An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Avondale Community College
Rathdrum, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70810H

Date of inspection: 11 May 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Avondale Community College, Rathdrum. 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. The board of management 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

Avondale Community College is a co-educational school with 423 students. Incoming first-year students choose their optional subjects prior to entry into the school. In December of their sixth-class year, pupils from the feeder primary school are offered a two-day taster programme in the subjects which form part of the option bands. French is offered as part of this taster programme. However, the study of a modern European language as an optional subject should be kept under review. While the school reported that parents are made aware of the implications of not studying a modern European language for students’ future educational choices, students of this age may not fully comprehend these implications if they choose subjects on the basis of preference rather than need. All classes are formed into mixed-ability groupings.

The allocation of time for French is satisfactory in junior cycle and in Transition Year (TY) and is very good in senior cycle. However, the timetabling of the subject in junior cycle needs to be reviewed. French is set against a range of practical subjects all of which require double periods. However, best practice for the teaching and learning of languages necessitates more frequent contact with the target language. The timetabling of French in double periods in junior cycle means that students only have contact with the target language twice a week in each year of junior cycle. School management should work towards a situation where languages are timetabled in single periods to ensure good practice in the organisation and teaching of modern European languages.

There are four teachers of French in the school, all of whom are graduates in the subject. Some of the more established teachers have benefitted in recent years from in-service programmes held in France for Irish teachers of French, while others have attended workshops in France of specific interest to their own studies of French. Some of the teachers have also attended courses in information and communication technology (ICT) to support the use of ICT in the French
language class. All teachers have benefited from whole school in-service on Assessment for Learning (AfL). Plans are also in place in the college for whole-school in-service on co-operative learning. Teacher engagement with continuing professional development is commended. To further support this good practice, teachers should keep themselves informed of all initiatives provided for the linguistic and pedagogical upskilling of teachers of French. These include in-service programmes funded by the Department of Education and Skills, the French Cultural Services and agencies such as Léargas in addition to the range of seminars organised both regionally and nationally by the French Teachers’ Association (FTA) and subject related courses organised in local education centres.

Classrooms in Avondale Community College are teacher based. This has facilitated the creation of a supportive language learning environment in all of the classrooms visited. In addition to the maps, posters, grammar and vocabulary charts posted up on the walls, many classrooms had displays of students’ work and lists of useful websites. To optimise the benefits of the print-rich environment, teachers should extend the display of classroom language to support students’ use of French in the classroom. It is also recommended that, in rooms where two languages are taught, separate walls are used for the different languages.

There is very good provision of and access to resources for French in the school. All teachers have CD players and the provision of laptop computers and data projectors in each classroom facilitates the use of audio-visual and internet resources. A set of French dictionaries is available to students in the school library. A range of supplementary materials including magazines, CDs and DVDs, which are accessible to all teachers of French, are stored in a designated cabinet in one classroom and teachers also have built up their own folders of materials. In addition to the ICT resources available in all classrooms, there are two computer rooms in the school which can be accessed by all teachers.

Co-curricular activities include the organisation of a French week, involving activities such as a French breakfast for students and presentations from French theatre for schools groups. TY students also prepare a workshop for the taster programme for incoming first-year students. This is good practice. Involvement in co-curricular activities is encouraged, and where possible should be extended as such activities provide students with enjoyable language learning experiences in addition to raising the profile of French in the school. The school took part in a language exchange some years ago. However, they currently have no contacts with French schools. It is recommended that efforts be made to develop links with a French school for the purpose of e-pals and intercultural dialogue.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject planning for French is very well developed in Avondale Community College. There is a subject coordinator and this position is voluntary and it rotates among teachers in line with good practice. Teachers meet as a subject department on a regular basis. Formal meetings are facilitated as part of whole-school planning days and teachers also meet informally at lunchtime approximately once a month. Minutes are kept of all subject planning meetings. These are good practices.

A review of the subject planning documentation, submitted on the day of the inspection, indicated that considerable work has been completed by the members of the French department. The long-term plan for French sets out the aims and objectives for the teaching and learning of French in the school and outlines the school’s organisational and operating context. The planning folder
also includes the syllabus and draft guidelines for the teaching and learning of French; examination papers and chief examiners’ reports spanning a number of years; lists of resources and useful websites and minutes of meetings. Of particular note was the inclusion of documentation relating to a review of the subject and of teaching and learning strategies including AfL which have been implemented in the French department. The curriculum content for each year group has been developed by individual teachers and is set out in terms of the topics or chapters to be covered within a given time frame.

To build on the very good work completed to date the teachers of French should work together to establish common learning outcomes for each year group and articulate them in terms of can do statements. The focus of the learning outcomes should be on the development of transferable skills as this will support student learning which allows for greater freedom in the choice of texts and materials.

A review of the TY plan indicates a need for further development to ensure that the proposed outcomes and methodologies respond to the principles underpinning an effective TY programme. When planning for the TY programme for future years, teachers should consult the document *Transition Year Programmes: Guidelines for Schools* (Department of Education and Science: 1995)

Teachers also submitted folders of individual lesson plans spanning across the academic year indicating that the practice of individual lesson planning and preparation is well established in the French department. Some teachers used a lesson plan template which enabled them to prepare their lessons in a structured manner and which also allowed for reflections on how the lesson progressed. This is very good practice. A review of these plans also provided evidence that many of the teachers of French have actively embraced ICT into their teaching and learning.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Evaluation activities involved the observation of four lessons: two in junior cycle, one in Transition Year and one in senior cycle. The quality of teaching and learning ranged from satisfactory to very good. Of particular note was the differentiated approach to teaching and learning observed in one lesson.

The target language was consistently used by the teachers in all of the lessons observed. This is good practice. However, there was strong focus on translation as a methodology in one of the lessons observed and this lessened the benefits of target language usage. All students should be challenged to comprehend the target language and, where there are difficulties students should be encouraged to communicate their difficulties using simple phrases in French. To this end all teachers should ensure that students have the expressions needed to ask questions, make requests and express difficulty in simple French. Ability to communicate, albeit at a very basic level, will improve students’ confidence and encourage them to extend their range of language skills. It will also help their aural and oral skills development. Suitable phrases could be posted up on the walls as a point of reference and to help students assimilate them over time. In the lesson where translation was a dominant methodology alternatives such as visual supports to help students in their work, should be considered.

There was some attention to correct pronunciation in one of the lessons observed. This is good practice and should be further extended as correct pronunciation is essential for successful language learning. It is recommended that all teachers work towards improving students’
pronunciation through the use of short regular pronunciation drills. In some lessons teachers called out spellings in French which is good practice, while in another instance students were asked to spell French words in English. All students should be taught to spell in French as it is a requirement of the junior-cycle curriculum.

Most lessons were well structured, appropriately paced and the content was suited to the needs and abilities of the students. Good practice was noted in all lessons where teachers communicated the lesson plan to their students. In one instance, the plan was written up on the board, while in another lesson, the teacher outlined to the students what they would be expected to do during the lesson. These are good practices in line with the principles of Assessment for Learning (AfL). To further extend these good practices, it is recommended that teachers begin all lessons by sharing the proposed learning outcomes in terms of what the students should be able to do at the end of the lesson. This will engage the students as partners in the teaching and learning process from the outset.

An integrated approach to teaching the different language skills was observed in many lessons and there were some very good examples of grammar being integrated into the body of the lesson. There were some instances where the use of a listening text would have supported the work of the lesson as new learning could have been grounded in a given context. There were also some lessons where the main focus was on vocabulary acquisition rather than using vocabulary to support and consolidate oral and written skills development.

Very good practice was observed in one lesson where the teacher used a generic topic as a stimulus and, then using a differentiated approach, guided the higher and ordinary-level students to develop the topic differently in order to best meet their specific needs. Furthermore, the structured approach adopted facilitated the effective management of time for both groups. It also enabled the higher-level students to draw on their previous and present learning and to focus on the development of skills which could be transferred to different contexts. This practice is highly commended.

In one of the lessons observed, the use of flash cards intermingled with ICT, was effective in visually supporting student learning. There was another lesson however, where the use of such supports would have enhanced student learning and would have avoided the need for ongoing use of translation to support comprehension.

Question and answer sessions were used in all lessons to assess comprehension and elicit information. In one lesson however, where the focus was on oral skills development, the teacher asked all the questions and individual students replied accordingly. Given the intended purpose of the lesson, it is recommended that this approach be reviewed. In order to ensure variety and ongoing student engagement in the question and answer process, situations should be created where students also learn to ask questions in French, both of the teacher and of each other. Students could also be asked to make short oral presentations to the class.

Active learning was promoted in many lessons through the use of games and pair or group work. This is good practice. It is recommended that all lessons include at least one short, focused pair or group activity where students are afforded opportunities to work independently, ask questions, make suggestions, negotiate possibilities and generally interact using simple French expressions.

All students were well behaved and applied themselves to the work of the lesson. Their responses to questions indicated a good understanding of the work in hand. In lessons where the strong focus was on translation, students needed to be challenged more as many of them were reticent.
about communicating in the target language when interacting with the inspector. However, many other students indicated good evidence of learning and a willingness to communicate in French.

ASSESSMENT

A range of good practices are in place to monitor students’ 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 and corrected with an evaluative comment included in many instances. The inclusion of a comment is good practice as it is both affirming and informing. There were some copybooks where many of the homework assignments were translation exercises. In these instances it is recommended that alternative exercises to translation should be given. Teachers’ records of student progress included, in some instances, a record of the evaluative comment given as well as the mark. This is very good practice.

Students have informal tests at mid-term and formal examinations at Christmas and in the summer. Leaving Certificate students sit a first round of formal examinations in November and have mock examinations early in the second term. Junior Certificate students have formal Christmas tests and mock examinations in the spring. An aural component is included in all formal tests and oral assessments are carried out in class. Leaving Certificate students have a formal mock oral examination in the second term. In order to attribute due importance to oral skills development and assessment, all teachers should award a separate mark for students’ oral work and include it accordingly in their school reports. Good practice was noted in many of the teachers’ records, where test results were broken down to indicate where students gained and lost marks. In some instances the marking of student projects also indicated the assessment criteria used and this is commended.

A range of supports are in place to motivate and help certificate examination students in their endeavours. Students have a series of meetings with the principal and with the guidance counsellor for the purpose of target setting and evaluation of their progress. These are good practices. Contact is also maintained with parents through the use of the school journal and the annual parent-teacher meetings held for each year group. A review of student attainment in the certificate examinations indicates a trend towards improved outcomes.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good whole school provision of resources, including ICT, to support the teaching and learning of French. Teachers have also built up a very good stock of materials to help them in their work.
- Considerable work has been completed in subject department planning and teachers’ individual planning folders indicated good practice in individual planning and preparation.
- There was good use of the target language by the teachers in all of the lessons observed.
- A variety of methodologies was observed and many were used to very good effect.
- Very good practice was observed in lessons where a differentiated approach was used to support teaching 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 keep the provision for French as an optional subject under review to ensure that incoming first-year students and their parents fully comprehend the implications for their future educational choices of not having studied a modern European language.
- School management should work towards timetabling French in single periods at regular intervals across the week.
- Strategies, other than translation, should be introduced for checking comprehension and consolidating learning.
- All students should be given the opportunity to ask questions and to interact in French with peers as well as with the teacher. To this end in addition to supporting active and independent learning, all lessons should include at least one short, focused pair or group 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.

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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

Following the subject inspection of French in Avondale Community College, the Board of Management, Senior Management and members of the French Department felt that the report was accurate, comprehensive and fair.

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

Management of the school is currently pursuing the possibility of including French as a core subject in the curriculum at Junior Cycle.