Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Thurles, County Tipperary
Roll number: 65470F

Date of inspection: 15 October 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ursuline Secondary School, Thurles, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The school is committed to the teaching of modern foreign languages and in particular, French and German. All students in first year study both languages although students with additional learning needs may opt to take only one language. At the end of first year, students choose their optional subjects, one of which must be a foreign language. The option bands are generated according to student demand and it is very positive that students may choose to continue studying two languages. French is allocated three single periods per week in first year and this allocation increases to two double periods and one single period in second year and in third year.

In Transition Year (TY), students continue the study of either French or German and have four periods per week. As French and German are timetabled against each other in TY, it is difficult to facilitate those students who wish to keep on both languages. However, arrangements are made to accommodate the students in as far as is possible by allowing them to attend two out of the four weekly lessons in each language.

In fifth and sixth year, students are required to study one foreign language. As the languages are timetabled concurrently at present, it is not possible for students to study both French and German. However, this arrangement may vary from year to year depending on the number of students opting for two languages. The timetabling provision is good with three single periods and one double period in fifth year and four single periods and one double period in sixth year. The French department operates a policy of placing students in mixed-ability groupings in all years until the end of TY. While the usual practice has been to divide class groups in fifth year and sixth year into higher level and ordinary level classes, the current sixth year classes are mixed ability.

The teachers do not have designated classrooms but move from room to room. Due to space constraints, it is not possible at present to make available a language room where resources could be stored and displayed. In the absence of this room, it is therefore very important to create a stimulating language-learning environment in the classrooms through the use of posters and samples of students’ work. The provision of a map of France in particular is essential in order to
promote cultural awareness and a map should be a feature of every classroom. It was good to note the displays of posters in a small number of rooms and it is suggested that this practice be extended and developed to include items on current affairs. This would help to foster an awareness of European issues among students in senior cycle. The resources available for the teaching of languages include a well-equipped computer room, two mobile computers units and a projector. There is internet access in the majority of classrooms and many rooms are equipped with a data projector. Extracurricular support for the language includes the annual TY trip to France. Students in first year are encouraged to write to pen-pals and they also engage in project work. It is hoped to start a monthly French and German film club for senior students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Management facilitates the holding of a subject department meeting at the start of the school year. A co-ordinator for the subject is nominated by the French department at this meeting. The role includes the taking of minutes and the dissemination of information related to French during the year. At this meeting, the teachers agree on common written programmes of work for the year.

A very comprehensive subject plan has been prepared. The plan includes detailed information on a range of topics including subject aims and objectives, timetabling, planning for students with special needs, cross-curricular planning, resources and methodologies. It is very positive to note that as part of its child protection policy, the French department has prepared guidelines to be observed by the teachers when carrying out practice orals with students.

The subject plan contains details of the content to be covered with each year group. The textbook is seen as the core resource and the schemes are built around the textbook. The units of work are linked with the themes of the junior certificate syllabus and leaving certificate syllabus. As a way of further developing subject planning, it is recommended that the learning outcomes for students be highlighted in the schemes of work. These outcomes could then be used to inform individual lesson preparation and should be shared with students. They could also form the basis for student self-assessment. The identification of a small number of short-term and medium term goals for inclusion in the plan is also recommended as a way of ensuring that the subject plan remains a work in progress. Suggested short-term goals might include ways of developing opportunities for student communication in the target language and active learning methodologies. This would support ongoing teacher collaboration and the sharing of good practice.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Visits were made to lessons at both junior and senior cycle during the course of the evaluation. Within most individual lessons, students were involved in a variety of activities including grammar work, reading comprehension, discussion and pair work. The pace and structure of the lessons was good in most instances. Where teaching was very good, the lessons were characterised by good use of the target language; clear communication of content; and activities that supported student learning.

There was very good use of the target language by teachers for teaching lesson content and for classroom communication. Instructions, corrections and affirmation were given in French. This is recognised as good practice in that it affords students the opportunity to hear French spoken as part of normal classroom interaction. It is especially beneficial when the use of the target language by the teacher forms the basis for interaction between the students and teacher in the
language as was observed in some lessons. It was very positive to note in many instances that language production had been structured into the lesson planning and this served well to maintain students’ interest and motivation. In a senior cycle lesson where a theme had been chosen as the focus, students engaged in lively conversation on the topic and their enthusiasm and enjoyment of the subject was evident.

However, in a small number of lessons, opportunities for students to speak French were more limited. Sometimes their participation was confined to reading a text aloud, providing a translation into English or answering vocabulary questions. As the students showed a very good level of knowledge, it is recommended that more opportunities for student interaction and participation be provided. This could be achieved by careful structuring of the time available so as to include more active learning methodologies.

The clear communication of lesson aims and learning outcomes to students is an important aspect of lesson management. In lessons where the learning intentions were explained, it helped to give a focus to the lesson and so facilitated learning. It is recommended that this practice be extended to all lessons. Good lesson management was observed when there was support for students’ learning. This is especially important when working with mixed-ability groupings. In one lesson, the choice of a song served as a way of revising grammar with the lyrics providing a starting point for discussion and eventually for written homework. There was a smooth transition from one activity to the next. The homework was well prepared and differentiated as appropriate. In junior cycle, the support for learning was seen when conversations were modelled by the teacher before the students worked on the dialogues in pairs or when the students had time to practise a new verb orally before answering a written exercise. However, at times there needed to be greater support for students’ learning. Clear instruction for tasks or giving a brief overview of a reading text would help to facilitate learning. Likewise the writing of key words on the board could be helpful in assisting students to identify key vocabulary or items of particular significance. Sometimes where a reading comprehension is the focus of the lesson, it would be beneficial to concentrate on a section of the text in order to allow more time for discussion or for the integration of other skills. It would create a better balance between teacher input and student activity. The reading comprehension should also be appropriate to the level of the class.

Grammar was a feature of some lessons with both revision and the teaching of new elements observed. Language awareness was emphasised, in particular the links and patterns to be found between languages. As the syllabus for senior cycle recommends the integration of language skills around a theme with grammar linked to the topic being studied, it was good to note that this was the approach taken in some lessons. This ensured that students were taught grammar in context rather than in isolation. Time was also spent in some lessons on giving an overview of the type of grammatical errors that had been found by the teacher when correcting copybooks. This was effective in that students were able to ask questions and were more likely to learn from their work as a result.

The students’ enthusiasm and enjoyment of the language was evident when the methods used encouraged student participation. The playing of a rap helped junior cycle students to learn the French alphabet and to gain confidence in pronouncing the language. Students were also given opportunities to work in pairs in a number of lessons. This approach was successful where there was a clear reason for the pair work. However, at other times students needed to be more engaged with the classroom activities.

The energy and enthusiasm of the teachers was a factor in creating a very positive learning environment in some classes. The occasion of a student’s birthday was taken as an opportunity to
include an element of cultural awareness through the appropriate song and card. It was a thoughtful way of creating a personal rapport in the class. The students were courteous and cooperative at all times in the lessons observed. They were well organised and purposeful in their work. It was evident that they were highly motivated and they showed a good level of knowledge when questioned.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has a formal homework and assessment policy. Students’ progress is monitored through a variety of classroom activities, homework and regular tests. Continuous assessment is carried out through class tests at the end of chapters or of units of work. The results of each test are recorded by the teacher and an average mark is given as the result in the Christmas report that is issued to parents. The mock examinations take place in the second term for the examination year classes. Each year students, with the exception of the TY classes, sit formal house examinations in the summer. This takes the form of a common test for each year group. In senior cycle an emphasis is placed on the testing of oral proficiency in French and an oral forms part of the annual assessment in fifth year. The teachers also take the students for a number of practice orals in preparation for the Leaving Certificate examinations.

An examination of a selection of copybooks showed that a variety of written work has been assigned. In addition to the very thorough correction of work, it was found that a positive comment is often included by the teacher in order to encourage and to affirm students’ efforts. Parents are informed of students’ progress through the student journal, twice-yearly reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a strong commitment to the teaching of modern foreign languages.
- A comprehensive subject plan has been developed for French.
- Lesson preparation and the management of teaching and learning activities were found to be very good in most instances.
- There was good use of the target language by teachers for instruction and classroom communication.
- Students were courteous and cooperative at all times. They were highly motivated and showed an interest in their learning.

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

- It is recommended that subject planning focus on highlighting learning outcomes in the yearly schemes of work and individual lesson planning.
- It is recommended that students be provided with more opportunities to speak French during lessons.
- Lessons should be planned to include greater use of active learning strategies.
A post-evaluation meeting was 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.