Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Ballyphehane, Cork
Roll number: 62693K

Date of inspection: 21 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 Presentation Secondary School, Ballyphehane, 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 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 deputy principal and subject teachers. The board of management of the school 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

This all girls’ voluntary secondary school has enrolment of 341 in the current school year. The school offers a wide range of programmes including Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA).

French is one of two modern languages offered in the school. Both French and German are offered in first year. Students may opt to study one of the two languages in second and subsequent years. Currently uptake of French is very satisfactory.

The school is commended in particular for its policy of open and inclusive access to modern languages for all students at junior cycle. This practice facilitates student growth and development, recognises the potential in all and promotes access to opportunities for further study in the long term.

Junior cycle classes are organised as mixed-ability groups. This is appropriate particularly given the common nature of the modern languages’ syllabus. 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 streamed but work is planned so as to maintain some consistency between groups.

There are three class groups in each of first, third, fourth, fifth and sixth year and two in second year. This means that class sizes are generally small; the largest class group has twenty-six students, but many class groups have less than twenty 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 and in line with national norms. Every effort has been made to timetable lessons well. It was suggested that in timetabling fourth-year French in future years it might be better to try to have at least one lesson in the morning.

There are four teachers of French in the school. All four teachers are language graduates and have been in the school for a number of years. A departmental structure is in place and one of the four 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 department meets formally once a term and a record of the business of the meeting and decisions taken is kept. A further general planning meeting takes place at the beginning of the year and teachers of French also meet informally during the year as required. 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 one of the teachers at professional development courses in both Besançon and Montpellier is further evidence of professional commitment to the subject. Teacher involvement in a school exchange has also supported teacher CPD and other activities such as teacher engagement in examination work for the State Examinations Commission continue to provide valuable opportunities for professional development.

The school has not had a French language assistant for a number of years but has hosted two native trainee teachers for a period of time. Given the importance of basic teacher linguistic competence, and of the development and maintenance of this competence, it is suggested that the school consider applying for an assistant as soon as is practicable. Teachers of French are also referred to Circular 0028/10 which outlines the terms of the French/Irish Teacher Professional Visits scheme which might offer a further professional development opportunity. Teachers are also encouraged to avail of any events or courses which would support them in enhancing what is already an obviously rich repertoire of strategies for the teaching and learning of languages.

French is very well resourced from a number of points of view. Each teacher has a base classroom which allows her to establish an appropriate language learning environment. The work done to date on creating a print-rich environment in classrooms, including the display of students’ work, is recognised and should continue and develop.

Other facilities available include a language laboratory, a fully equipped computer room and a library. Teachers of French have access to both the computer room and the language laboratory although currently the latter is used as a base classroom. Both of these facilities offer opportunities to support learners in the acquisition of accurate pronunciation, intonation and structure. Their potential to allow teachers support students’ learning in a very personalised manner, and to support self-directed student learning, should not be forgotten and should be discussed by the French department.

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.

Each classroom has recently been equipped with a laptop computer, data projector and printer. Classroom observation provided ample evidence of teacher use of this equipment and of its
potential to support students’ learning. It was clear for example that using the data projector and laptop allowed the incorporation of visually stimulating material and supported various student learning styles. It is recommended that the teachers of French build on and develop their use of this new equipment. It is very important that all concerned be cognisant of linguistic accuracy in devising and developing a store of PowerPoint presentations.

Resources available to French teachers include syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, aural material, past examination papers and further material that is personal to the teachers concerned. The school subscribes to the online version of Français Plus. Such a resource supports classroom work, extends learning opportunities beyond the confines of the textbook and encourages independent learning.

The learning of French is further supported by a number of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Cross-curricular links with Home Economics for example facilitate the organisation of an annual French breakfast in second year. The French department organises the visit of a theatre company during the year and also brings students to the annual French film festival. Such initiatives support student motivation and the development of cultural awareness. The work of the teachers concerned is recognised and encouraged.

Links with the target language country are fostered through electronic correspondence with a partner school in South West France. The work of the school in establishing these links through an exchange programme, which was organised for at least ten years, is praised. It is clear that the school would be supportive of another such exchange at some point in the future.

French is a key 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 and the allocation of time supports provision. School management is well informed and very positively disposed to supporting 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. A number of whole-school policies which might have a bearing on the teaching and learning of French were considered as part of the evaluation. These included: a modern languages policy; a learning-support and special educational needs policy; a homework policy; a literacy policy and a policy on school reports. The existence of such a range of policies is welcomed. As work on the modern languages policy itself may evolve over time, it is suggested that consideration might valuably be given to devising a statement on the place of modern languages generally in the curriculum in the school and access to them for students. The inclusion of some reference to special educational needs, teaching and learning strategies recommended and use of resources is also suggested. Consideration should also be given to the matter of the assessment of students’ oral competence in modern languages.

The French department has prepared year-specific plans in accordance with best practice. These are kept in a general French department file. The plans provided included both an overview of the curriculum for a particular year and details on a monthly basis. Further work on these plans would enhance their capacity to support students’ learning. It is suggested for example that the plans be closely linked to the relevant syllabus documents; be based on thematic units of work with syllabus-related learning outcomes clearly defined and make reference to the development of the various skills and to differentiation.
Preparation for lessons observed was thoughtful and thorough. It was evident that all lessons observed had been planned in line with the year plans provided. This thorough preparation included attention to the selection and preparation of a range of resources, the inclusion of a variety of activities and the incorporation of the use of a range of equipment and supports for teaching and learning. In one instance, it was considered that the teacher may have been over-ambitious in selecting the amount of material for inclusion in the lesson. Closer attention, at the time of lesson preparation, to the specific learning objective(s) chosen for the lesson might help to maintain focus.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Six lessons were observed as part of the evaluation process. Three of these lessons were at junior cycle and three at senior cycle.

Lesson content was well chosen and based on plans developed. Great effort was made to ensure that lesson content was appropriate to the student cohort involved and likely to interest them by virtue of its relationship to their own lives. It was also evident that students’ cultural awareness was being developed in line with syllabus requirements.

Lesson pace was generally very good and this supported learner engagement. In the instance where, as mentioned previously, the teacher may have been over-ambitious in her selection of the amount of material to be covered, students may have experienced the pace as being unsettling in its speed.

It was very positive that all lessons were conducted in the target language. Students had been supported to use the target language for basic communication in the classroom by virtue of the fact that they had been taught expressions which they might need in ordinary classroom communication and they had noted these in their notebooks. Classroom displays also supported the use of such language.

Language acquisition was well supported where, in some lessons, students had become accustomed to acquiring and using a new expression or structure each day. Language acquisition was also well supported where students were introduced to a new structure in context, encouraged to repeat and practice this structure and then required to use it themselves in a communicative context. The value of teaching structures in this way as opposed to vocabulary in isolation cannot be over-stated. Where in some instances questions may have been closed and directed at a particular student, it was suggested that greater use of an open style of questioning should be considered in order to maximise opportunities for student talk.

Observation of lessons also provided some good examples of the development of students’ language awareness. This was particularly the case where grammar was being taught or reinforced in context, and terminology was being taught and used in French. Good methodologies were employed when students’ knowledge of grammar was elicited and reinforced in French but by reference to the students’ grammatical knowledge in their first language.

All lessons observed showed clearly that the teachers were cognisant of the importance of the integration of the various language skills. This was done most skilfully in a number of lessons.
A wide range of resources was used in the lessons observed; this is very good practice where the use of such resources clearly supports and enhances students’ learning. Resources sourced, prepared and used included songs, a poem, a rap, anagrams, a map of France, laminated labels, a pencil case and its contents, sets of envelopes with labels and images of objects, and sets of images of well-known figures.

A number of teaching and learning strategies were used to very good effect. Lessons were teacher directed as appropriate but lessons also included good use of pair work, group work, games and songs.

Classroom management was very good in all lessons. It was clear that there was a very good rapport between teachers and students. Students communicated easily and freely with their teachers. Teachers were supportive, encouraging, affirming and humorous in their dealings with students.

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.

All lessons concluded with attention to the preparation and allocation of a relevant homework exercise. In many instances homework was also well chosen so as to enthuse and engage the students.

Teaching and learning in the lessons observed was good or very good. It was suggested that, where teaching was less effective, and therefore learning somewhat compromised, it was due to issues of teacher linguistic competency rather than any lack of interest or commitment on the part of the teacher.

ASSESSMENT

Students’ learning is supported by the allocation of homework tasks. Students record homework assigned in their journals and the journals are also used to allow communication between parents and teachers. Inspectorate activity included the examination of several sets of students’ copies, some notebooks and journals. It was evident that work is being assigned and monitored by the teachers of French. Attention to linguistic accuracy must inform teacher monitoring of students’ exercises and it is recommended that as far as is possible students be expected to correct work that has been monitored by the teacher.

Formal timetabled assessments are organised bi-annually. Individual teachers may organise other assessments during the year. Reports are issued to parents following the formal assessments and all parents are invited to attend an annual parent-teacher meeting. It is suggested that arrangements be made to begin to formally assess students’ oral competence in the language. It is also recommended that the results of such assessments should 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. There is ongoing monitoring of the progress of students with special educational needs and the special educational needs team meets weekly. Students’ achievement generally is also monitored. Teachers analyse results in certificate examinations. A review by the inspector of results, and discussions with the teachers, demonstrated the following positive findings: as many
students as possible are encouraged to take higher-level papers; almost all students succeed at the level for which they have been entered and students experience success despite concerns about absences in a number of instances. In this regard parents should note that regular attendance at school, and thereby frequent exposure to the language, is vital to student achievement.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for, access to and uptake of French is very good.
- The subject is well provided for in terms of facilities and resources available.
- School management is well informed and supportive of quality provision in the subject.
- Planning is good and preparation thoughtful and thorough.
- Teaching and learning was good or very good in almost 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 school should consider applying for a language assistant as soon as practicable.
- Planning and the acquisition and use of resources should evolve as indicated.
- Lessons should be planned so as to maximise opportunities for student talk.
- Arrangements should be made for the formalization of the assessment of students’ oral competence.
- The positive practice of inclusive participation at junior cycle should be reflected in the school’s language policy and subject plans.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of French and with the deputy 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 is pleased that the report reflects the excellent teaching and learning in the French Department.

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

Ongoing review of resources, as indicated in report.
Discussion is ongoing re application for a language assistant and the benefit of same.
The school looks forward to support from the Department of Education & Skills in the implementation of the recommendations.