Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Scoil Aireagail
Ballhyale, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70570N

Date of inspection: 23 April 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Aireagail. 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 subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Scoil Aireagail is a co-educational vocational school with 373 students. All students have access to the study of French, which is a core subject at junior cycle. There is also very good provision for French in the allocation of instruction time for all year groups, in particular at senior cycle. However, school management should endeavour to ensure that, in the future, the two periods allocated to Transition Year (TY) French do not occur on the same day. Consideration should also be given to making the study of French in TY mandatory for those who intend taking the subject to Leaving Certificate to ensure continuity with the subject. Classes for French are mixed ability in first and second year and are set in third year into discrete higher-level and ordinary-level groupings. This is appropriate within the current school context to ensure optimum outcomes for the students in the state examinations. However, it is recommended that the second grouping in third year should be designated a mixed grouping where students, who have the capacity, are afforded the opportunity to study for higher level. This is facilitated by the common syllabus for Junior Certificate French.

There are three teachers of French in the school, all of whom are graduates in the subject. Each teacher is afforded the opportunity to teach to all levels, which is good practice. Some have benefited from national in-service programmes in the subject. Ongoing linguistic and pedagogical upskilling is essential and the members of the French department should avail of all opportunities for continuous professional development, including the scholarships to France funded jointly by the Department of Education and Science and the French Cultural Services and the range of seminars and courses provided by the French Teachers’ Association and by the regional education centre. To this end, teachers should also avail of the school’s willingness to fund membership of their subject association. Engaging with other teachers of French and the sharing of good practice are also encouraged.
Classrooms are student based, which limits somewhat the opportunity for the creation of a language learning environment. While there were some posters in a number of the classrooms visited, it is recommended that consideration be given to designating one classroom as a language learning room where displays of maps, posters, key expressions, grammar points and samples of students’ work could be posted and accessed by all teachers of the subject. The creation of a print-rich environment supports the assimilation of learning over time and the promotion of cultural awareness. It is also a valuable resource to help visual learners. One of the lessons observed took place in the computer room where the seating arrangements did not facilitate the activities of the lesson. This needs to be addressed.

The school has an annual budget for the purchase of all resources, which are provided on request to senior management. The teachers of French currently share technical equipment such as CD recorders and television and DVD players with other subject departments. However, CD players designated for the French department have recently been ordered. This is welcomed. Material resources included the textbook, some magazines, revision notes and supporting vocabulary sheets devised by the individual teachers, and supplementary worksheets extracted from other text books. While the teachers’ efforts to support students through the provision of such additional materials is commended, there is a need to expand the range of resources to facilitate the use of more up-to-date texts responding to the needs and interests of the student cohort and to avoid the predictability of textbook work. To this end, teachers should seek out and download materials from the wealth of resources available on educational internet sites such as www.french.ie. These can include articles dealing with the topics being studied in class, grammar exercises, word searches, puzzles and PowerPoint presentations to further consolidate learning, promote cultural awareness and facilitate some correction of homework in class. The school has two computer rooms and an interactive whiteboard for which some training was provided. However, information and communication technology (ICT) is rarely used by the members of the French department, who reported difficulty accessing the computer room. As part of their ongoing professional development, the teachers of French should access the help of colleagues and avail of any ICT related courses held in the regional education centre to facilitate some integration of ICT into the teaching and learning of French.

While teachers cross reference aspects of French and France when relevant to the other subjects they teach, there are currently no specific co-curricular activities in place to support the teaching and learning of French. Given the benefits of providing students with a range of enjoyable language learning experiences in addition to promoting cultural awareness, teachers could introduce a range of activities such as a French breakfast, ‘goûter’ or cooking, board games and quizzes to support the teaching and learning of the subject. Some of this work could be carried out by students, where they organise activities for other groups as an outcome of their learning in the classroom. The involvement of other groups in such activities will not only generate enthusiasm for the language but also contribute to positive peer interactions in the target language.

**Planning and Preparation**

Senior management in Scoil Aireagail facilitates subject department meetings on a regular basis throughout the school year. There is a subject co-ordinator for French whose duties include organising meetings and liaising with senior management. Minutes are kept of all formal meetings. This is good practice.
A review of the subject plan for French indicates that the members of the French department are making progress in the development of a whole school plan for the teaching and learning of French. The plan begins with the school’s mission statement and establishes the aims and objectives for the planning and delivery of the subject. The plan also describes the context in which students can access the subject and the arrangements for class groupings. It includes a list of the resources available, effective teaching methodologies, opportunities for cross-curricular planning, curriculum content for each year group and homework and assessment procedures. The work completed to date by the members of the French department is commended. When engaging in subject planning it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of such planning is to inform practice and to facilitate self-evaluation. To this end teachers should establish desired learning outcomes for each year group in terms of ‘can do’ statements and identify the linguistic skills needed and the proposed methodologies to achieve such outcomes. This approach which focuses on the development of transferable skills will allow for greater variety in the choice of topics to be studied. It will also make students more aware of language learning as a cumulative process.

A Transition Year plan for French is in place. This plan needs to be reviewed in order to reflect Department guidelines and to incorporate a broader range of teaching and learning methodologies. To this end, consideration should be given to introducing elements of learner autonomy and the development of co-curricular activities.

Scoil Aireagail has been allocated a French language assistant for the forthcoming academic year. To ensure that optimum linguistic benefit is accrued for both teachers and students from the provision of such a valuable resource, teachers should plan carefully the manner in which this service will be utilised. Areas for consideration should include the aforementioned recommendations relating to the development of a print-rich environment and co-curricular activities, the development of links with a French school for the purpose of intercultural dialogue and the exchange of materials and other such initiatives which will expand and improve the use of the target language by both teachers and students.

There was evidence of careful planning and preparation for the lessons observed with the advance preparation of equipment and photocopying and the preparation of individual lesson plans.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Inspection activities involved the observation of five lessons, three at junior cycle and two at senior cycle. There was also the opportunity to review students’ copybooks.

The proposed content for the lesson was shared with the students. This is good practice as it engages the students from the outset. To optimise the benefits of this good practice it is recommended that the lesson plan be communicated to the students in terms of the proposed learning outcome. This will make students aware of teaching and learning as a shared role and responsibility.

The target language was used in all of the lessons observed, but to a very limited extent. Teachers generally began the lesson speaking in French. However, translation became the dominant methodology as the lesson progressed. While the need for linguistic scaffolding is acknowledged, teachers should endeavour to reduce this dependence on translation. For example, they should consider explaining first in French and then checking whether or not students understand rather than automatically explaining in English. Teachers should also promote greater
interaction in the target language in the classroom by giving instructions in the target language and by providing students with the linguistic strategies to ask and answer questions and to express difficulties in French. It would also provide practice in listening and oral comprehension and production.

Many of the lessons concentrated on revision, which was appropriate for the time of year and most lessons focused on the teaching of a number of different language skills. However, teachers should adopt a more integrated approach which attributes equal importance to the development of all the language skills. To this end, the use of a thematic approach is recommended as skills development in one area feeds into and supports other skills development; for example, when engaging in revision or examination preparation teachers should consider identifying the themes in the examination questions and use them in an integrated way in order to support the revision of all the language skills.

Brainstorming, as observed in one lesson, facilitated active student engagement. This is good practice as it affords students the opportunity to transfer their previous learning to new situations and enables them to extend their vocabulary by creating families of words. Pair work activities were observed in one lesson and this is also very good practice in promoting oral skills development and active and independent learning. Teachers should include at least one pair or group work activity into lessons where it is not currently happening. These tasks should be short, focused and interactive in nature. The completion of individual student-based tasks was observed in some lessons. This is also commended as a means of actively engaging the students. However, there was a need for a greater balance between the completion of such exercises and the progression of new learning in the lessons observed. There were some instances where some of these exercises could have been effectively completed as homework assignments.

In order to maximise student learning, teachers need to build up their own confidence in devolving greater responsibility to students through greater use of these active learning methodologies in addition to differentiated tasks and worksheets to cater for the varying needs and abilities of the students.

There was good classroom management throughout and most students applied themselves to the work in hand. A small number of students made very good efforts to ask questions in French indicating good levels of confidence and competence in the language. This willingness and ability to communicate effectively in French was also evident in the interaction between the inspector and some of the students.

ASSESSMENT

Teachers of French in Scoil Aireagail monitor students’ progress in a variety of ways, including questioning in class and allocating and correcting homework assignments, tests and formal examinations.

A review of students’ copybooks indicated that homework was regularly assigned and highly commendable practice was noted in the regular and detailed corrections and the inclusion of a comment in some copybooks. This very good practice should be extended to all lessons where it is not currently happening. Many of the homework assignments were translation exercises. Teachers should seek alternatives to translation exercises and assign work which demands expression in the target language.
In addition to end of chapter or regular vocabulary tests, students sit formal Christmas and summer tests. Certificate examination students sit formal Christmas tests and mock examinations in the second term. To support sixth-year students in their work a mentoring programme is in place where teachers are each assigned two students whom they mentor throughout the year. This is commended. Senior management also reported that consideration is being given to reintroducing a system previously in place in the school whereby each month examination classes are given a test in two subjects which are not announced in advance. It was reported that this policy had met with considerable success when in place. An aural component is included in all formal tests. This is good practice. Sixth-year students have a mock oral examination in the second term. To further support oral skills development, teachers should consider introducing some form of oral assessment for all year groups.

A review of state examination results indicates outcomes appropriate to the student cohort. However, teachers need to remain vigilant to ensure that all students at Junior Certificate are taking the highest level appropriate to their full potential.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole-school provision for French in the allocation of time
- The members of the French department have embraced the subject planning process and are making progress.
- Where used, pair work activities encouraged active student participation.
- There was good classroom management throughout.
- Homework is regularly assigned and, in some instances, good formative feedback is given to students on their written work.

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

- Subject planning should be progressed into the development of a long-term plan which includes the desired learning outcomes for each year group, linguistic strategies and proposed methodologies to support such outcomes. Teachers also need to plan for resource acquisition, in particular for the integration of ICT resources.
- Teachers need to reduce the dependency on translation both in class and for homework assignments and build up the use of the target language by both teachers and students.
- A more integrated approach to the teaching of the different language skills is recommended. This thematic approach should also be adopted for the teaching of revision and examination preparation.
- Teachers should use methodologies which will encourage greater student engagement, promote active and independent learning and will meet the differentiated needs of the student cohort.
- Consideration should be given to designating one classroom as a language learning room.

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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