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, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The school is committed to the teaching of modern foreign languages and in particular, French and German. Spanish was also introduced in recent years. However, during a two-year period French was not offered on the curriculum. This led to a lack of continuity in the teaching of the language and as a result there are no French classes in third year and fifth year at present. Following a review of the position of languages and the resources available, a decision was taken by management to reinstate French as a core subject in the school and to offer it to students in first year. Students now have a choice of French or German in first year. The students are given an opportunity to sample the two languages during their first month in the school. At the end of this period, they select either French or German and they will then continue with the study of this language into senior cycle.

There are currently French classes in first year, second year and sixth year. Timetabling provision for the subject is satisfactory and the provision of single periods in junior cycle is an advantage in terms of language learning. Students in first year are allocated three single periods per week and this allocation increases to four periods in second year. Three single and one double period are allocated to French in sixth year.

The re-introduction of French as a core subject coupled with changes in the teaching staff means that there are two teachers in the subject department this year. The teachers do not have designated classrooms but move from room to room. In the absence of a language room, it is important to create a stimulating language-learning environment through the use of posters and samples of students’ work. The provision of a map of France in particular is essential. It was good to note the displays of posters in some rooms and it is suggested that this practice be extended and developed.

Resources for language teaching include an interactive whiteboard, and a language section in the library as well as a selection of DVDs and CDs. The school is awaiting installation of new information and communication technology (ICT) including data projectors and additional interactive whiteboards. Teacher professional development in the use of ICT is ongoing within
the school and it is very positive that the expertise within the staff is being utilised in this regard as it promotes collaboration and collegiality.

The school celebrates an International Day each year in which the culture of different countries is celebrated. It is suggested that the languages taught in the school could be highlighted as part of this event or through accompanying activities. The involvement of junior-cycle classes is particularly recommended as a way of making language learning enjoyable. This would help to promote French language and culture within the school. A school tour to Paris is also organised on a regular basis.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Management facilitates the holding of a subject department meeting each term. While subject planning has been carried out in the past, there was a natural hiatus caused by the absence of French from the curriculum for a number of years. The recent re-introduction of French as a core component of the curriculum offers an excellent opportunity for a renewed focus on planning. The teachers have already commenced this work and have developed ideas and documents on a range of topics including yearly plans and differentiated teaching strategies as well as links with the learning support team. However, it is recommended that planning should concentrate on the updating of yearly schemes of work for first year and second year classes initially as well as preparatory work and forward planning for third year. The schemes should identify the knowledge, skills and learning outcomes that the students should acquire in each year of their course. The stipulated learning outcomes could then be used to monitor students’ learning at the end of a unit of work. Active teaching methodologies, cultural awareness and a policy for use of the target language should also be included.

As the school is awaiting the installation of extensive ICT facilities, it is suggested that the opportunities that such facilities will offer for language learning should also be factored into subject planning. Collaboration between the languages departments so as to allow for a sharing of resources and of examples of good practice is also recommended. As the number of teachers involved is small, the appointment of a languages co-ordinator to oversee planning for the reintroduction of French and also German into senior cycle should be considered. This would help to progress the development of a language policy and to identify language departments’ requirements in the future as the number of students taking those languages increases.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The quality of teaching and learning in French varied from lesson to lesson. Where teaching was very good, the lessons were characterised by good use of the target language, clear communication of content, and activities that supported student learning.

There was good use of the target language for teaching lesson content and for classroom communication in a small number of lessons. Instructions, corrections and affirmation were given in French and this created an environment that encouraged students to respond to questions in French. Where an explanation was required, students were encouraged to make connections between the French expression and similar sounding words in English. This is good practice as it develops a sense of language awareness and helps students in their language learning. However, in other instances there was an emphasis on translation into English. As a result, students had very little opportunity to hear French spoken as part of normal classroom interaction. It is
recommended that translation should be avoided where possible, especially in junior-cycle classes where the meaning of words can be communicated more readily through pictures, drawings, gestures and facial expressions. With more able students, it can often be beneficial to ask them to indicate the words that require explanation rather than engaging in automatic translation.

Good classroom management was seen when attendance was monitored and learning activities were well managed. Often the simple routine of calling the roll and of writing the day and date can help to ease the transition from one subject to the next for students. This is especially relevant for first-year students who are grappling with a number of new subjects and two new languages during the first few weeks of term. In such instances, the lesson content needs to be carefully chosen so as to be appropriate to the class group, the subject matter and the time available. With first-year students during the language-sampling period, a good balance needs to be achieved between creating a sense of enjoyment about learning a language and lesson content. An emphasis on active learning methodologies and allowing students an opportunity to work together during the lesson would help them to gain confidence and would foster positive class relations.

The clear communication of lesson aims and learning outcomes to students is an important aspect of lesson management. In lessons where the learning intentions were explained, it helped to give a focus to the lesson and so facilitated learning. The teaching of vocabulary was a key feature and flash-cards highlighting some key words on a topic were used at the start of one lesson. Careful planning by the teacher ensured that the same words re-appeared as part of the assigned homework at the end of the lesson. This reinforced what had been taught and it was good to note that the students were able to apply what they had learnt and to make suggestions. The students were encouraged to suggest examples of how words could be built into sentences through the inclusion of grammatical phrases such as *il faut*. Allowing a few minutes of lesson-time for students to practise the pronunciation of key words or phrases is recommended as a way of building confidence in speaking the language and so preparing them for their oral examinations.

While resources such as handouts were sometimes used effectively to enhance learning, at other times, there was limited use of resources. In junior cycle classes in particular, visual aids such as photographs, pictures and drawings can be very effective in encouraging student participation. Strategies such as the use of colour in the teaching of grammar, the highlighting of key words and ensuring that students have time to practise those words during the lesson, could be employed to assist students in their language learning. These strategies would link well with the priorities of the Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) initiative with which the school is involved and would support teaching and learning in French.

The students’ enthusiasm and enjoyment of the subject was evident in particular when the methods used encouraged participation. However, at other times students needed to be more engaged with the classroom activities. This could be achieved by the creation of a better balance between teacher input and student activity so as to ensure that students have an opportunity to engage in pair or small group work. At junior-cycle level, more attention needs to be paid to lesson planning so as to ensure that the key language skills of listening, reading and speaking are incorporated into the lesson. In particular there should be an increased emphasis on listening and speaking activities during the lesson. The incorporation of listening activities could also be used successfully to vary the pace of the lesson. Making use of the CD accompanying the textbook would allow students to become accustomed to hearing a range of different voices and accents.

The students were polite and cooperative at all times in the lessons observed. It was evident that they were interested in their work and they responded well when questioned. Their behaviour was very good and they applied themselves diligently to the tasks assigned.
ASSESSMENT

The school has a formal homework and assessment policy. Students’ progress is monitored through classroom activities and homework. Continuous assessment is carried out through class tests at the end of units of work. Each year, the students sit formal house examinations in November and in the summer while the ‘mock’ certificate examinations take place in the second term. Practice orals are also held for students in Leaving Certificate in preparation for the certificate examinations. An examination of a selection of copybooks showed that a variety of written work had been assigned and corrected. It is suggested that the use of assessment for learning techniques (AfL) such as the inclusion of a comment on exercises would be of benefit in helping students to monitor their progress. Information in relation to these techniques can be accessed on the website of the NCCA (www.ncca.ie). Parents are kept informed of students’ progress through the student journal, reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a renewed emphasis on French as a core subject on the curriculum.
- The timetabling provision of single class periods in junior cycle is satisfactory.
- The commitment of the teachers to reinvigorate subject planning is very positive.
- Lesson preparation and the management of teaching and learning activities were very good in some instances.
- Students were courteous and cooperative at all times and showed an interest in their learning.

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

- Subject planning should focus on the review and updating of the yearly schemes of work to include learning outcomes and strategies to promote student engagement and participation.
- The target language should be used as the language of communication in all lessons.
- An increased emphasis on active learning methodologies in junior cycle is needed; more opportunities should be provided for students to engage in pair and group work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with one teacher 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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