

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Castletroy College
County Limerick
Roll number: 76073G

Date of inspection: 9 March 2010



AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF 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 Castletroy College. 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. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

There is a strong commitment to the teaching of modern foreign languages in the school and it is very positive that the importance of learning a foreign language is emphasised. The study of a language is a core element of the curriculum at both junior cycle and senior cycle and three languages are on offer, namely French, German and Spanish. Students are asked to choose one of the three languages prior to enrolment in first year. They are also facilitated if they wish to change their choice during the first month of term. They continue with this language to senior cycle.

The provision for languages is very good in terms of time allocation. The languages are timetabled concurrently and are allocated four single periods per week in junior cycle and in Transition Year (TY). This increases to five single periods in fifth year and in sixth year. The provision of single periods allows for frequent class contact with the target language and is recognised as being of particular benefit to students in the early years of language learning. The positive practice of concurrent timetabling of language classes in the school facilitates the creation of ordinary level and higher level groups in senior cycle. It also offers possibilities for the language students to come together for cross-curricular or cultural activities and so promotes a broader awareness of European languages and enriches the language-learning experience of the students.

The school is very well equipped with regard to information and communication technology (ICT) and a wide range of multi-media resources are available. All classrooms have internet access and are equipped with a multi-media projector. Access to the computer rooms is available through a booking system. The school also has its own Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). Teachers are provided with laptops and the teachers of French hope to expand their use of ICT through the compilation of a shared bank of resources to be made available through the VLE. These resources would include PowerPoint presentations on a number of themes. Good use of ICT was observed during the inspection and the teachers are encouraged to further exploit its potential for teaching and learning in French. The provision of designated rooms for the teachers

has enabled them to create an attractive and stimulating language-learning environment through the displays of posters, maps, flags and samples of students' work.

There are eight members of staff teaching French at present. As some of the teachers are currently on leave, it is very positive to note that structures are in place to support teachers who are new to the school, including an induction programme, a mentoring system and the appointment of a post-holder with responsibility for liaising with new members of staff. The teachers are members of their subject association and avail of professional development in their subject area. A number of whole-school seminars relevant to teaching and learning, such as differentiation, personalising learning, and team teaching have been organised in the school and management is commended for its commitment to the ongoing upskilling of staff.

Extra-curricular provision for the subject is very good. A school tour to France is offered to junior cycle students while the celebration of *La Semaine Française* helps to promote French across all year groups within the school. Other activities include interclass quizzes, a *petit déjeuner* and a visit from a French theatre company. Students are encouraged to use *eTwinning* as a way of forming links with students in France and their project-work is put on display in the school.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject-department planning is well organised and is facilitated by senior management. There are regular planning meetings for French during the year and the teachers also meet informally. One of the teachers acts as co-ordinator for the subject and this position is rotated among the teachers. The role involves chairing meetings, updating the subject plan and liaising with the principal in relation to resources and new initiatives. Records of recent planning meetings illustrate the range of items discussed.

A very comprehensive subject plan for French has been prepared which is monitored by the teachers on an ongoing basis. It addresses the aims and learning objectives for the different year groups and includes details of a wide number of policies and subject-specific supports. The plan is of a very high quality and there is clear evidence of extensive reflection and discussion in its compilation. Of particular note is the inclusion of a number of short-term and long-term teaching and learning goals for French. These goals are selected and prioritised by the teachers each year. This is very worthwhile as it helps to identify key elements for development and ensures that there is ongoing collaboration and sharing of good practice. The current goals include a focus on Assessment for Learning (AfL), cultural awareness and the development of ICT in teaching and learning.

Good collaborative planning is also evident in the subject plan for TY which is divided into three separate modules targeting literature, language and culture awareness. As there are three class groups in TY, the teachers change groups at the end of each module. This is an effective approach as it enables teachers to teach to their strengths and also encourages creativity and flexibility in the modules offered to students.

There was evidence of very good individual preparation for lessons in the range of teaching resources such as PowerPoint presentations and handouts that had been prepared.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Lessons were often well organised and many lessons were of a very high standard. Good practice was seen when the learning outcomes were shared with students at the beginning of the lesson and it is recommended that this practice be extended to all lessons. Teachers made use of differentiated teaching methods to meet the needs of students and to encourage student participation. There was very good practice observed in some lessons where the planned lesson was constructed around a theme and where there was clear continuity with previous work.

French was used extensively in many lessons for teaching lesson content and for classroom communication. This was positive as it ensured that students were accustomed to hearing the language spoken and so were more likely to speak it themselves. In some junior cycle lessons, there was a very good emphasis on pronunciation with choral repetition of words and monitoring of individual students' efforts by the teacher. Students were encouraged to develop their listening skills and to identify key sounds. However, in a small number of classes, French was used less regularly and there was a tendency, on the part of the teacher, to resort to translation into English. While the aim was to ensure that all students understood, the result was to slow down the pace of the lesson. It is therefore recommended that the use of translation as a strategy to support students' understanding should be avoided where possible. Alternative strategies such as pictures and gestures can be particularly effective at junior cycle level in helping students to understand. This was ably demonstrated, in some lessons, with regard to the teaching of vocabulary where visual aids such as drawings or flash cards were used to communicate the meaning of new words. In senior cycle, close attention was paid to correct pronunciation and students were encouraged to be aware of very specific elements of French pronunciation. The meaning of unfamiliar words was communicated through the use of synonyms while the inclusion of elements of cultural awareness relating to gesture and language enhanced students' learning. There was constant monitoring of students' understanding and participation and, as a result, the standard of learning was very high.

Some very good practice was observed in the teaching of grammar. The approach taken by individual teachers varied considerably and included both a didactic approach and a more learner-centred approach. Careful preparation, clear explanations and active-learning strategies ensured a successful and interesting lesson. In some lessons, a traditional approach to teaching verbs and tenses was enlivened by the teacher's energy and enthusiasm, while games were used to encourage students to put the new learning into immediate use. The use of an aural recording and an accompanying tape script helped students to identify the particular tenses. This was an example of a well-crafted exercise that built students' confidence and skill in using the language. In another instance, brochures were used as a stimulus for the creation of dialogues using the verbs. Good practice was also seen where grammar was taught in context and for a purpose. Accompanying handouts, with the relevant grammar rules, provided support for the students' learning and so effective use was made of the time available.

However, in a small number of lessons where grammar revision was also the focus of the lesson, a significant portion of time was spent on note-taking. As this can be tedious and time-consuming work, it is suggested that the adoption of an inductive approach to grammar teaching, as outlined in the syllabus guidelines, would allow for more active student participation. Written and aural texts could be used as a resource and would lessen the need for teacher-directed questioning. In addition, the school's ICT resources could provide opportunities for students to work independently on a variety of suitable exercises. This would be of particular benefit at senior cycle level, where many students already have a very good level of knowledge, as it would allow the students to progress at their own pace and would promote learner autonomy. As good

teamwork is already in evidence within the department, it is recommended that, as part of subject planning, the teachers look at ways of sharing good practice in relation to strategies for grammar teaching.

It was very positive that students were provided with opportunities to engage in a variety of activities in many lessons. These activities included listening exercises, information retrieval, pair work and small group work in both junior cycle and senior cycle lessons. It was evident that the students enjoyed activities such as a table quiz or viewing a film clip that involved them working together. Sometimes, too much time was spent on an activity and the pace of the lesson was slow. Learning to judge the pace of a lesson is a skill that develops with teaching experience and it is therefore suggested that there should be a greater awareness of the importance of time management.

The classroom atmosphere was positive and conducive to learning. When questioned, the students demonstrated a clear understanding of the topic and were able to apply their knowledge. Their answers indicated good progress in relation to the planned learning outcomes and they were organised and purposeful in their work. It was evident that the teachers had high expectations of the students and that they were challenged to reach their potential.

ASSESSMENT

The school has a formal homework and assessment policy and a system of formative and summative assessment is in place. Students' work is assessed through continuous assessment based on units of work. A range of assessment techniques is used and a novel feature is the use of table quizzes to check cultural comprehension. As part of the whole school initiative on Assessment for Learning (AfL), the teachers of French have decided to focus on providing positive feedback to students as a way of helping them to improve their learning. This feedback may be given verbally, by means of a comment on work in copybooks or through the school merit system. An examination of a selection of students' copybooks shows that the AfL practices have been introduced and the teachers are encouraged to continue to implement these very worthwhile strategies. In TY, assessment for the chosen language takes place at the end of each module and involves both formal assessment and project work. In senior cycle, students in fifth year have an oral assessment at the end of the year, while, in sixth year, two oral tests are held in the first term and second term. Additional tuition is also provided in order to help students prepare for the certificate examinations.

An analysis of results in the certificate examinations takes place and this is used to inform teaching and learning in the subject. It is evident that careful note is taken of the uptake of higher level and ordinary level in the subject and the continuation in the growth in the percentage of students taking higher level has been prioritised by the French department in their planning goals in recent years.

Contact is maintained with parents through the student journal, by phone and through the reports which are posted home after the Christmas and summer examinations. Progress reports may be requested by parents during the year. The reports may also be used by the school to highlight a student's achievements or if there is cause for concern. An annual parent-teacher meeting is also held for each year group.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision for modern foreign languages in Castletroy College and study of a foreign language is a core element of the curriculum.
- The range of resources available to support teaching and learning is very good and classrooms are well equipped.
- Extensive subject planning has taken place and this is reflected in the very comprehensive subject plan.
- The selection of key priorities for teaching and learning is very positive.
- Active-learning methodologies were used effectively to encourage student participation.
- Students were challenged to reach their potential in all aspects of their work.

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

- It is recommended that, as part of subject planning, the teachers should share good practice in relation to strategies for grammar teaching.
- It is recommended that translation should be avoided, where possible, in lessons.
- Learning outcomes should be shared with students in all classes.

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.