Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire
Johnstown, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 70600T

Date of inspection: 5 November 2009
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Johnstown. 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. 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

Coláiste Mhuire is a co-educational vocational school with 431 students. All students are offered an eight-week taster programme in all optional subjects on entry into first year. This is commended as it helps them to make informed subject choices. French is one of the optional subjects offered and, in recognition of its importance for third level studies, it is included in two option bands. However, it was noted during the course of the evaluation that the uptake of the subject among boys is significantly lower than among girls. This gender imbalance should be reviewed and strategies devised to reverse this trend. An ab initio module for French is offered in senior cycle for students who have not studied French in junior cycle and who wish to take the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

There is generally good whole school provision and support for French in the allocation of time. However, it is recommended that ways be explored whereby French could be timetabled in single rather than double periods at junior cycle to facilitate ongoing contact with the target language. French is currently timetabled as a half-year module in Transition Year. In the interests of continuity it is recommended that the timetabling of French in TY be reviewed to facilitate contact with the language for the duration of the entire academic year. Classes are of mixed-ability groupings throughout. However, to ensure optimum benefit from the TY module for French, discrete groups should be formed comprising students who have done French at junior cycle and those who have not.

There are four teachers of French, all of whom are graduates in the subject. Some have benefited from a number of in-service programmes held for teachers of French in recent years. Many also attended the recent national seminar organised by the French Teachers’ Association (FTA).
Teachers also reported benefiting linguistically from the presence of a French language assistant in the school in the previous year. School management supports the teachers’ professional development by paying the group membership of the FTA. Commitment to ongoing professional development is commended. To further maintain high levels of linguistic and pedagogical competency, teachers are encouraged to inform themselves of and apply for the range of language-related scholarships, courses and seminars made available though the Department of Education and Science and the French Cultural Services, and through Léargas, in addition to attending subject-related in-service training offered in local education centres.

Classrooms are generally student based. However, one room has been designated for use by the members of the French department. This room was visually stimulating with displays of maps, posters, students’ projects and some classroom language. Efforts had also been made in some of the other student-based classrooms to display students’ projects on France. The creation of a print rich environment is good practice as it affords students opportunities to assimilate over time aspects of French language and culture. While it is acknowledged that the opportunities to display French related materials are more limited in a student-based room teachers should consider the possibility of using a section of the wall for the display of charts containing classroom language, key expressions and grammar points.

There is good provision of resources for the teaching and learning of French. Supplementary materials include a range of French CDs, DVDs, films, visual aids and resources downloaded from the internet. This is commended. Information and communication technology (ICT) has been embraced in the school. All classrooms are equipped with data projectors and teachers are currently working on maximising the use ICT to support teaching and learning.

A broad range of co-curricular activities is in place to support students in their learning. A number of school exchanges have been organised in the past with a French school near Nantes and junior-cycle students currently correspond with two French schools. This is commended as such links promote opportunities for intercultural dialogue for all students. To further extend these very good initiatives and to support individual language improvement, teachers should in time consider extending the exchange to encouraging the students to correspond by email. As part of their task for sport and drama, Leaving Certificate Applied students teach first year students to play ‘boules’ and then organise a competition as part of a ‘fête française’ event organised within the school. Visits from French theatre for school groups are also organised to coincide with the event. Transition Year students prepare a French breakfast and make ‘crêpes’ and students also attend French films in Kilkenny and in Thurles, where they have links with a third level institution. The teachers of French are highly commended for their commitment to supporting active and meaningful learning by affording all students the opportunity to both organise and engage in a range of memorable language learning experiences.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The members of the French department have actively embraced the subject planning process. There is a subject co-ordinator, a position which is voluntary and rotates, in line with good practice. Teachers meet formally once a term and minutes are kept of all meetings. A review of subject planning documentation indicates that very good work has been carried out to date in developing a meaningful subject plan for French.

The subject plan sets out the school context and its organisational and operating context. It also includes documentation such as proposed action plans for the completion of homework and
reports on attendance at in-service, indicating that subject planning is being carried out as an active and evaluative process. A meaningful ab initio module has been developed for the LCVP programme and this is commended. Good planning for the LCA module for French was also noted. Subject planning for each year group is set out in terms of what students will be able to do as a result of their learning and the grammatical structures needed to support this learning. This is very good practice. In some instances the proposed methodologies and resources are also included. This is also highly commended and should be included in all plans. As the planning process further develops, teachers should look at ways of reviewing their work and identifying elements of good practice and areas for development in relation to the different methodologies used and their outcomes.

There was also evidence of very good preparation for the individual lessons observed, with the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Evaluation activities included the observation of five lessons, two at junior cycle, one in Transition Year and two at senior cycle. Interaction with the students and a review of their copybooks was also facilitated. Good quality teaching and learning was observed in all lessons.

The target language was used by the teachers throughout all the lessons observed. Of particular note was its consistent use with students new to the language. Some students were also observed to make good efforts to interact in French. This very commendable practice should be further encouraged by giving students the necessary expressions to be able to ask simple questions in French, make requests and express difficulties. These expressions could be posted up on the walls or put on the cover of their copybooks for ease of reference. There was also good attention to pronunciation in some of the lessons observed. This is commended as correct pronunciation and intonation is an essential component of successful language learning. This good practice should be extended to all lessons through the regular use of short, focused pronunciation drills. Students read aloud in some of the lessons observed. While such an exercise can provide good opportunity for practising pronunciation it is important that students are familiar with the text as comprehension of a text supports correct pronunciation.

Lessons were well structured and appropriately paced throughout. In order to maximise the benefits of the work to be completed, it is recommended that the lesson plan be communicated to the students in terms of the proposed learning outcomes for the lesson. This will make them more aware of and responsible for their role in the teaching and learning process.

A thematic approach, as observed in most lessons, facilitated the integration of the different language skills and there were some good examples of the effective integration of grammar into the body of the lesson. This is commended. The integrated approach and choice of texts also provided opportunities for teachers in some lessons to engage in a quick revision of previous learning. The use of up-to-date texts downloaded from the internet to support the thematic approach is also commended as it afforded students the opportunity to engage with materials appropriate to their needs and interests. If however, a text is appropriate but very long, consideration should be given to abridging it or dealing with it on a section by section basis and providing students with a range of tasks to complete after each section.

Good use was made of visual aids and supplementary materials to support comprehension and to actively engage the students. ICT was also effectively used for the correction of exercises and to
support teaching and learning in many of the lessons observed. This is commended. The good practice of using ICT should be further extended to incorporate elements of cultural awareness.

The use of individual student-based tasks or group work was observed in all lessons. This is commended as such tasks actively engage the students and give them greater responsibility for their own learning. In some instances where students had to work in pairs, they were asked to report back in the third person, thereby expanding their use of different verbs. This is commended. When assigning such tasks however, it is recommended, that a range of graded questions or tasks be devised to respond to students’ different needs.

An environment conducive to learning was observed in all lessons and teachers and students worked in a climate of mutual respect. Students engaged well with the work in hand and applied themselves to the assigned tasks. Their responses indicated good comprehension of the target language used by the teacher and a good understanding of and engagement with the work in hand. Students also indicated good willingness to communicate in the target language when interacting with the inspector.

ASSESSMENT

A variety of assessment modes is used to monitor students’ progress. These include question and answer sessions in class, homework assignments, tests and formal examinations. A review of students’ copybooks indicated that homework is given and corrected. It is however, recommended that teachers sign or date their corrections in order to differentiate between work monitored by the teachers and work corrected by the students themselves. Teachers should also include a comment where appropriate to affirm students and inform them of their progress. Consideration should also be given to spending some time at the beginning of the school year helping students to organise their copybooks for ease of reference.

As part of a whole school planning initiative aimed at raising attainment, monthly tests have been introduced for all students. All concerted efforts to raise student attainment are commended. Students sit formal tests at Christmas and in the summer. An aural component is included in all formal tests. This is good practice. Leaving Certificate students are also given oral assessments. These are currently carried out as part of co-curricular activities where students are given two mock oral examinations, each carried out by a different teacher. This is commended. It is recommended that the practice of giving an oral assessment be extended to all year groups. Consideration should be given to assessing oral skills as one of the monthly tests. The proposal to extend the use of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) statements to all junior cycle students is also commended.

Contact with parents is maintained through the use of the school journal, the school reports sent out twice yearly and the annual parent teachers meetings held for each year group. School management also plans to contact parents of students who are deemed to be underperforming following the outcomes of the monthly tests. A review of outcomes in the certificate examinations indicates that vigilance is needed to ensure that students are choosing the levels most appropriate to their abilities and potential.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The members of the French department have actively embraced the subject planning process and have made very good progress to date.
- There was very good use of the target language by the teachers in all of the lessons observed.
- A thematic approach facilitated the integration of the different language skills.
- A variety of methodologies was observed in classes and all were used to good effect.
- Some very good co-curricular activities are in place in the school to enhance students’ enjoyment of the language.
- Good assessment practices are in place to monitor student progress.

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

- School management should explore ways to improve the gender balance in the uptake of French.
- The timetabling of French in Transition Year should be reviewed and extended to a full year module. Discrete groups should be formed for those who have done French at junior cycle and those who have not.
- Teachers should provide graded exercises to respond to the different needs of all students.

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.

*Published December 2010.*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

We welcome and accept the positive inspection report on the teaching and learning of French. It affirms the high quality of teaching and learning of French in Coláiste Mhuire. We thank the inspector for her professionalism and courtesy throughout.

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

The recommendations of the inspector are being pursued on an ongoing basis. The timetabling recommendation has already been implemented.