Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Gaelcholáiste Chiarraí
Trá Lí, Contae Chiarraí
Roll number: 70560K

Date of inspection: 4 March 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Gaelscóil Chiarraí. 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 the teacher, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teacher. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and the teacher’s written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and the subject teacher. 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 one of two modern languages offered in this Irish-medium post-primary school. Students study both French and German in first year and then chose to study one of these languages in second and subsequent years. In exceptional cases, a student may be exempted from the study of a modern language but only on the basis of professional advice and by agreement with parents or guardians.

Uptake of French is satisfactory at junior cycle but the low number of students opting to take French at senior cycle is of some concern. Management and the French department are advised to monitor uptake at this level and to work to increase it over time. Students are organised in mixed-ability groups. Class size is very manageable, offering opportunities for personal attention and development of students’ oral competence.

Time allocated to the subject is good but the distribution of lesson periods across the week is not entirely satisfactory as there are double periods timetabled in both second and third year. In second year, the weekly tuition time is delivered in two double periods which means that students do not have contact with the language from Friday of one week to Wednesday of the following week. It was explained that this does not normally occur. It is advised that, if at all possible, it be avoided when timetabling language lessons as it is recommended that frequent and regular contact with the target language best supports language acquisition.

The continuing professional development of teachers is promoted at whole-school level and the French department has engaged in some professional development provided locally. Consideration might now be given to the benefits of membership of the professional organisation, and to the possibilities offered by Department schemes such as the French/Irish Teacher Professional Visits scheme, outlined in the recently published Circular 0028/10, and the summer scholarship scheme jointly organised with the French Cultural Services. These schemes provide a particular opportunity to support teachers in the maintenance of essential linguistic accuracy and
fluency. The school should pursue its efforts to secure the services of a language assistant as an assistant can animate and support the teaching and learning of the subject in a school in a very real way.

Most French lessons take place in the French base-classroom. The classroom is well-equipped and also provides storage for some teaching resources. The availability of information and communication technology (ICT) in the classroom is commended. There was some evidence of the use of posters, pictures and student work being used to create a print-rich and culturally supportive learning environment. However, there is scope to renew and enhance this environment on an on-going basis. Students of French have access to some reading material in the school library, and the French department also makes use of journalistic material, particularly in Transition Year (TY). The proposed move to a larger base for the school library should provide an opportunity to build the departmental stock of reading and film material.

Co-curricular links with subjects such as Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE), German and computer studies are encouraged. It is very positive that the French department has organised student participation in the Concours Internet ‘Francophonie’ organised by the French Cultural Services in Ireland. Students of French have attended film screenings in the past and a French theatrical production. Plans are now being made to participate in a regional quiz. Gaelscoil Chiarrai is currently investigating the creation of a link with an educational institution in Touraine; this is very much encouraged as it should offer a real opportunity for authentic communication in the target language and the possibility of student visits or an exchange.

French is an important part of the curriculum in this school. Management is well-informed in relation to the subject and committed to the development of provision. The on-going growth and expansion of the school now offers opportunities to sustain, support and enhance provision in French.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The work of the department is co-ordinated by the teacher appointed. Meetings of the French department are organised on a termly basis. Formal notes are not retained. It is suggested that such a record of matters considered and decisions taken should be kept, and that decisions taken should also demonstrate the practical steps to be taken to develop the subject as part of any action plan to be put in place.

A departmental plan has been prepared. Plans document organisational arrangements for the subject and the teaching programme for all years. Plans also include reference to the inclusion of students with additional educational needs and to strategies to support differentiation in the classroom; this is commended. It is suggested that the teaching plans could be enhanced by the inclusion of reference to student learning goals, methodologies to be employed and assessment and evaluation. It is suggested that the TY plan also include the assessment of students’ oral competence. In order to support the overall effective development of subject provision it is also suggested that the French department draft a simple time-referenced action plan for that purpose. Collaboration with the other modern language department in the school should provide a useful synergy and support.

All lessons observed had been well prepared. Preparation was thorough. It had taken into account appropriateness of content and cultural awareness. Thought had also been given to the methodologies to be used and to the integration of the various skills where possible. Careful
preparation had also included the sourcing and preparation of resources including an internet clip and material resources to stimulate students’ oral participation.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Three lessons were observed as part of the evaluation; one double lesson at junior cycle and two lessons at senior cycle. Teaching and learning was good or very good in these lessons.

Lesson content selected was appropriate to the students’ stage of language development and had been aptly chosen to support the development of cultural awareness and also to be of topical interest to the students. This is commended.

Work had been planned so as to endeavour to maintain student interest and engagement. Lesson pace was generally very good and engaging, though perhaps this was more successfully achieved in the single-period lessons.

The target language was used in all lessons. It was clear that most students were accustomed to this. Pair work was used very effectively to encourage oral production. This was supported by good teacher circulation and the requirement to provide extended answers. Work with students also included good error analysis and correction. The importance of supporting junior cycle students to repeat and acquire structures prior to being required to reproduce and use them was discussed. It was suggested that greater use could be made of recorded material in order to do this. It was further suggested that students’ oral production could be supported by requiring them to be able to ask, as well as to answer, questions and by planning to begin a lesson with some active student oral engagement.

The careful planning necessary to include the integration of skills observed in lessons is praised. The skilful inclusion of grammar as relevant is also commended. It was particularly good to see students being encouraged to make a connection with prior learning and to recall examples from that learning, especially when those examples were drawn from them orally. It was suggested that thought be given to how best to develop students’ listening skills over time.

All lessons were well managed. Students were encouraged by gentle teacher support. Where most successful, the quality of atmosphere and student engagement was a direct reflection of the quality of classroom management and student-teacher rapport established in the particular lesson.

Students’ application to learning was generally very good. They responded well in conversation with the inspector. It was clear that they were well-disposed to the subject and to learning.

**ASSESSMENT**

Gaelchláiste Chiarraí has both an assessment and a homework policy. Homework was assigned and reviewed in lessons observed. A review of students’ written work provided evidence of the regular assignment of homework exercises. The importance of regular monitoring of written work from the early years of language learning was raised.

Students’ learning is assessed on an on-going basis. Progress is reported to parents through the student journal, student reports and at parent-teacher meetings. Assessment of students’ oral competence is part of the formal assessment process in sixth year. It is recommended that the French department plan to extend the practice of the assessment of students’ oral competence
more widely over time. Levels of students’ oral competence should then also be reported to parents.

Uptake of higher-level papers in certificate examinations is generally above average. Achievement is very good. It is recommended that the French department monitor uptake, achievement and performance in certificate examinations in the context of national norms.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- French is an important part of curricular provision in this school.
- School management is well informed in relation to the subject and supportive of the development of provision.
- All lessons observed had been well prepared.
- The target language was used in all lessons evaluated.
- Teaching and learning was good or very good in all lessons observed.
- All lessons were well managed and students were encouraged by gentle teacher support.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- School management and the French department should monitor uptake of French at senior cycle and work to increase it over time.
- In so far as is possible, teaching time for the subject should be more evenly distributed across the week at junior cycle.
- The practice of assessing students’ oral competence should be extended to all class groups over time.
- The French department should devise an action-plan to support the development of the teaching and learning of the subject.

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 October 2011*
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

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

- Teachers and school management are making every effort to increase uptake of French in senior cycle.

- Henceforward the allocation of time to the subject will be distributed more evenly across the week in junior cycle.

- The board will examine carefully the recommendations made in the report so as to implement them over time.

  *This is a translation of the school response submitted by the board of management.*