Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Bandon Grammar School,
County Cork
Roll number: 62060R

Date of inspection: 17 November 2009
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Bandon Grammar School. 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. 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

There is very good provision for languages in the school and it is very positive that students may choose to study more than one modern foreign language. Prospective students are offered a choice between French and Spanish as a language prior to enrolment and also have the option of taking German as a second foreign language. They receive guidance on their choices at the induction night for new students and are also facilitated in changing languages if they so wish in the first few weeks of term. All students in first year are encouraged to study a foreign language and they generally continue with either French or Spanish to Junior Certificate level. However, a small number of students may opt to take a practical subject instead. Students receive advice from the guidance counsellor and from teachers before choosing their subjects for senior cycle. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes in the first two years of junior cycle although some streaming may occur to cater for students with additional learning needs. Class groups are streamed from Junior Certificate level onwards.

Timetabling arrangements for French are satisfactory with an allocation of two single and one double class period in first year and second year. This becomes four single class periods in third year. Students have four class periods of French per week in fourth year. This increases to five class periods for the remainder of senior cycle. French classes are timetabled to run concurrently. This is good practice as it allows for student mobility and a change of level, where appropriate.

Resources for the teaching of French are very good. The teachers have designated classrooms which are well equipped with a television, data or overhead projector, CD and DVD players. The rooms have internet access and are used to store resources for the subject and to display a wide variety of language-related charts and posters. The good practice of displaying students’ work, in particular, the project work undertaken by junior cycle and fourth year students, is also evident. In order to further promote cultural awareness, it is suggested that a map of France be displayed in all the designated rooms. There is a growing interest among the language teachers in the use of information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching and learning purposes and this is
demonstrated in their use of PowerPoint presentations and Moodle, as well as the provision of a website for fourth-year students. The teachers have regular access to a computer room and to rooms equipped with an interactive whiteboard. Students are given a list of websites, which they use for research purposes, and they have access to ICT facilities in their free time. This is very positive as it provides additional support and helps to promote independent learning.

The co-curricular and extracurricular activities offered include a visit by a French theatre for schools group, a French petit déjeuner, a fashion show for junior cycle students and the celebration of European Languages Day and La Semaine Française. The quality of students’ work is acknowledged and affirmed at the annual prize-giving ceremony where special language prizes are awarded to students in fourth year and fifth year. The school is linked with a lycée in Northern France and senior students are offered the opportunity to take part in a language exchange. The teachers who accompany the students recognise the benefits that the visit affords them on a professional level through collaboration and team-teaching with colleagues from the partner school. As coordinating a student exchange scheme demands considerable time and energy, it is good to note the ongoing involvement in this programme.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject development planning is well advanced in the school. One of the teachers acts as co-ordinator for the subject and takes responsibility for leading subject planning, updating resources and for the preparation of reports for management. The role also involves supporting teachers who are new to the subject. A subject meeting is organised each month and the teachers also endeavour to meet more often on an informal basis. The good practice of taking minutes at these meetings is well established. The school supports the language teachers’ involvement in their subject association and they are encouraged to participate in professional development courses in Ireland and in France. It is very positive that ideas on new methodologies received at in-service in other subjects, for example in Irish, are shared with colleagues in the European languages. This sharing of good practice helps to promote collegiality and enriches teaching and learning generally.

A comprehensive subject plan for French has been compiled as part of school development planning. It includes yearly schemes of work identifying the knowledge and skills that students should acquire, as well as copies of policies and research on methodologies. The plan is reviewed regularly by the language teachers and is also reviewed as part of the whole-school reviews that take place on a twice-yearly basis. Procedures to provide support for students with additional educational needs are included in the plan. Teachers receive advice on the best approach to language learning for each student availing of learning support. This allows them to personalise their approach and to make adjustments to the homework or class work in order to differentiate according to students’ abilities and needs. The resource teacher liaises with the language teachers throughout the year. At the same time, the teachers provide the learning-support team with details of their programme and with websites where additional material may be accessed on the selected topics. This good practice makes for a close fit between class teaching and the support offered by the learning-support team.

The teachers are involved in co-curricular and cross-curricular planning with other subject departments such as Geography, History, Art and Music in preparation for the student exchange and for other language events. This collaboration is very worthwhile as it helps students to develop a broader perspective on language-learning and promotes cultural awareness. There is evidence of thorough individual planning and preparation by the teachers in the documentation.
available and in the PowerPoint presentations, film clips, worksheets and other materials used in the lessons observed.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was very good use of French by the teachers to teach lesson content and for classroom communication. It was very positive that students had been provided with an aide-mémoire of useful classroom phrases and it was evident that they were accustomed to speaking French when communicating with the teacher. The teachers’ use of synonyms lessened the need for a translation into English when teaching and explaining new material. Attention was also paid to teaching grammatical terms in the language and this is good practice.

The aims and planned learning outcomes were sometimes shared with students at the start of lessons. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all lessons. Content and pace were generally appropriate to the class group and the time available, and there was good continuity with prior learning.

Resources, and in particular ICT resources, were used very successfully to enhance learning. There was very good use of film clips and jeux télévisés with students at all levels. The accompanying worksheets and lists of relevant vocabulary enabled students to progress from listening and reading to the more active skills of speaking and writing. It was good to note the commitment, in many instances, to ensuring that students were engaged and interested in the lesson topic. This was achieved in one lesson by introducing a fun element into the correction of homework through the use of ICT, while the choice of a short film caught students’ attention and served as a basis for a range of activities in another lesson.

A variety of questioning techniques was employed including whole-class and teacher-directed questioning and cognisance was taken of the differing abilities of the students. Opportunities for students to engage in pair work were provided in many of the lessons observed. In some instances however, there was a need for better time management so as to allow adequate time for student interaction. It was evident that the students enjoyed the experience of working in pairs or teams. In one lesson, an in-class survey of students’ television-viewing habits was used successfully as a strategy to encourage students to question each other. This was very positive as it promoted peer-learning and enabled the teacher to offer assistance to individual students as required. It is suggested that a further development of this type of activity might involve an inter-class survey with an oral or written presentation of the findings.

Grammar awareness was a focus of some lessons. In one instance, questions on current affairs were employed to facilitate a brief revision of the passé composé while in another instance, the teacher built on suggestions offered by students to introduce some new grammar points. These methods were effective in encouraging student participation. Where grammar was taught in isolation, it is recommended that the teaching of grammar be linked with the theme of the lesson, as outlined in the syllabus, rather than taught independently. Illustrating the grammar point with examples of how it would be used in a spoken or written context would enable students to apply the new learning more easily to their own work.

The teaching of listening skills was generally well integrated with the work of the lesson and care had been taken to match the listening material with the topic being studied. Good practice was observed when answers were given in French as well as English. However, it is important to monitor students’ answering in order to ensure that they all participate fully in the exercise.
Asking students to evaluate the level of difficulty of the exercise would help to identify any words or phrases that need clarification or explanation.

There was a high standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed. Classroom management was very good. The teachers had high expectations of their students who were encouraged to be active in their own learning and were suitably challenged by the programme of work. It was evident that students were generally motivated and engaged by the classroom activities. When questioned, they demonstrated a good understanding of their work and an ability to apply what they had learned from the lesson. The teachers were enthusiastic in their approach to their work. Their energy and good humour ensured that the classroom atmosphere was relaxed and conducive to learning in all the lessons observed.

ASSessment

The modes of assessment used in the subject include classroom monitoring, homework, aural, oral and written assessments. Formal school tests are held at Christmas and in the summer for all non-examination classes and common tests are used where appropriate. Students in senior cycle have an assessment of their oral proficiency twice yearly. It is very positive that the modes of assessment are varied to suit the level and interests of the students and include portfolio assessment in fourth year. The preparation of a personal profile or “scrap-book” by students in first year which is then further developed throughout junior cycle is an innovative and effective approach to continuous assessment.

The planned fourth-year programme allows for a varied range of assessment modes to be utilised. Students are assessed at the end of the first term on their written and aural skills and on the presentation of their poster project on La Francophonie. Their summer assessment involves an oral, aural and written assessment as well as an evaluation of the portfolio completed during the year. An examination of a sample of the portfolios showed that work was already well advanced and this approach is commended as an excellent way of encouraging students to engage in personal writing and reflection in the target language.

It is very positive that there is a formal school homework policy in place. 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 positive comments and suggestions for improvement is also noted. Students and parents are provided with information about progress in the subject through regular classroom feedback, twice-yearly reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings. Results in the certificate examinations are analysed with reference to national norms and are used to inform teaching and learning.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for languages is very good. The teachers have access to a range of resources and ICT is used effectively to enhance learning.
- Subject planning is well developed.
- French is used for classroom communication and for teaching purposes.
• Teaching and learning in the subject is of a high standard.

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

• It is recommended that planned learning outcomes be shared with students in all lessons.
• An integrated approach to the teaching of grammar is recommended.

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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