Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School
Castleblayney, County Monaghan
Roll number: 64770M

Date of inspection: 24 September 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s Secondary School, Castleblayney. 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 to the subject teachers. 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

Our Lady’s Secondary School is a co-educational, voluntary, post-primary school in Castleblayney, Co. Monaghan. The school provides a broad range of curricular programmes, namely the Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Transition Year programme (TY) Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). This wide range of programmes clearly demonstrates the school’s resolve to serve the educational needs of all its students.

The study of a modern language is mandatory in the first year of junior cycle in this school and students must choose either French or German on entry to the school. Modern languages are not included in the seven-week sampler programme which is offered to new students to support their choice of the other optional subjects. The school should consider the inclusion of French and German in the sampler programme so that the first-year students could make an informed choice of language. All but a very small number of students continue their study of either French or German for Junior Certificate. Transition Year (TY) is compulsory in the school and students choose their subjects for Leaving Certificate at the beginning of TY. Students are allowed to change their minds at the end of TY however, if they consider that they have made an unwise decision regarding their optional subjects for Leaving Certificate. This commendable flexibility ensures that the students are not tied in to subjects chosen in TY. French alternates with German as the modern language studied by students in the LCA programme.

The allocation of class periods for French is very satisfactory, apart from a difficulty which has arisen this year in relation to the timetabling of some class groups in second year, in third year and in TY. Some classes are timetabled for two separate periods of French on the same day. In terms of the effective teaching and learning of a modern language, such provision is inadvisable. Regular, daily contact with the target language is most advantageous to students. Timetabled provision for French in TY, where students have four periods per week, is very good. Similarly,
the provision of six single periods of French in sixth year is acknowledged as being of great benefit to the students.

Mixed-ability classes are the norm in junior cycle and the number of students taking French at higher level in the Junior Certificate examination is particularly good. It is good that high expectations are set for students of French, particularly as the common syllabus for ordinary-level and higher-level Junior Certificate French is designed to facilitate the learning of the language in a mixed-ability setting. Senior-cycle groups are timetabled concurrently to facilitate movement between higher-level and ordinary-level classes. This represents good timetabling provision. Again, the number of students taking higher-level French in senior cycle is very good. In the current academic year, French has been placed in two separate options blocks and this is very satisfactory in terms of facilitating a greater number of students being able to study the language for Leaving Certificate.

Broad whole-school support for French is good. The provision of a base classroom for each teacher of French facilitates the creation of a well equipped, stimulating language learning environment. All classrooms visited were attractively decorated with colourful resources such as maps, posters, charts, photographs and useful phrases. The vibrancy of the classrooms was striking and great credit is due to the teachers concerned for providing such an inspiring and uplifting learning environment for their students.

The school has three computer rooms with broadband access and, when required, teachers of French may book their classes into a computer room. Furthermore, each teacher has a portable laptop in the classroom as well as a fixed data projector in many classrooms. By the end of this school year, the school hopes that all classrooms will have a data projector in situ. Teachers have had some preliminary training in the use of the E-portal system and data projectors. As the school year progresses, the excellent information communication technology (ICT) facilities available should be used extensively for the teaching and learning of French. The internet is an invaluable source of contemporary material for language teachers and their students.

French has a strong profile in the school. Notices and labels in French were visible throughout the building. Many language enrichment activities, organised by the teachers of French, extend learning beyond the classroom. The nearby Iontas Centre is accessible to the school and has been used to host a myriad of language activities including the serving of typical French food and the holding of a joint French/German fashion show. Other enjoyable language events include inter-class quizzes, an Easter Egg Hunt, the production of cards and brochures in French and a school tour to Paris, for senior-cycle students, in 2008 and again in 2010. It is acknowledged that all the above-mentioned activities can only take place due to the generous time and personal commitment of the teachers concerned.

Castleblayney is twinned with Nogent-sur-Vernisson, a small town in north central France. A member of the French department in the school is on the twinning committee and she has established pen pal links for some of her students with the students of Collège Henri Becquerel. It is worth exploring the possibility of initiating an e-mail exchange and video link between students in both schools. Furthermore, ongoing contact with the French school would provide the opportunity for all teachers of French in Our Lady’s Secondary School to acquire authentic material such as school reports, timetables, brochures, school journals, yearbook, canteen menus, posters and photographs from their counterparts in France. Such authentic resources could be used effectively in all classes to promote interest in the lifestyle of young French students and in French culture. The French department hopes to incorporate a visit to Collège Henri Becquerel during the next school tour and this is a very positive initiative.
Five teachers are engaged in the delivery of French in the school. All teachers have studied the language to degree level and some have experience of correcting Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examination papers in French. The teachers have engaged with continuous professional development, attending workshops, for example, on Leaving Certificate assessment and TY teaching methodologies.

**Planning and Preparation**

Subject planning has become an integral part of the planning process in the school and a clear department structure has been put in place. Management has facilitated collaborative planning through the allocation of time for a formal meeting each term. Additional informal meetings of the French department take place, usually on the first Tuesday of every month. An ethos of collaboration permeates the French department. One member of the team acts, in a voluntary capacity, as subject co-ordinator maintaining and updating the French folder, while another convenes and chairs department meetings and maintains the minutes. The fact that these roles are rotated among the members of the team benefits all teachers of French.

The teachers of French and German have recently agreed and drawn up a draft policy relating to the teaching and learning of modern languages in the school. It is intended that this policy will guide all aspects of the work of the modern language teachers. This is good practice. The comprehensive subject planning document for French which was presented during the evaluation lists the topics for each year group, refers to cross-curricular links and catalogues supplementary language and cultural resources. In content and in presentation, the plan was of a high quality and it was obvious that serious consideration had been given to the documenting of specific aims and objectives, choice of texts, lesson content, homework and assessment procedures. The subject plan also refers to record keeping and reporting procedures. Commendably, the French department has documented the methodologies and teaching strategies to be used to achieve the learning objectives for each year group. The setting of such objectives is at the heart of effective subject planning. It is suggested, therefore, that the emphasis of future planning meetings be placed on discussing the effectiveness of various methodologies in delivering the documented learning objectives.

As with all planning documents, the plan for French should be viewed as a working document to be reviewed and altered as the need arises. In order to build on the very good work achieved to date, the following recommendations are made. The French department might consider documenting some ideas on how to make optimum use of the school’s excellent ICT facilities as an additional learning support. The existing agreed TY programme for French is general in nature and it needs to be reviewed and elaborated. It may also be helpful to include a copy of the Chief Examiners’ Reports on Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate French in the department plan. These reports are available on the State Examinations Commission’s website, [www.examinations.ie](http://www.examinations.ie) and they may help to inform the teaching and learning of the language in the school.

Individual short-term planning and preparation for teaching were very good. Many teachers had detailed schemes of work to guide their teaching on a daily basis. All teachers of French displayed a high level of preparedness and had organised a range of resources including flashcards, handouts, audio and visual equipment and additional worksheets in advance of the lesson.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Seven lessons, four in junior cycle and three in senior cycle, were observed during the evaluation visit. In all lessons, a variety of brisk start-up routines served to engage the learners’ attention. The practice of writing up the day and date and briefly discussing the season and weather proved effective in some junior-cycle lessons. The writing of the lesson theme, key words and the proposed layout of the lesson on the board helped to focus senior students’ attention on the task in hand.

Most lessons were well structured, with a variety of learning activities based on a specific single theme. In a minority of lessons, a change of theme occurred midway through the class period, resulting in some impairment of students’ focus and understanding. It is important, at the planning stage, to ensure that lesson activities are linked thematically. Where the lesson topic was related to the lives and experiences of the students, lively discussion and high levels of engagement ensued. In a number of lessons, the use of visual stimuli enhanced the engagement and participation of the learners. Colourful flash cards, prepared by the students themselves, were used to good effect in a junior-cycle class to revise vocabulary on the weather. In a senior-cycle lesson, a picture of a well-known young celebrity, clearly under the influence of alcohol, provoked a good, forthright class discussion on the problem of under-age drinking. The participation of all students in the debate was ably facilitated by the teacher and all views were acknowledged and written on the board as the discussion progressed.

A number of language-teaching strategies employed during the evaluation reflected good practice. For example, the inclusion of pair work sessions in most lessons encouraged the development of oral language skills. All students made a good effort to communicate with their assigned pair work partner. However, some students were over-dependent on their prepared script. It is understandable that young learners would be nervous when speaking a foreign language but pair work exercises deliver maximum benefit when students are encouraged to conduct short conversations without reference to notes. The integration of pair work in lessons is a worthwhile exercise as students gradually grow in confidence and competence when speaking French. Pair work has a further advantage in that it allows the teacher to circulate in the classroom, to listen to and interact with individual students and to correct grammatical or pronunciation errors discretely.

Group work was a feature of some lessons. In a senior-cycle class, students presented material which they had gleaned from websites and brochures on the town of Castleblayney. It was good to note that the students were competent and at ease using the classroom computer and data projector to present their work to their teacher and classmates. Much good work had been done in advance of the presentation and it was obvious that each group had worked hard to produce an interesting and informative French booklet about Castleblayney. In relation to the PowerPoint presentation of this material, students should be advised to limit the amount of text on each slide and to focus instead on photographs or images accompanied by a short commentary which they could easily deliver without reference to a written text. This strategy would help to develop their confidence when speaking French.

In all lessons observed, teachers’ explanations of grammatical points were clear, easily understood and referenced at all times to real life situations in which the language is used. This is very good practice. In some junior-cycle lessons, teachers were seen to model language at a level which was age-appropriate and accessible to the young learners. A positive outcome of this
methodology was that the students had the confidence to make a determined effort to emulate their teacher.

The four skill areas of language learning, reading, writing, listening and speaking, were developed methodically in a junior-cycle class observed. The integration of language skills was successfully effected through a range of interlinked activities around the theme of nationality. Questioning by the teacher, entirely in the target language, was effective and pitched at an appropriate level for the young students who were keen to participate fully in the class. All students were comfortable using the French alphabet and they spoke confidently about various colours, countries, flags and nationalities. This lesson, in terms of pace, structure, content and learners’ engagement, exemplified best practice.

It was very positive to note that most teachers incorporated focused listening activities into their lessons. When prefaced by appropriate pre-listening activities, purposeful aural work is very beneficial to students as it enables them to become familiar with a wide range of accents and intonations. In two lessons observed, the tape script was distributed to students at the end of the listening exercise. This was an effective strategy as it speeded up the correction process, enabling the students to correct their own mistakes and, most importantly, to see the link between the spoken and the written word.

The commitment of all the teachers to make full use of the target language for instruction and affirmation, for classroom management and for communication was impressive. Teachers’ linguistic proficiency was very good and the register of language used in the various classes was suitable to the needs and the language ability of the students in question. In all lessons observed, it was obvious that the teachers had established a very good rapport with their students. High expectations of behaviour and work ethic had been set and students were, without exception, polite, co-operative and diligent.

**ASSESSMENT**

In the course of the inspection, teachers used a range of strategies to monitor learning, including frequent individual questioning to gauge levels of students’ knowledge or understanding. In interactions with the inspector, students displayed a very good level of comprehension and communication skills.

The school has a documented homework policy. The assignment and correction of homework in French is regular, purposeful and in line with the school policy. Most students’ copybooks contained constructive comments and some supportive recommendations for learners. Negative comments from teachers were seen in some copybooks. This can have the effect of discouraging learners and it is recommended that all teachers make an effort to give precise, constructive advice to students on how to improve their written work.

In one class observed, listening exercises were assigned as homework. Each student had a CD which accompanied the aural textbook used in class and they are able to practise their listening skills at home. This is a very good strategy to improve students’ listening techniques especially when the assigned aural homework is linked to and consolidates the class work of the day.

In some classes, students had specific copybooks or notebooks where all new words and phrases were recorded. Vocabulary acquisition is an intrinsic part of language learning and, in order to ensure the optimum organisation of a resource which aids their revision and retention, it is
recommended that students be directed to classify their vocabulary notebooks under thematic headings.

The French department does not have a common assessment policy. Common assessment merits strong consideration as it gives teachers the opportunity to compare students’ standards, particularly in junior cycle. It also encourages the coverage of the syllabus at a similar pace in the different class groups. Common house examinations in French would also promote increased collaborative planning among the teachers.

Class-based tests are conducted regularly in addition to formal house examinations. Written and aural assessments are given to all year groups and teachers maintain comprehensive records of students’ results. The testing of oral proficiency occurs in fifth year and in sixth year. ‘Mock’ oral examinations for Leaving Certificate students are conducted by an external examiner. This is good practice. It is recommended that an element of oral assessment be introduced into every year group, either in a formal or informal capacity, in order to promote students’ competence and confidence in speaking French. The assessment of oral skills also underpins and validates the use of the target language in the classroom.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A comprehensive plan for the teaching and learning of French has been documented collaboratively.
- The school has excellent ICT facilities to which teachers and students have access.
- A stimulating language-learning environment has been created in designated classrooms.
- Extensive co-curricular and extracurricular support for French enhances the teaching of the language.
- Most lessons had a clear structure, followed a coherent plan, and incorporated a variety of learning activities.
- The target language was used extensively in all lessons.
- The quality of the teaching and learning observed during the evaluation was very good.

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

- A collaborative review of the TY programme for French should be carried out as part of the subject planning process.
- Oral testing, either formal or informal, should be incorporated into the assessment procedures for all year groups.
- Common assessment, where feasible, should be introduced.

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.

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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

The Board of Management have reviewed the subject of French Inspection Report and are delighted that the excellent work done in the teaching and learning of French has been affirmed in such a positive way.

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

1. Every effort will be made to ensure that French is not timetabled twice on the one day.
2. A review of the TY programme in French will be carried out.
3. More oral work will be incorporated.
4. Whenever possible common assessment is carried out.