An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Loreto Secondary School, Fermoy
Co Cork
Roll number: 62270F

Date of inspection: 9 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 Loreto Secondary 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 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 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 modern foreign languages in Loreto Secondary School. French and German are offered on the curriculum in junior cycle and senior cycle, while Italian is provided as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. All students study French in first year and the majority of students study German as well. At the end of the year, they choose their optional subjects for study to Junior Certificate level from a list based on students’ preferences. Students are generally taught in mixed-ability groupings at junior cycle. The subject is optional at senior cycle and students are given the chance to study French in two different option blocks. This is good practice as it facilitates students in choosing the language. The subject teachers and the guidance counsellor advise the students on their choice of subjects, while parents are invited to a subject information evening where the options are discussed.

The timetabling provision for French is satisfactory. The language is allocated three single class periods per week in first year and four periods in second year and third year. During the optional Transition Year (TY) programme, students have three periods of French per week, while in fifth year and sixth year they have five class periods per week.

The students are classroom based and some of the rooms are decorated with posters and maps. As these displays help to create an attractive language-learning environment, it is suggested that similar displays be mounted in all rooms. The subject is well resourced and an annual budget is provided for the purchase of resources. Novels, magazines, videos and CDs are available as well as a range of audio-visual equipment. A storage room allows for these resources to be readily accessible. The teachers have access to a data projector for use in class and the computer room may be booked for language classes.

 Provision for co-curricular and extracurricular support for the language is very strong. It includes French theatre and cinema visits, competitions, involvement in e-twinning and in the annual quiz organised by the French Teachers’ Association, as well as the annual school tour. As the school forms part of the international community of Loreto schools, students have had an opportunity to
visit a French-speaking Loreto school in Morocco. The school also contributes to the twinning arrangement in place between Fermoy and its partner town of Ploemeur in France and welcomes visitors to the school from Brittany each year. This ongoing commitment on the part of management and staff to fostering links with France and La Francophonie is very positive.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

School development planning within the school is well established and good progress has been made in subject planning for French. A modern-languages policy has been developed and a subject plan for French prepared. A co-ordinator for the subject is appointed on a rotational basis and takes responsibility for the organisation of meetings, the dissemination of information, subject planning and the mentoring of new teachers. A meeting is held at the start of the school year when the subject plan is discussed and updated. Other meetings, both formal and informal, are held throughout the year and the plan is monitored and evaluated on an ongoing basis. These subject meetings are appropriately documented.

There is evidence of good overall planning for each year group in the subject plan and it is very positive that learning outcomes and performance targets have been included. However, there is a need to look at how best the learning outcomes can inform day-to-day lesson planning, in particular, the choice of methodologies. In this regard, there is a need for future subject-department meetings to focus on lesson planning and teaching and learning. It is recommended that planning should emphasise the increased use of active-learning methodologies in order to encourage student participation and engagement. It is suggested that the experience and expertise within the modern-languages departments be harnessed in order to promote the sharing of best practice in this regard.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was very good use of the target language in many lessons where French was used extensively for teaching and for classroom communication. Questions, explanations and instructions for exercises were given in French. It was evident that the students were accustomed to hearing the language spoken in the classroom setting and they were given opportunities to communicate with the teacher in the language. This is very positive. In a small number of lessons, the opportunities for students to speak French were more limited and were sometimes confined to the reading aloud of a text. In order to improve all students’ communicative competency, it is recommended that all teachers include opportunities for student interaction and communication in the target language when planning lessons.

The aims and objectives of the lesson were shared with students in some classes. This is good practice as it communicates a clear expectation of what the students will be required to know at the end of the lesson. In order to involve all students in the learning process, it is recommended that the teachers make them aware of the planned learning outcomes. This will enable the students and teacher to focus on the key learning of the lesson from the outset and will facilitate the review and consolidation of learning at its conclusion.

Some lessons were very well structured and student participation was encouraged. Good practice was seen when there was a clear progression from an initial brief revision of prior learning to the introduction of new material. This was then followed by a variety of activities including pair or
group work that enabled students to practise what they had just learnt. A significant advantage of giving students an opportunity to work together in this way was that it allowed the teacher to give assistance to individual students, where necessary. Employing a variety of questioning techniques was often effective in contributing to a lively pace and maintaining students’ interest in the topic. Where there was a preponderance of teacher-directed questioning, the pace of the lesson slowed and it was more difficult for students to remain focused on the task.

Lesson content was generally organised around a theme, as recommended in the syllabus. Among the themes covered were leisure activities, school, future plans and work; all of which were of relevance to the students. In some instances, a range of teaching methodologies was in evidence including role play, aural and oral work. This varied approach was effective in that it integrated the skills of listening and speaking and enabled students to be active in their own learning. Students engaged readily with this type of activity and were confident in their responses. It was clear that they enjoyed the interaction with each other in teams and small groups. However, sometimes there was an emphasis on note-taking and consequently, the students had limited opportunity to participate in the lesson. It is therefore recommended that the use of active-learning methodologies be increased in order to encourage students to engage fully with the lesson. It is also good practice to have the same theme linking the different elements of the lesson so as to ensure a smooth transition from one activity to the next. When questions from the examination papers are assigned, it should be possible, with pre-planning, to identify texts with a similar theme. This integrated approach should also apply to the setting of homework so that it serves to reinforce the work of the lesson.

It was very positive to see a planned programme of work in senior cycle based on a classic nineteenth-century short story by Maupassant. The text was used as a starting point for a range of activities including personal writing and language awareness. Worksheets were used effectively to supplement the text while an additional twist to the story, in the form of an alternative ending, served as a starting point for discussion among the students. It was evident from the high level of the students’ responses during the discussion that they engaged fully with the text and enjoyed the activities linked to it. The choice of a literary text enriched the work of the lesson and provided an insight into a classic French genre. This approach clearly demonstrated how such texts are still readily accessible to students today, albeit with careful planning by the teacher, and how they can create a rich linguistic and imaginative world for students to explore.

The textbook was used extensively at times. While it is a useful resource, the teacher’s personal knowledge of the students’ interests, abilities and prior learning should also play a part in deciding how best the textbook will support teaching and learning. It will sometimes be preferable to supplement or replace the exercises in the textbook with activities that foster student engagement. The use of pictures, flash-cards and word games can be very effective in motivating younger students. It is recommended that more use be made of games and visual aids particularly in junior classes.

A good student-teacher rapport was evident in many of the classes and the affirmation of students’ efforts helped to create a positive atmosphere. Students worked hard and were well-behaved and cooperative at all times.
ASSESSMENT

Students’ progress is monitored in a number of ways, including class questioning, homework, informal and formal tests. Students in first year have class tests at Christmas and sit formal school examinations in the summer. Other year groups have Christmas and summer exams while third-year classes and Leaving Certificate classes sit mock examinations in the second term. Assessment for TY classes includes project work during the year. It is very positive that the modes of assessment include a testing of oral proficiency in both junior cycle and senior cycle, and that common test papers are used where appropriate. Progress reports are sent to parents twice yearly and parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group. Results from the certificate examinations are analysed with reference to national norms.

It is very positive that there is a homework policy in place for French. A review of a sample of students’ copybooks and files showed that homework is assigned and corrected. Detailed marking with reference to the marking schemes of the certificate examinations is used regularly with senior cycle students. This is good practice as it keeps students informed of their progress.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The study of modern foreign languages is a key element of the curriculum and French is well provided for in the school. Access to the study of the subject is open to all students.
- Good progress has been made in the area of subject planning as part of the school development planning process.
- French was used as the medium of instruction and communication in many lessons.
- An integrated approach to the development of language skills was evident in some classes.
- Good practice is evident in the inclusion of an assessment of oral proficiency in junior cycle and senior cycle.

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

- Subject planning should focus on teaching and learning and in particular on the development of active-learning methodologies in order to encourage students’ participation and engagement.
- It is recommended that the planned learning outcomes of lessons be shared with all students.
- More use should be made of games and visual aids for teaching and learning purposes in junior cycle 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.

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