Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Scoil Pól
Kilfinane, County Limerick
Roll number: 64130W

Date of inspection: 5 October 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

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

French is a core subject for all students in Scoil Pól in both junior cycle and senior cycle. Spanish is also offered as a language module for students taking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. Timetabling provision for the subject is satisfactory with four single class periods allocated in first year and in second year. This allocation increases to five periods in third year. In senior cycle, French is timetabled for four periods in the optional Transition Year (TY) programme and for five periods in fifth year and in sixth year. An additional period for French is also available on a shared basis with the Irish department in senior cycle. Students are taught in mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle.

There are two teachers of French in the school. The teachers are classroom based and have a range of resources available including a data projector, CD players, DVDs, books and magazines. Internet access is available in the classrooms and the teachers also have access to the computer room. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used for teaching and learning on a regular basis. Requests for additional language resources are submitted to management through the subject co-ordinator.

School management is committed to the provision of professional development activities for staff, and seminars on aspects of teaching and learning have taken place including sessions on co-operative learning and on engaging the reluctant learner. Support is also provided by the board of management in the form of funding for subject association membership for the teachers concerned. The school is currently taking part in the Learning School Project and has chosen to concentrate on the theme of homework with a particular focus on the second year cohort. The encouragement provided by management for teacher participation in continuing professional development and in new initiatives is very positive.
Extracurricular and co-curricular support for French is strong and includes activities such as French cinema and cookery lessons in a local French restaurant. The subject department has established links with French people living in the area and with companies with a connection with France. This has created a support network for language learning in the school and has raised the profile of the subject among the students. One of the companies sponsors an award for achievement in French at the annual awards ceremony and invitations are issued to guest speakers to attend the annual *Journée Française*. This French Day celebrates all aspects of French culture with a programme of presentations and events including a *petit déjeuner*.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject-department planning is facilitated by senior management. One of the teachers acts as subject co-ordinator and minutes are kept of all formal subject-planning meetings. The records are filed in the school plan. The teachers also meet informally at lunch-time on a weekly basis.

Departmental planning facilitates the induction and mentoring of new subject teachers and student teachers. Structures are in place to support new teachers including a handbook, an induction policy and mentoring by a colleague in the same subject department. The French department also cooperates with the University of Limerick in the education and training of student teachers. This partnership has been found by the school to be beneficial, in that it promotes professional discourse as well as the sharing of good practice and new methodologies.

A very high standard of planning for French is evident. The subject plan is a comprehensive document and it is very positive to note the emphasis on evaluation and review that informs all aspects of planning. The plan is regarded as a work in progress by the teachers with changes and additions made to it on an ongoing basis. An example of good practice is a document on language-learning strategies that focuses both on a generic approach and on specific practices appropriate for students with special educational needs. It is very good to note that the teachers have prepared an action plan in which they have identified a number of planned actions and have outlined the procedures to be taken for their implementation. The sharing of good practice as part of subject planning has led to the introduction of new methodologies such as the compilation of a student scrapbook during first year.

The curriculum content of the plan reflects syllabus requirements. Of particular note is the innovative and creative approach taken to TY French where the planning of the programme changes from year to year to reflect the interests of the student cohort. Student learning is promoted and the students are encouraged to engage in self-directed learning through the use of ICT. An example of good practice is the French cookbook produced by the students. A bilingual drama presentation in conjunction with the Irish department has also taken place.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In the lessons observed, it was very positive that French was used by the teachers both for classroom management and for teaching purposes. The language was used to give instructions, to explain content and to affirm students’ efforts. As a result, students were afforded the opportunity to hear French spoken as part of normal classroom interaction. They showed a good level of understanding and were able to make use of their knowledge of the language. They were also familiar with the appropriate French grammar terminology. Attention was paid to pronunciation and intonation and students’ mistakes were corrected in a sensitive manner. Resources including
handouts and the data projector were used to enhance learning. It was particularly good to see the emphasis on visual aids as a support for learning in junior cycle as the drawings and images reduced the need for translation into English.

The lessons were well structured and the aims and objectives were shared with students. All the lessons were planned around a theme and care was taken to include the key skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing during the lesson. This is good practice and in line with syllabus guidelines. In one lesson, it was very positive that a literary text was chosen as a stimulus for discussion on a topic. Cultural awareness was highlighted through the provision of a short biography of the author and an explanation of the cultural references in the text. This helped to create a meaningful context for the discussion that followed.

The questioning techniques used included a good mix of whole-class and individual questioning with opportunities for general discussion. Effective use was also made of group work to encourage peer learning. Of particular note was the thorough preparation in advance of any group work. This was good practice as it enabled all students to contribute their ideas. The choice of topics gave them an opportunity to speak from their own experience which helped to emphasise the authenticity of the exercise. They were given time to develop their answers and the questions were sufficiently broad so as to allow for a range of responses. The teacher was able to take on the role of facilitator and to encourage the involvement of all students. The subsequent presentation of their ideas, both orally and in poster format by each group, helped to consolidate learning and served as a summary of the lesson. It was evident that students were motivated by this type of activity and they responded with energy and enthusiasm.

There was a focus on vocabulary building in some lessons. Good practice was evident when activities took place which helped the students to work with the vocabulary during the lesson, and when they had time to practise the pronunciation of new words. However, in a small number of lessons, more time could have been spent on providing students with opportunities to practise the new learning during the lesson. It is recommended that lesson planning should include adequate time for students to learn and practise new vocabulary, for example through games and exercises.

Grammar was a feature of some lessons with clear explanations given of verb tenses. In junior cycle, grammar was linked to students’ written work and thus taught in context rather than in isolation. Students were encouraged to take a structured approach to letter-writing and were given a model to follow in building paragraphs. It is suggested that as a further development of this approach, language awareness and simple suggestions for the inclusion of some elements of style should be incorporated into each stage of the process.

The quality of teaching and learning in the subject was very good. The students were interested in their work and engaged fully in the classroom activities. They were well behaved and cooperative at all times in the lessons observed. The teachers had high expectations while still maintaining a relaxed and positive rapport with the students.

**ASSESSMENT**

The emphasis placed on the monitoring of students’ progress is a significant strength of the French department in the school. Students are assessed regularly and parents are provided with four reports during the year. The modes used reflect the objectives of the syllabus and it is very good practice that all students are assessed on their oral proficiency in French. The format of the oral varies according to the age and level of the students and may encompass a series of questions
in first year to a more formal interview in fifth year. It is very positive that new methods of assessment have been introduced including the use of IT, peer assessment through role play in second year, and portfolio assessment in TY. Students in TY also present their work to other classes.

Very good practice was evident in the monitoring of students’ progress. A school homework and assessment policy is in place and is implemented by the teachers. Homework is set regularly and is one element of ongoing formative assessment. An examination of students’ copybooks showed that a variety of exercises is assigned and corrected by the teachers. Assessment for Learning (AFL) techniques are employed including the use of a comment to help students to improve on their work. A key element is the well-established system of academic tracking that is in place. The information derived from this system is used to support students both pastorally and in their academic development. Another element of the tracking is the in-depth statistical analysis of results and of the uptake of levels in the certificate examinations that is carried out. The results are used to motivate students and to establish that they are achieving to their potential. Students’ achievement in language learning is also recognised at the annual awards ceremony.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- French is a core subject and access is open to all students.
- Management recognises the importance of ongoing professional development for staff and offers support for teacher involvement in new initiatives.
- Subject planning is of a very high standard and a collaborative approach is taken to the development and implementation of the subject plan.
- The quality of teaching and learning is very good.
- Lessons are well structured and students engage fully in the classroom activities.
- Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning, and the modes used reflect the objectives of the syllabus and programmes.
- A system of academic tracking is in place to assist students in reaching their potential.

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

- It is recommended that adequate time for students to practise new vocabulary be factored into lesson planning.

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 welcomes the affirmation of the very good quality of teaching and learning taking place in the French department in Scoil Pól. The Board particularly notes the recognition of

- The high expectations teachers have of students
- The pastoral approach taken to students’ academic development
- The cultural links and awareness fostered by the French department
- The practice by teachers of facilitating the involvement of all students in class activities.
- The in-depth statistical analysis of results and the effective manner in which this information is used.

The Board commends the comprehensive and professional nature of the inspection.