Subject Inspection of French REPORT

Scoil Chonglais
Baltinglass, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70750P

Date of inspection: 2 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Chonglais, Baltinglass. 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 deputy 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

Scoil Chonglais is a co-educational vocational school with 378 students. The study of a modern European language is mandatory in junior cycle for all students apart from those who are in receipt of learning support, for whom it is optional. Students can choose between French and German. Modern European languages are optional in senior cycle. It was noted during the course of the inspection that a significant number of boys had ceased to study a modern language at senior cycle. It is recommended that ways be explored whereby subjects can be blocked to ensure that such a gender imbalance does not prevail in certain subjects.

French is not currently offered in Transition Year. This is of concern as it breaks with the continuity which is important for successful language learning. It is recommended that this be reviewed and provision be made for students of French to continue their study of the language while in Transition Year.

There is good whole school support for French in the allocation of time and timetabling. All classes in junior cycle are timetabled in singles periods affording students ongoing contact with the language.

There are three teachers in the school, two of whom are graduates in the subject. It is recommended that the school work towards a situation where all lessons in French are delivered by a teacher who is qualified to teach the subject. To support and maintain their own linguistic and pedagogical expertise, teachers should inform themselves of and apply for any scholarships, grants or exchanges offered jointly by the Department of Education and Science and the French Cultural Services or by Léargas. They should also explore the range of in-service training programmes co-ordinated by the French Teachers’ Association (FTA) and local education
centres. School management should also consider applying for the language assistantship programme.

There is currently one teacher-based classroom which was visually stimulating with a range of posters, student projects and charts of vocabulary expressions. This is commended. To extend the benefits of the print-rich environment teachers should post up charts of relevant classroom language and key expressions for the topics being studied. It is also recommended that the teacher-based classroom be made available to the other teachers of French whenever possible.

Resources are provided on request to management. The current focus in relation to resources is on extending the use of information and communication technology (ICT) as a tool for teaching and learning. Some school-based in-service has been provided to support teachers in the use of ICT. This is good practice. There was evidence during the course of the evaluation that ICT has been embraced by the members of the French department and this is commended.

A range of co-curricular activities is in place in Scoil Chonglais to support students in their language learning. A highly commendable radio project has been organised with first-year students where students prepare a series of questions in advance and are interviewed in relation to some of these questions. These interviews are recorded and music added and it is planned to create a CD of the interviews. Students also correspond with students in France as part of a pen pal scheme initiated by the teachers. Teachers should extend this good practice by exchanging authentic documents which could be of use in lessons. Teachers have organised a language club to support students who wish to further develop their language skills and plans are in place to organise a French language day in the school. The commitment of the French department to co-curricular and extra-curricular activities is highly commended as it affords students opportunities for enjoyable language learning experiences and ensures that French remains a high-profile subject in the school.

Planning and Preparation

A review of planning documentation submitted on the day of the inspection indicates that subject planning for French is well advanced. Formal planning meetings are facilitated each term as part of overall school development planning. Teachers also meet informally at lunchtime or after school as necessary throughout the year. There is a subject co-ordinator, a position which is voluntary and rotates in line with good practice. Minutes are kept of all formal meetings.

The subject plan for French begins with the mission statement underpinning the teaching and learning of French. It sets out the school context and its organisational and operating context. The syllabus was also included. This is good practice as it is important to work to the syllabus rather than the textbook. The aims for each year group were also included. Some of these aims were set out in terms of learning outcomes focusing on the development of aural, oral, grammar and written skills, while others established the topics to be covered and the different skills to be developed. Teachers are commended for the quality work achieved to date in subject planning. As the process continues the members of the French department should extend their planning to include learning outcomes for each year group in terms of what the students will be able to do as a result of their learning, with the focus on the development of transferable skills. This will afford teachers greater variety in the choice of texts and topics and will also help with the process of self-evaluation.
There was careful planning and preparation for the lessons observed. Individual lesson plans were submitted and there was advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Inspection activities involved the observation of four lessons, two in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. Interaction with the inspector and a review of students’ copybooks was also facilitated. The lessons evaluated revealed good standards of teaching and learning with some very good examples of innovative practice.

French was used consistently by the teachers in most of the lessons observed and a number of effective strategies were used to overcome the need for translation into English. This is good practice. There was also evidence in these lessons that teachers actively encouraged their students to interact in French. This is also commended. Where the target language was used to a more limited extent it is recommended that it be extended by issuing classroom instructions in French. Teachers should also speak first in French and then check whether or not students understand rather than automatically translating into English. Students should also be given the necessary expressions to ask questions, or make requests in simple French. Greater use of the target language will challenge the more able students and will also improve their aural and oral skills.

Most lessons were well structured and paced and the content was appropriate to the needs and interests of the students. There was one instance however, where much of the lesson was devoted to the revision of previous work. While the importance of consolidating previous learning is acknowledged, an approach which progresses previous work into new learning situations is recommended as it should enhance overall learning outcomes in a more time-effective manner.

Visual supports were effectively used in some lessons and this is commended. ICT was also very competently used in one instance to support the work of the lesson and to increase students’ cultural awareness. The availability of dictionaries for use in class is also commended as it enabled students to work independently on some of the student-based tasks.

Active learning was facilitated in all of the lessons observed through the use of pair work, group work or student presentations. This is very good practice. Of particular note were the presentations made by students on areas in France or the weather in Francophone countries. The organisation of these activities resulted in students expanding their knowledge of French culture in addition to contributing to their oral skills development. In one lesson students also had to interact with their peers in the question and answer session which followed the presentation. This is highly commended. To extend the benefits of this very good practice, teachers should introduce the practice of regular pronunciation drills which will further improve students’ confidence and competence in oral communication.

There was very good classroom management throughout and teachers and students worked in a positive learning environment. Students applied themselves well to the assigned tasks and their answers indicated good understanding of the work in hand.

ASSESSMENT

A number of assessment protocols are used in Scoil Chonglais to monitor students’ progress. These include question and answer sessions in class, homework assignments, regular class tests
and formal examinations. A review of students’ copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected with comments included. This is commended as it both affirms and informs student progress. It was noted however, that some of the homework assignments involved translation exercises. It is recommended that tasks other than translation exercises be given in order to encourage students to think more in the target language. Some teachers reported engaging in peer assessment in accordance with the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL). Teachers are also working towards establishing e-portfolios where students will be able to access work online. These developments aimed at improving learning outcomes for students are highly commended.

Students sit house examinations at mid-term, 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. Some teachers also reported administering informal oral assessments. It is recommended that this good practice be extended to all class groups.

Contact with parents is maintained through the school reports which are issued twice yearly and the annual parent teacher meetings held for each year group. All class tests completed by students must be signed by parents. Parents are also informed in writing when a student decides to change levels for the state examinations. This is good practice. A review of student attainment in the certificate examinations indicates a trend towards improved outcomes. However, teachers should remain vigilant to ensure that students in Junior Certificate choose the level which is appropriate to the achievement of their full potential.

**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 for the subject and timetabling.
- Very good work has been completed to date in subject planning for French.
- The target language was used consistently by the teachers in most of the lessons observed.
- A variety of methodologies was observed and they were used to very good effect.
- A number of commendable strategies promoting active learning were noted during the course of the evaluation.
- There was good attention to the development of cultural awareness.
- A number of good practices are in place to support and monitor student progress.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- Provision should be made for students to continue their study of French while in Transition Year.
- The members of the French department should extend the good work completed in planning to include learning outcomes for each year group in terms of what the students will be able to do as a result of their learning, with the focus on the development of transferable skills.
- Where the target language was used to a lesser degree it is recommended that its use be extended.
- Where relevant, it is recommended that the consolidation of previous work is progressed into new learning situations in a more timely manner.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of French and with the 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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