

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**  
**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of French**  
**REPORT**

**Scoil Phobail Bheara**  
**Castletownbere, County Cork**  
**Roll number: 91387Q**

**Date of inspection: 30 September 2010**



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT**  
**OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION**  
**AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Phobail Bheara, Castletownbere, County Cork. 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. 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**

This community school has an enrolment of 306 in the current school year. The school offers a very wide range of programmes including Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

Currently French is the main modern language offered in the school. An ab initio module of German is offered in sixth year as part of the LCVP programme; German has also been offered more widely in the past when resources have allowed. French is part of the core curriculum in junior cycle. All Transition Year (TY) students study French and it is optional at Leaving Certificate level. The percentage of students taking French for Leaving Certificate is good and would appear to be rising.

Access to the subject is very good. Students of all abilities are encouraged to study French at junior cycle and withdrawal from the subject is only permitted after careful consideration of each individual case, consultation with the relevant professionals and with parents or guardians. When resources allow it, a module of cultural studies is offered to the cohort of students who may have been withdrawn.

Study of the language at a level relevant to the needs of individual students is also well supported by the provision of the JCSP at junior cycle and the LCA at senior cycle. Further, students who may not have studied a language at junior cycle, but who are taking the LCVP in fifth year, all study a module of French as required. There are a number of newcomer students in the school who are all encouraged to study French. The school is praised for the breadth of access to the language across all programmes provided and across the spectrum of abilities in the student cohort.

Junior cycle classes are organised as mixed-ability groups. This is appropriate particularly given the common nature of the syllabus for modern languages. This practice is also commended as it supports the school's policy of encouraging as many students as possible to sit higher-level examination papers. Senior cycle classes are also mixed-ability. Although this can be challenging for teachers, evaluation activities demonstrated that the teachers concerned are aware of, and respond to, the needs of both ordinary and higher-level students in their classes. The common nature of the Leaving Certificate syllabus for modern languages makes it easier to deal with mixed-ability groups at this level. It is accepted in the subject department that employing a thematic approach to planning and teaching also supports teachers in working with mixed-ability groups. Working thematically allows the teacher to focus on a common theme with all students but with an appropriate level of differentiation where necessary. Such an approach has the added advantage of encouraging as many students as possible to aim to achieve at the highest level appropriate to them. Practice in this area should continue to expand and develop.

Class size in French is generally very manageable; the largest class group has twenty-eight students but many class groups have twenty-five or fewer students per group. This is particularly advantageous in the context of language teaching as it offers valuable opportunities for the development of students' oral competence.

Time allocated to the subject is very satisfactory. Every effort has been made to timetable lessons well. However, the fact that at senior cycle the five periods timetabled are organised as one single and two double periods was noted and discussed. Whilst accepting that student selection of subjects has resulted in such a distribution of time across the week, it was pointed out that such timetabling is not ideal for the teaching and learning of languages where regular and frequent contact with the target language is deemed most appropriate. Given the restrictions in question, it was suggested that homework tasks should be planned and assigned with this in mind.

There are three teachers of French in the school. All three teachers are French graduates and have been in the school for a number of years. A number of the teachers have engaged in further study and have obtained valuable qualifications. These qualifications, combined with teaching experience, bring an added advantage to the teaching and learning of French in the school.

A departmental structure is in place and one of the three teachers acts as subject co-ordinator. Management provision for, and encouragement of, such a structure is welcome as it supports effective and evolving provision in the subject. The team of teachers involved was keen to acknowledge the committed and generous leadership of the current subject co-ordinator.

School management and teachers recognise the importance of continuing professional development (CPD). It was very positive that all teachers of French are members of the professional body, the French Teachers Association (FTA). The attendance of teachers at various in-service events at home and abroad, and the participation of the subject co-ordinator in certificate examination work, is further evidence of professional commitment. Teacher involvement in a school exchange has also supported teacher CPD, as has the engagement of a language assistant in the current school year, and in the 2005-2006 school year, and the hosting of a visiting teacher from France in 2009-2010. School management and the teachers of French are proactive in the way in which they seek to support the teaching and learning of French in the school and this is praised. The recently published Circular 0028/10 which outlines the terms of the French/Irish Teacher Professional Visits scheme might offer a further professional development opportunity.

French is very well resourced from a number of points of view. Most French lessons now take place in a designated classroom. Much work has been done on creating an appropriate and visually stimulating and supportive classroom environment including the display of students' work. This is commended.

This base room also has a well-organised subject store cupboard containing dictionaries, class sets of texts, an examination archive, programme folders, games, laminates, work sheets, and handouts. Some student work is also stored here. Work has also begun on building sets of resources on a thematic basis; this initiative is encouraged.

Other facilities available include a fully equipped computer room and a library. The inspector visited the library during the course of the evaluation. The library has a small French section. It was agreed that it would be a good idea to increase and renew the current stock. The inspector provided a number of suggestions as to possible acquisitions.

French teachers have access to a variety of equipment including data projectors with audio speakers, laptop computers, a television and DVD players. In-house training and support has been valuable in supporting teachers to integrate information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning.

The learning of French is further supported by a number of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. The French department organises the visit of a theatre company during the year and uses French film. Individual students are encouraged to visit France and the matter of the school exchange is being kept under review. The work of the teachers concerned is recognised and encouraged.

French is an important element of curricular provision in this school. French teachers are committed to their subject and interested in the development of provision in the school. The subject is well resourced. School management is well informed and supports and encourages quality provision in the subject.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

This school has been involved in a process of school development planning and a school plan has been prepared. The collaborative development over time of whole-school policies in areas such as assessment and homework would further support the teaching and learning of the subject.

The French department meets formally once a term and a record of the business of the meeting and decisions taken is kept. Further meetings are held informally as necessary. The work of the department in preparing a five-year plan for the subject is praised. The plans are being implemented incrementally on a year-by-year basis. The plan is reviewed annually. It is clear that such subject-focused planning and evaluation provides a framework for, and supports the development of, provision. It is suggested that the selection and inclusion of a number of self-evaluation criteria in the area of teaching and learning of the language would be a most valuable addition to this work.

The French department has prepared a subject folder which contains a comprehensive range of documents and materials. These include general language-related documents, the departmental plan, schemes of work for all programmes and classes, correspondence and departmental records.

It is suggested that, where the schemes of work are textbook-based or referenced, greater use might be made of the syllabus documents as a framework.

All lessons observed were planned thoughtfully and thoroughly to take into account issues such as relevance of content, length of lesson, prior learning, selection and preparation of resources, and differentiation.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Four lessons were observed as part of the evaluation process. Two of these lessons were at junior cycle and two at senior cycle. Teaching and learning in these lessons was good or very good.

Lesson content was well chosen, based on plans developed and appropriate to the student level concerned. Focus of content at senior cycle was well selected to take cognisance of European Day of Languages which occurred in the week of the inspection.

Lesson pace was very good. The use of teacher circulation and time-specific instructions supported this good lesson pace and learner engagement.

It was very positive that lessons were conducted in the target language. Lesson content was taught through the medium of the target language and, for the most part, it was used also for communicative purposes in the classroom. Strategies such as the use of the French alphabet, reference to key words, the provision of alternatives or illustrations of an item of vocabulary or phrases in French, work on pronunciation and an emphasis on the acquisition of structures were effective in supporting language acquisition.

Classroom involvement of the language assistant was at an initial stage as he had not yet commenced formal timetabled work. It was clear that his presence had the potential to support language acquisition in very real way. The advantages accruing to students because of the presence of a language assistant, and the obvious teacher commitment to the use of the target language, were noted and discussed with the students.

There was some evidence of automatic recourse to translation. This was discussed, and it was agreed that it may have been unnecessary and that it may create an unnecessary dependency in students. It was also recommended that oral or written translation exercises be avoided.

It was good to see students undertaking exercises in which they were expected to use structures previously taught. It was suggested that a whole-class review of such structures would be very supportive of student learning. This should be carried out prior to the undertaking of such exercises individually or in groups or on conclusion of same.

In lessons observed, student use of the target language was best supported when methodologies such as pair work, group work, the use of visual resources and language-based material which students had to manipulate physically were employed. In these instances, lessons were less likely to have been dominated by teacher talk. In order to further support student talk in the classroom, greater use of global questioning and 'wait-time' was advocated as was the creation of further opportunities to draw from students orally.

Lessons observed showed clearly that the teachers were cognisant of the importance of the integration of the various language skills. It was suggested however that it would be very

beneficial to consider the matter of the development of these skills in students. Consideration should be given to the manner in which listening comprehension exercises are exploited for example so as to make sure that students are acquiring and developing transferable listening skills and techniques rather than merely being tested in that skill.

A very good teacher-student rapport was evident in all lessons. Teachers were supportive, encouraging, affirming and humorous in their dealings with students. In general, classes were very well managed. Where full class attention was more difficult to achieve, it was suggested that the sharing of the lesson objective with students and the whole-class review and practice of the structures to be used in exercises which follow, might also serve to establish a controlled learning environment.

Inspector engagement with the students demonstrated learning as appropriate to the particular group at this juncture in the school year. It was very positive to see that students of French are encouraged to use notebooks to record new structures, vocabulary and grammar.

## **ASSESSMENT**

Students' learning is supported by the allocation of homework tasks. All lessons concluded with attention to the preparation and allocation of a relevant homework exercise. It was very good to see that, where appropriate, homework assigned was differentiated. The work of teachers in planning for, preparing, providing and managing such homework assignments is acknowledged.

Students record homework assigned in their journals. Inspector activity included the examination of a selection of students' copies. It was evident that work is being assigned. It is suggested that monitoring of student work should be consistent, and that it should be carried out at agreed intervals, to be decided perhaps as part of the possible development of a homework policy in the school. It is also recommended that, as far as is possible, students be expected to correct work that has been monitored by the teacher.

The school has evolved a comprehensive system of assessment. Student progress is monitored on an ongoing basis and progress is tested at four separate junctures in the school year. Formal tests are held at Christmas and at the end of the year, and progress is also noted at mid-term and at Easter. In these instances the mark assigned is based on two assessment 'events' which will have been carried out in the previous weeks. It is very good that these may be written, oral, aural, practical or project work based. Reports are sent to parents at all four junctures. There is an annual parent-teacher meeting and a second if necessary. The work of all concerned is recognised and praised.

Leaving Certificate students are assessed orally. It is suggested that arrangements be made to begin to formally assess the oral competence of students more generally. It is also recommended that the results of such assessments be documented in reports and commented on as appropriate.

The progress of students in the subject is supported by the teachers' commitment and practices in the school. Students' achievement generally is also monitored. Teachers analyse results in certificate examinations. A review by the inspector of results and discussions with the school demonstrated that the percentage of students taking higher level at Junior Certificate is going up. Almost all succeed at their chosen level. It is to the credit of the school that they are anxious to encourage student achievement as much as possible.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for, and access to, French is very good.
- The subject is generally well supported in terms of the allocation of time and timetabling and very well supported in terms of facilities and resources available.
- School management is well informed and supportive of quality provision in the subject.
- Teachers are committed to the subject and subject co-ordination is informed, strategic and effective.
- Planning is very good and preparation thoughtful and thorough.
- Teaching and learning was good, or very good, in all lessons observed.
- Lessons are conducted in the target language.
- Student-teacher rapport is very good.
- Students' achievement is promoted and supported by all concerned.

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

- The French department should continue to develop provision in the subject through its five-year planning process.
- Teachers should endeavour to enhance teaching and learning through planning for the development of the various language skills in students, the use of a thematic approach and the use of some element of self-evaluation.
- The avoidance of translation, and greater use of global questioning, would enhance good practice in relation to the use of the target language.
- Arrangements should be made for some assessment of the oral competence of students generally.
- Matters such as the development of a homework policy and support for student contact with the target language should be kept under review.

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.