Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Schull Community College, Schull
County Cork
Roll number: 71102I

Date of inspection: 2 October 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Schull Community College. 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

The provision for modern European languages is very good. It is very positive that students are offered the opportunity to learn more than one language during their time in the school and that access to the study of the language is open to all. French and German are provided and students also have an opportunity to study Spanish outside of the school day. Study of a European language forms one of the core subjects in junior cycle with French and German taken by all students in first year as part of a subject-sampling programme. At the end of first year, students choose their subjects from option bands that are dictated by student preference. Students are advised by the subject teacher and guidance counsellor with regard to their choice. There is strong recognition of the importance of modern languages in that students are encouraged to select more than one language and this choice is facilitated by the timetable. Transition Year (TY) is compulsory for students and the study of a language forms an integral part of the programme. French is offered in two subject-option bands in both fifth year and sixth year and this favours the high uptake of the subject. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes in junior cycle and senior cycle. The teachers have regular contact with the special educational needs team with a view to best supporting students with additional educational needs.

In first year, students are timetabled for three lesson periods per week. In second year and third year, however, there are two double periods of French per week. While the time allocation is satisfactory, the provision of double periods is less favourable as frequency of class contact is important for language-learning, in particular in the early years. It is therefore recommended that every effort be made to increase the number of single periods per week in junior cycle. In TY, students taking one modern language have four class periods per week while those taking two languages have two periods in each language per week. The subject is allocated one single and two double lesson periods in fifth year and in sixth year.

There are currently two members of staff teaching French. The teachers may be classroom based or may move from room to room. Attention is paid to displaying posters and charts in the classrooms. Samples of students’ work ranging from Bonjour posters created by first-year students to projects by older students on France and la Francophonie were used to decorate the walls. The range of displays was successful in creating a pleasant and informative language-learning environment and highlighted the quality of the work taking place in the
classroom. The school is well-resourced in relation to information and communication technology (ICT), with internet access in the staffroom and in some classrooms, a language laboratory, an interactive whiteboard as well as overhead projectors, data projectors and television. It is good to note that the teachers are committed to developing the use of ICT for teaching and learning purposes. Networked computer rooms allow for students to have email contact with their language-exchange partners. Class sets of dictionaries and books are also available to support teaching and learning.

There is very good co-curricular and extracurricular support for French. The teachers work with the geography, home economics and English departments to organise cultural activities. These include a Christmas concert, a French cheese-tasting during the school’s Open Night and a petit déjeuner for students. The European Day of Languages is celebrated and a programme of events is prepared for a European Language Week to highlight the languages within the school. Outings to the cinema to view French films are organised. A French theatre group puts on performances for students while Transition Year students dramatise and perform traditional French stories and fairy tales as part of their programme. A student-exchange programme for second-year students with a collège in the South of France also forms part of the school year. As such an exchange involves considerable organisation both in coordinating arrangements for students to visit France and in preparing for the return visit by the French school, the teachers are to be commended for their ongoing commitment to this exchange programme.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The French department is well organised as regards planning and it is good to note that extensive subject planning has been undertaken. One teacher acts as subject co-ordinator on a rotational basis and her role includes the co-ordination of the subject plans and teaching resources. Formal meetings are scheduled each term while informal meetings take place regularly. The good practice of recording the minutes of these meetings has commenced. Tools such as a diagnostic window have been employed to identify what is working well in the subject as well as areas for future development. There was evidence of good individual planning and preparation in the teachers’ files and in the worksheets and other materials used in the lessons observed.

A whole-school policy has been prepared for modern languages. This policy is monitored on an ongoing basis and reviewed as part of school development planning meetings. The subject plan for French includes schemes of work for each year group with reference to learning outcomes, copies of correspondence, official documentation and detailed planning for students with additional needs including exceptionally able students. Planning for a culturally diverse society is also included. In all cases, it is very positive that planning is informed by the context of the school and its students.

The teachers have created a collegial environment which encourages the sharing of ideas on best practice and collating resources. In order to build on the good work accomplished to date, it is suggested that future planning should focus on teaching and learning strategies for mixed-ability classes. This could involve selecting a number of short-term goals such as encouraging students’ communication in the target language.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Good practice was observed in the use of French for classroom management by the teachers. Instructions and affirmation were given in the target language while the use of gestures by the teacher helped to lessen the need for translation into English especially with new learners.
With junior cycle students, the choral repetition of new words and phrases was used to good effect as the practice of having students learn new words aurally before discovering the written form of the word can help to establish habits of correct pronunciation. Students were given opportunities to use the target language during the lessons. Often this was in response to questions from the teacher. While junior cycle students were eager to answer and to participate in activities, some older students were more hesitant in speaking the language. As a means of encouraging communication in the target language, it is recommended that there be a focus on developing strategies to support communication such as highlighting phrases for classroom communication. It is also suggested that questioning techniques be extended so as to encourage students to answer in French rather than English.

Lessons were well paced and the choice of material and of activities was appropriate to the level of the classes. There was very good continuity with prior learning. Visual aids such as drawings and posters helped to make lessons interesting and it was good that junior cycle students were encouraged to make use of drawings rather than an English translation when noting new words. Short grammar activities were well integrated with class work and helped to foster a sense of language awareness. Listening comprehension exercises were linked with the theme of the lesson. Attention was paid to organising younger students’ learning through instructions to make use of the appropriate notebook or copy.

There was a strong focus on cultural awareness with lessons on themes related to France and Europe. Activities were built around a quiz on the countries of the European Union or a map of the French-speaking world or a journalistic article on Europe. An exercise involving matching questions and answers provided a good introduction to current affairs and was used as the basis for work on vocabulary and personal opinions. It was very positive that authentic documents had been chosen and carefully edited so as to be readily accessible to students of varying abilities, and these resources were used effectively to enhance the learning experience. As a considerable amount of time and effort goes into the selection of such texts and the preparation of relevant activities, it is suggested that ways of further exploiting documents and resources be explored. A typical example might be using the initial activity as the basis for an oral presentation or for written work depending on the level of the group. This would allow for a progression from listening and reading activities to the more active-language skills of speaking and writing, and would encourage a personal response from students. As there is very good communication between the two teachers and as there are two class groups for the subject in each year, the feasibility of bringing groups together to carry out an activity might be investigated. Consideration might equally be given to introducing an element of team-teaching as a way of working with mixed-ability groups. This would serve as a way of providing for differentiation and would help to further challenge the more able students.

Students engaged in a number of activities that involved pair or small group work. It was obvious that they enjoyed this work which ranged from questions on families in one class to research on European countries and collaboration on information retrieval exercises. While this is very positive as it helps students to engage actively with the work of the lesson, creating a stronger reason for the students to work together would further encourage participation. For example, this could be achieved by dividing up information among students in such a way as to require them to question each other in order to discover the answer.

There was a good rapport between the teachers and students and the atmosphere in the classes was relaxed and positive. The quality of teaching and learning was good. The students were motivated and demonstrated a good understanding of their work. They received encouragement and affirmation from their teachers. The distribution of small prizes for a poster competition with a junior cycle class created a palpable sense of excitement during the visit while the display of projects on the walls contributed to the students’ evident sense of
pride in their achievements in the language. Such activities help to create interest in the subject and encourage students to be active in their own learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

The modes of assessment used include continuous assessment, class questioning, project work, common tests where appropriate, and formal school examinations. Non-examination year classes including TY have tests at Christmas and in the summer. It is good to note that there is also an assessment of TY project work and of the presentation made by students during the year. Third-year and sixth-year groups have class tests at Christmas and sit the pre-examinations in February. There is a good focus on the testing of spoken proficiency in senior cycle with an oral test for fifth-year students at Christmas and in the summer. It is recommended that this practice be extended to include an oral assessment for students in junior cycle as well.

An examination of a selection of copybooks and files showed that homework is assigned regularly. The good practice of including both marks and a positive comment on students’ work was noted. Results in the certificate examinations are analysed with reference to national norms and are used to ensure continuous evaluation of standards. Parents are kept informed of students’ progress through the student journal and the annual parent-teacher meetings. Reports are sent to parents twice yearly.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision for modern European languages with students encouraged to study more than one language.
- Co-curricular and extracurricular support for the language is very strong.
- The quality of teaching and learning in the subject is good.
- A comprehensive plan has been prepared for the subject and there is good cooperation between the teachers in the sharing of ideas and resources.
- There was good use of French by the teachers for teaching purposes and as the language of communication in the classroom.
- The focus on cultural awareness and authentic documents made for interesting and informative lessons.
- Activities involving pair work encouraged student participation.

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

- It is recommended that efforts be made to increase the number of single-lesson periods for French at junior cycle.
- As part of subject planning, there should be a focus on strategies to encourage student communication in French including an annual assessment of oral proficiency in junior cycle.

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*