of studying a foreign language both in terms of a holistic education and in order to gain access to third-level institutions.

Timetabling provision for languages is satisfactory. There are four single periods per week in junior cycle for the first choice foreign language. When a second language is chosen, the allocation for that language drops to three periods per week. It is good to note that during the optional Transition Year (TY), French is offered to all students including at ab initio level and is timetabled for three periods per week. In fifth year and in sixth year, students have five single periods of French per week. The classes are timetabled concurrently and this has facilitated the creation of higher level and ordinary level class groupings. Students are taught in mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle and in TY.
Provision for students with additional educational needs is good and there is ongoing liaison between the subject department and the student-support team. A specific member of the special educational needs team is assigned to each year group and teachers are provided with an information pack which allows them to respond to individual needs within their class. There has also been whole-school inservice training on differentiation in mixed-ability classes which has been of benefit to the staff in planning their work. In sixth year, additional support is provided for students in preparation for the French oral examinations, including the provision of an additional teacher so as to allow for a smaller class group for those in need of extra support.

The teachers do not have designated classrooms but instead move between rooms. This is a disadvantage in that they have to bring equipment such as a CD player with them. However, the school is well resourced with regard to information and communication technology (ICT) and the teachers have access to a language laboratory with a data projector and internet access. The class groups are timetabled for the language laboratory on a regular basis. Many of the classrooms have a television and DVD player and there are also mobile TV trolleys. As part of the broadband initiative, each subject department has been provided with a laptop. A centralised record-keeping ePortal is being piloted. In this process, new language resource software is uploaded on to the school server for use by the language teachers through the staff resource database. This presents a very good opportunity for staff to share good practice and resources for teaching such as PowerPoint presentations. Some of the teachers are involved in on-line courses which they undertake as a group during their lunch time; to support their initiative lunch is provided by the school on these occasions. Staff workshops on Moodle have also been developed.

While some of the classrooms and the language laboratory have displays of posters, it is suggested that more could be done in this regard, in particular with relation to the provision of maps of France which are essential in terms of teaching cultural awareness. If it is not feasible to display posters and samples of students’ work in all classrooms, then a section of a corridor should be set aside for notice boards for French. This would help to create a stimulating language-learning atmosphere and would encourage an awareness of French culture.

There is an ongoing commitment to professional development among the staff, and senior management actively promotes the importance of teacher learning. The school has a professional development policy in place which is focused on establishing a learning community in the school. The school has participated in a number of initiatives and pilot programmes including the Learning School Project focusing on the development of school-based initiatives in curriculum; the Equality of Challenge Initiative in relation to gifted and talented students; and the Learning Styles Project to assist the learning process in senior classes. The school is currently focusing on a number of areas including differentiation, Assessment for Learning (AfL), Co-operative Learning and the integration of ICT. This emphasis by management on encouraging staff participation in continuing professional development and in new initiatives is very positive.

Senior management also supports professional development in relation to languages. The school has recently completed a Comenius programme in conjunction with four partner schools in other countries and this programme has included teacher exchange opportunities. It is very positive that a number of the teachers have participated in professional development courses both in Ireland and in France. Management also provides opportunities for teachers to share their expertise with other staff. The teachers are encouraged to join their subject associations as the school funds the membership fee. The school also funds other resources such as subscriptions to magazines and periodicals. It is very good to note that management is supportive of teachers who wish to
develop their language skills and the French teachers have shown ongoing commitment to their own professional development.

Extracurricular and co-curricular support for French is strong and includes a visit from a French theatre company, French cinema, a coffee morning and an art competition. A number of activities is organised for students in TY who take part in a tour to Paris. The TY students also organise a French week or *Semaine de la Francophonie* when the school canteen is appropriately decorated, the menu is translated and *crêpes* are served by a French chef. Guest speakers are invited and events are organised in conjunction with other subject departments including Home Economics, Art and Music. As there is such a positive support for languages within the school, it is suggested that the possibilities of collaboration by the three foreign language departments to celebrate European Day of Languages should be explored as a way of promoting language learning and cultural awareness. Information on the day can be accessed on the website of the European Centre for Modern Languages (www.ecml.at).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

School development planning is very advanced in the school and there is a clear commitment by management to the importance of effective planning. Time for planning has been facilitated by management through the provision of two subject-department meetings each year. A co-ordinator for the subject is nominated on a rotating basis and a subject plan for French has been prepared. The plan is evidence of good collaboration among the members of the team and it is a comprehensive document containing details of relevant school policies, national reports and information on teaching methodologies and department procedures as well as the annual French department reports from previous years. It is very good to note that the teachers have prepared an action plan in which they have identified a number of planned actions and have outlined the procedures to be taken. It is also very good practice that the plan includes a target date and makes provision for review and evaluation. The subject action plan is evaluated each year by the language teachers, and the head of the department subsequently meets with senior management to discuss the progress made. A report on French is submitted for inclusion in the annual report presented to the board of management and to parents. Following the evaluation, new targets are identified for the following year.

The emphasis in planning is currently on teaching methodology. Funding for the purchase of resources for French is sourced through a scheme whereby the head of the department consults with the teachers on their requirements and then provides a submission for inclusion in the preparation of the school budget. At present the school does not have a modern languages policy as whole-school planning is focused on a number of other whole-school policies such as the study policy and the literacy and numeracy policy. However, it is planned to develop a modern languages policy in the next phase of whole-school planning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The standard of teaching and learning in French was generally very good. Where best practice was seen, there was evidence of thorough preparation, very good lesson management, and the use of active-learning methodologies. Pair work and small group work were used to good effect in all of these classes.
The use of the target language by the teachers for classroom communication and for teaching purposes varied from lesson to lesson. Where practice was very good, affirmation, instructions and explanations were in French with students expected to spell words and to engage in discussion. However, in a small number of lessons, classroom communication was conducted primarily through English and consequently, students’ opportunities to use the language were more limited. In order to ensure consistency of approach, it is recommended that French become the language of communication in all lessons. Students should be encouraged to communicate in the target language and should be given opportunities to speak French.

The aims and learning intentions for the lesson were shared with students in some lessons. This is good practice as it creates a clear structure for the lesson and so helps students to focus on what they are to learn. It is recommended that this practice be extended so that all students benefit from hearing the learning outcomes explained. In a number of lessons, the initial activity was well chosen and the teachers’ energy and enthusiasm helped to ensure that the students engaged with the work of the lesson very quickly. Sometimes, the activity was as simple and direct as questions about the students’ preferences in music, sport or clothes before the teacher proceeded to whole-class teaching on the same topic. The ability to create a personal rapport with the students in this way was a key factor in encouraging student participation.

Listening exercises were a feature of many lessons and it was very positive to see the emphasis on regular listening practice. The listening activities were linked to the theme of the lesson as recommended in the syllabus guidelines. In one lesson, a song was carefully chosen to be of interest to the students while the sharing of details of the singer’s biography with the students caught their attention and created a very positive response. In some lessons, it was very good to note that the teacher monitored students’ progress during the listening activity. This can be problematic because of the need to stop and start the CD player. However, at other times, there was a need for greater monitoring of student participation. Sometimes the teacher gave the answers rather than inviting suggestions from the students. While this may be a time-saving mechanism, it limits the possibilities for students to become active learners and to engage fully with the activity. Also, it is important to make use of the whiteboard in order to ensure that all students can note the correct answers, especially when spelling a word is involved. Encouraging students to comment on whether they found an exercise easy or challenging would also foster student self-evaluation and would enable them to take responsibility for their learning. It is therefore recommended that opportunities for student engagement and participation be an integral part of every lesson. Where students noted down new words following a reading or listening comprehension, it is suggested that the teachers should plan for a follow-up activity that would help the students both to learn and to use the new words. Depending on the level of the class, this could consist of a game or some oral work. Such an activity would help to challenge students in their learning and would encourage authentic communication in the classroom.

There was extensive use made of visual aids to support learning. Handouts, pictures, a PowerPoint presentation on *La Famille Simpson*, images of clothes and film clips helped to support learning and showed a recognition by the teachers of the students’ different learning styles. As a result, in many classes, there was a high level of engagement and students were interested and motivated. The use of a visual stimulus can be particularly effective when teaching mixed-ability classes in junior cycle. Sometimes, while there had been very good preparation for a lesson, there still needed to be a greater awareness of how to promote student learning. In a few classes in particular, there is a need to look at how to combine the different elements of a lesson in order to achieve a smooth progression and a development of skills from one activity to the next. Integrating a visual or aural stimulus such as a film clip or a taped interview with student conversation on the topic would help students to see a connection between the different language
skills. The sharing of good practice among the subject teachers would also be of benefit, as some examples of very good practice were seen where a listening activity led on to oral production, followed by a reading comprehension on a topic. The assigned homework was linked to the theme and so students’ progress and their understanding of how to learn a language was supported by the lesson structure.

It was very positive to note that many students were confident speakers of French. In some junior classes, students were encouraged to learn short dialogues by heart which they then performed for the class. This was a successful approach due to the way in which it was presented as an enjoyable and affirming activity. The teacher revised the pronunciation of the words in advance and, as a result, encouraged habits of good pronunciation. The added benefit was that the presentation of the dialogues helped to build students’ confidence and skill. In senior cycle, a high level of spoken proficiency was also in evidence in all classes. There was good continuity with previous lessons and students were able to apply the vocabulary they had learnt to a discussion on a local festival or to a more abstract topic. Asking them to engage in a role-play activity served as a lively introduction for more general discussion on the topic and allowed all students an opportunity to participate. There was an emphasis on the students’ own ideas and experiences, and on the production of simple, authentic French. Encouraging student communication was the primary focus and the students then developed their ideas in a written assignment for the next lesson. In this way, there was very good preparation for the certificate examinations while still retaining the emphasis on classroom discussion and a creative response from the students in those classes.

The rapport between the students and teachers was very good, and a pleasant and relaxed classroom atmosphere prevailed. The students were polite and cooperative and when questioned, showed a willingness to communicate in the target language. The teachers had high expectations for the students and, as a result, students responded well and their efforts were affirmed.

**ASSESSMENT**

A wide range of assessment modes is used to monitor students’ progress. Third-year and sixth-year classes sit examinations in the autumn and in the second term, while other year groups are tested at Christmas and in the summer. Common tests are arranged for first-year classes. In TY, assessment is by portfolio including a presentation at the end of the year and an interview. Parents receive two reports from the school each year and are also kept informed of students’ progress through the school journal and the parent-teacher meetings.

The school has a detailed study policy which outlines the purpose of homework as well as the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents and students with regard to homework. The school is involved in implementing AfL techniques, and in this regard it was good to note that the practice of comment-based marking is in place and is being implemented, as evidenced in the sample of copybooks examined.

An analysis of achievement in the certificate examinations in comparison with national norms is carried out by senior management. The results are made known to the language teachers and are used by management to monitor trends in the uptake of languages as well as in the uptake of higher level and ordinary level.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a strong commitment to the teaching of modern foreign languages in the school and access to the study of a language is open to all.
- There is a significant emphasis on the creation of a learning community and on support for teacher professional development.
- Very good work has been achieved on subject planning for French, and the preparation of an action plan is a particular strength.
- Students were confident in speaking the language and showed an interest in their work in the lessons observed.
- Teaching and learning in French was very good in many of the lessons observed.

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

- French should be used as the language of communication in all lessons.
- The good practice of sharing learning outcomes with students should be extended to all classes.
- Opportunities for student engagement and participation should be an integral part of every lesson.
- A greater emphasis should be placed on monitoring students’ learning in the classroom.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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 welcomes the report on teaching and learning of French in the school as an opportunity to further our own self-evaluation. The Board is pleased that the strong commitment to teaching of modern languages in the school in terms of access, subject planning and quality of teaching and learning has been endorsed and affirmed in such a positive way. The Board is also pleased that the commitment to school planning and in particular the current strategies around the creation of a ‘learning school community’ and the support for teacher CPD has been recognised and commended.

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

The Board suggests that the areas for development outlined in the recommendations can be addressed through the continuation and extension of the current CPD programme in the school. As part of this programme, we have organised workshops in Co-operative Learning and AFL, the further development of which will extend the use of techniques which promote student engagement and participation and further the good practice of sharing learning outcomes in class as recommended.