

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil na Tríonóide
Youghal, County Cork
Roll number: 91513S**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection as part of a whole school evaluation in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide. 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 principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Two modern European languages are offered to students in Pobalscoil na Tríonóide, namely French and German. All students are offered an opportunity to study both languages in first year and this is commendable.

At the end of first year, students select their optional subjects of which French is one. In the last three years, the school has endeavoured to find the best way of offering an open choice of options to students and so the formation of option blocks has varied from year to year. As a result, the present second and third year cohorts have had different experiences of language learning and of access to languages. The arrangement in place for third-year students has allowed them the option of continuing with two languages to Junior Certificate. This has not been a possibility for the current second year group under the open-choice system. These students had an initial year of both French and German for two periods per week whereas the current first year cohort is following a sampling programme of seven weeks of one language followed by seven weeks of the second. At the end of the first term, these first-year students will be asked to select one of the two languages to study for the remainder of the year. They will then be offered an open choice of options at the end of first year for study up to Junior Certificate level. Although it is envisaged that students will continue with the modern language initially chosen, it is still possible for a student to drop the study of any language at the end of first year. It is positive however, that students are encouraged to take a language and are made aware of the long-term implications of discontinuing the study of a foreign language at an information evening on the choice of options for first year students.

An examination of current uptake figures for French and German suggests that students' levels of interest are high in junior cycle. At present, French is the less popular of the two foreign languages on offer in junior cycle. As there are advantages and disadvantages to each arrangement for choosing optional subjects in the junior cycle, it is recommended that there be ongoing monitoring and review of the current systems with a view to establishing the most appropriate system and that the factors that promote the study of languages be given particular consideration in this process. Given the number of students who are showing interest in languages

and the level of their interest, a way of facilitating those students who wish to study more than one language should also be considered.

Students are taught in mixed-ability classes in junior cycle. The decision whether to sit the higher or ordinary level in the Junior Certificate examination is usually made by students during third year in consultation with the teacher. Parents are informed of the choice of level in the progress reports sent home at Christmas and after the “mock” examinations.

Unlike the system in place in junior cycle, study of a language is a core element of the optional Transition Year (TY) programme. As a result, the TY French class groupings in the current year include both students who have studied the language to Junior Certificate level and a number of *ab initio* students. As this arrangement was found by the teachers to be unsatisfactory for teaching and learning purposes, a re-organisation of staffing was required some weeks into the term to allow for a division between core-language lessons and a more general lesson based on a cultural approach. It is suggested that pre-planning of the TY class groupings should take account of variations in language learning needs while concurrent timetabling of TY language classes would obviate the need for such disparate groups in the future.

Students have an open choice of option subjects for the Leaving Certificate and at present French is part of two option blocks with a choice of nine subjects in each block. There are two classes of French in fifth and sixth year and students are taught in mixed-ability classes. As each class is part of a different option block, the classes are not timetabled concurrently and therefore it is not possible to have separate ordinary-level and higher-level classes in senior cycle. As the number of students taking French is high, it is suggested that management considers ways of facilitating the provision of separate ordinary-level and higher-level classes in French for fifth and sixth year.

Teachers have designated base classrooms. The rooms are well-equipped with CD players, computers and data projectors and generally have internet access. The teachers have made excellent use of their rooms to create colourful and attractive displays of posters, maps and photographs which help to provide a stimulating language-learning environment. The language teachers have access to a language laboratory and to a room equipped with an interactive whiteboard.

Extracurricular support for the language is wide-ranging and includes the celebration of European Day of Languages, and a French Week during which a range of activities and events are offered to students including French food and music. The teachers are to be commended for their work in this regard.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The French department is very well organised as regards subject planning and the French teachers have engaged in extensive subject planning since the opening of the school. This is very good. A member of the French department acts as subject co-ordinator on a rotational basis and the role includes organising subject department meetings, the co-ordination of the annual French Week and support for new staff. Meetings are scheduled on a regular basis throughout the year while informal meetings also take place. The good practice of recording minutes is maintained. Recent minutes show that a range of issues has been discussed at meetings.

A comprehensive subject-department plan has been prepared. Common schemes of work have been compiled for each year group which address the learning outcomes, methodologies,

resources and modes of assessment for the topics to be studied. It is good to note that suggestions for strategies to support students with special educational needs and subject planning for a culturally diverse society are also part of the subject plan. Results from the certificate examinations are analysed by the subject teachers with reference to national norms and with a focus on maintaining and improving standards. Files of resources have been compiled as well as worksheets and materials for pair and group work. It is to the department's credit that its members have created a collegial environment where the sharing of resources and discussion on good practice is encouraged. In order to build on the good work accomplished to date, it is recommended that consideration be given in future planning meetings to focusing on teaching and learning strategies for specific year groups. This could involve selecting a small number of short and medium term goals for these groups. It might also include a focus on differentiated teaching or on encouraging communication in the target language.

Cross-curricular planning involving cooperation and collaboration between various subject departments is a feature of the French department's planning. This allows students to broaden their approach to a topic or subject and brings a sense of unity to their work. This collaboration played an important role, for example, in the success of the visit by French students to the school. The French department intends to collaborate with teachers of subjects such as History, Geography, Music and Art in the preparations for the upcoming French Week. The teachers are to be commended for the efforts put into establishing links with other subject areas.

There was evidence of some very good individual planning and preparation in the teachers' files and in the PowerPoint presentations, handouts, worksheets and other materials used in the lessons observed. It is very positive that the schemes of work in use incorporated the teachers' evaluations of the learning outcomes and allowed space for noting the progress made to date.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Visits were made to seven lessons at junior and senior cycle during the course of the evaluation. Students were involved in a variety of activities during the lessons, including a table quiz, crosswords, reflective writing, PowerPoint presentations and pair work. Within most individual lessons, students were encouraged to participate in a range of language tasks and this served well to maintain their interest and motivation. It was evident that there was good continuity with previous lessons and there were frequent references made to prior learning. In some instances, the aims and learning outcomes were shared with students at the start of the lesson. This is recognised as good practice and it is suggested that this practice should be extended to all classes.

The pace and structure of the lessons was very good in most instances. This was particularly in evidence where instructions for activities were clear; where teaching aids such as the whiteboard and information and communication technology (ICT) were used effectively; and where there was a smooth transition from one activity to the next. The success with which ICT was integrated into the teaching of the language in some lessons is particularly noteworthy. The effective use of a PowerPoint presentation in one instance to illustrate new vocabulary and to test students' knowledge through a game ensured that all students were focused on the activity. This then led easily into a further task which was based on a listening comprehension exercise. In a small number of other instances, students would have benefited from a change in the type of activity or from the use of more visual aids to support learning. When planning a lesson, it is important to ensure that the learning objectives intended are achievable in the time available and that they take into consideration the students' capacity to concentrate. This is particularly important at certain times of the school day, or in the case of a double period, or when the lesson content is focused

on a topic such as grammatical structures. In these cases, varying the activity to make it better suit the mood of the class may be successful in evoking a more positive response from the students. Sometimes the simple act of starting the lesson with a short group activity rather than the correction of the previous night's homework will be enough to motivate the students and to get them engaged with the lesson.

The use of French by the teachers for classroom communication and instruction was generally excellent. It was obvious that the students were accustomed to hearing French spoken and they showed a good level of understanding. However, while some students displayed great confidence in using the language, others were more hesitant and were slow to respond. At times, there needed to be a better balance between the time devoted to teaching and the time available for students to talk as they would have benefited from more opportunities to communicate. In order to encourage students to use French, it is recommended that the teachers look at ways of supporting the students' active use of the language through focused interventions and through strategies such as providing them with models for an exercise. This is especially relevant where the less-able students are concerned as they are more likely to find it difficult to structure their ideas and so may hold back when it comes to answering in French. The introduction of classroom phrases for use with and by first-year students from the very start of their language learning is also suggested.

Pair work was used effectively with many classes to encourage active participation and peer learning. It was obvious that students at all levels greatly enjoyed these activities. Pair work and small-group work help to encourage students to be independent learners. An added advantage is that this type of approach enables the teacher to take on the role of facilitator and to offer individual assistance where it is required. Giving students the responsibility for asking questions of each other can lead to a move away from teacher-directed questioning to the use of a greater variety of questioning techniques. This is recommended as good practice as it affords students more opportunity for communication.

The teaching of vocabulary was a feature of some classes and good organisation of students' learning was displayed in the way that new words were written on the board, synonyms given and students advised to take notes. In order to link vocabulary building with encouraging good habits of pronunciation, it is suggested that time should be allowed for students to practise the pronunciation of new vocabulary in class. In some lessons, the teaching of new vocabulary was associated with work on a listening comprehension. As a way of developing students' global listening skills, they should be made aware of the importance of learning to listen to a text in its entirety as well as listening to it just for information retrieval purposes, especially as the questions on a listening comprehension are usually asked in English. This type of activity could easily be done as a pre-listening or post-listening exercise or for the consolidation of learning at the end of a lesson.

The attention paid to the teaching of cultural awareness was especially noteworthy and is to be commended. This ranged from the use of a map in one lesson to questions on French culture as part of a quiz in another lesson. At senior cycle level, a few minutes spent by the teacher on asking the students to suggest headlines from the news led to a short discussion of items of national and international interest. This had the effect of broadening the students' perspective on world affairs while providing an excellent link with oral and written work. A piece of reflective writing taken from a student's blog in France was used most successfully as a stimulus to elicit a similar reflective response from students and encouraged them to make comparisons between their own culture and life in France. A whole-class activity of creating a text on the board from their contributions helped to prepare them for the task of crafting an individual response as a

homework exercise. It was evident from the thoughtfulness and care with which they carried out the activity that they were engaged and learning well.

The atmosphere in the classes visited was relaxed and positive. There was a good rapport between the teachers and students and it was noteworthy that students were respectful and attentive when others were speaking. They demonstrated a good understanding of the topics studied and were organised and purposeful in their work. The students received encouragement and affirmation from their teachers and corrections were given sensitively. A pleasant learning environment was created through the attention paid to seating arrangements and through the use of attractive displays including maps, posters and samples of students' work.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is used including class questioning, homework, class tests and formal school examinations. Mid-term assessments are carried out by the teachers during class-time. While first year Christmas tests are devised by the individual teachers, common assessments are prepared for summer tests. This is good practice. Assessment marks are based on a combination of different elements of written, oral and aural work. Care is taken to vary the type of assessment used so, for example, the preparation of posters may be a component at first year level while the projects, which are an integral part of the Transition Year programme, also form part of the TY assessment. Senior cycle students benefit from the practice oral lessons that the teachers offer them during lunch-time or after school and the teachers are to be commended for their work in this regard.

It is very positive that there is a subject-department homework policy with procedures in place for homework and assessment. An examination of a selection of students' copybooks and files showed that homework is assigned regularly and that work is corrected. The good practice of including positive comments and suggestions for improvement is also noted. Students and parents are provided with information about progress in the subject through regular feedback, reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for languages in the school is good and access to the study of French is open to all students.
- Provision for ICT resources is very good and ICT is used effectively as an aid to teaching and learning.
- Subject planning is well advanced and a comprehensive plan for French has been prepared.
- There was excellent use of French by the teachers for teaching purposes and as the language of communication in the classroom.
- Pair work was used effectively to promote student participation and engagement.
- There was evidence of a positive rapport between teachers and students.

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

- It is recommended that the current system of option choices at junior cycle be kept under review and that the factors that promote the study of languages be given particular consideration in this process.
- The possibility of concurrent timetabling of French classes in fifth and sixth year so as to allow for separate higher and ordinary level classes should be considered.
- Subject planning should focus, in the future, on teaching and learning strategies for specific year groups.
- In order to enable all students to use French with confidence, it is recommended that the teachers identify further ways of supporting the students in their use of the language.
- The use of a greater variety of questioning techniques is recommended in lessons.

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.