

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Coláiste Ghobnatan
Baile Mhic Íre, Contae Chorcaí
Roll number: 709200**

Date of inspection: 7 October 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

**REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH**

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Ghobnatan, Baile Mhic Íre, County Cork. 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. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

This all-Irish community college has an enrolment of 241 in the current school year. The school offers Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

French is a key element of curricular provision in the school as it is the only modern language offered to all students. It is positive to note that, where possible, the school supports linguistic diversity as evidenced by the provision currently of a module in Chinese which is being offered to TY students as part of a project led by University College, Cork (UCC).

All students are encouraged to study French. In a few instances, where a student has a special educational need, the school may decide to exempt the student from the study of the language, but only on the basis of professional advice, and following consultation with parents or guardians.

Students taking LCVP study French and those who may be taking the programme, but who have been exempted from Leaving Certificate French, are expected to take a module of French for the purposes of meeting the conditions necessary for full participation in the programme. This regulation is detailed in Circular 0013/09. Concern was expressed during the course of the evaluation when it came to light that an over-sight had meant that two of the students, currently in sixth-year LCVP, were not taking such a module. The issue was discussed with school management and assurances were provided, and accepted, that steps would be taken to rectify the matter.

Many classes have less than twenty students. Class sizes of this nature are particularly advantageous in the context of language learning and the need to emphasise oral skills. Teachers are encouraged to maximise the opportunity which these class numbers afford.

Classes are organised as mixed-ability groups. This is appropriate, particularly given the common nature of the syllabuses for modern languages. This practice is also commended as it supports the school's policy of encouraging as many students as possible to sit higher-level examination papers. It is suggested that employing a thematic approach to planning and teaching also supports teachers in working with mixed-ability groups. Such an approach allows the teacher to focus on a common theme with all students but with an appropriate level of differentiation and challenge where necessary.

Time allocated to the subject is very satisfactory and in line with national norms. Every effort has been made to timetable lessons well so that students have frequent contact with the language.

There are three teachers of French in the school all of whom are French graduates with a number of years teaching experience. The teachers work within a departmental structure led normally by the teacher with the greatest number of French classes in a given year.

Teachers in the French department are committed to, and interested in, their subject. School management recognises the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) and is supportive of teacher involvement in same. An annual subscription is paid to the French Teachers' Association (FTA). Teachers have spent time in the target language country, have attended the annual conference and have undertaken certificate examination work. It was suggested that consideration should be given to the benefits of applying for the services of a French language assistant. Teachers were also referred to Circular 0028/10 which details a new scheme to support teacher professional visits to the target language country.

The teaching of French is generally well resourced. Facilities are good with each teacher being classroom based. Work done to date on developing a supportive language learning environment should continue. Much credit is due to school management for the extent to which they have equipped these classrooms. Each classroom has a data projector, laptop computer, whiteboard, audio equipment, television and filing cabinet.

Lessons observed showed appropriate integration of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) and other equipment. ICT was used effectively in lesson preparation and classroom demonstration and to support students in undertaking tasks. It was very good to see that teachers have begun to use the shared platform on the school's computer network to support lesson planning and the sharing of materials. This good practice and effective exploitation of ICT should continue and develop.

Some resources for general use are stored in one of the classrooms. The French department should continue to build a stock of suitable resources and should gather and file 'documents authentiques' on a thematic basis. The school has a small library. It was suggested that the teachers of French should plan to build a stock of books and audio and film materials. These could be used to support teaching and learning, to encourage the development of students' linguistic competence generally and to challenge the more able students who already have the advantage of being bilingual. The inspector provided a number of suggestions as to possible acquisitions.

Teachers of French organise co-curricular events such as the French breakfast, planned for the first term, and outings to view screenings of French films. This practice should continue in order to develop students' cultural awareness and to extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom. A school exchange is not currently organised; however, it was suggested that the school was well placed to exploit an ICT-based link with a French school.

French is a key element of curricular provision in this school. French teachers are committed to their subject and interested in the development of provision in the school. The subject is well resourced and the allocation of time supports provision. School management is very positively disposed to supporting quality provision in the subject.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

This school has documented fundamental principles in relation to a number of key areas of school life. Consideration should be given to the matter of whole-school discussion, elaboration and documenting of policy and practice in areas such as assessment and homework. This would further support the teaching and learning of French and all subjects.

The French department holds a number of meetings during the year, and there is ongoing informal contact between the teachers concerned. It was clear that the teachers work together collaboratively and supportively. It was suggested that subject department planning should review provision and devise a long and short-term action plan for the teaching and learning of the subject.

Currently, the department does not retain formal records of its meetings. Good practice would suggest that a basic record of items discussed and decisions taken should be created and retained. The maintenance of such records would also allow suitable cross-reference to any action plans to be developed and agreed.

Teachers of French have put together a subject folder and have done some year-specific planning. This is commended. Positive features of this work to date included the articulation of a policy on the promotion of French in the school, some evidence of planning on a thematic basis, rather than solely on the basis of a textbook, and reference to contact and communication with those responsible for special educational needs in the school. It was suggested that subject-related planning could be enhanced by making reference to specific language learning objectives, which should be shared with students, by greater allusion to syllabus documents and by the inclusion of reference to differentiation.

The TY plan was suitably broad and demonstrated clear evidence of planning to offer new learning experiences to the students. Work had been planned to develop students' cultural awareness, to include the use of some literature and the requirement that students had to engage in project-based learning. The TY plan should also provide some detail in relation to specific content, methodologies to be used, cross-curricular work planned, student assessment and subject evaluation.

All lessons observed had been planned thoughtfully to take into account issues such as relevance of content, cultural awareness, length of lesson, prior learning and selection and preparation of resources and materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Six lessons were observed as part of the evaluation process. Three of these lessons were at junior cycle and three at senior cycle. Teaching and learning in these lessons was good or very good.

Lesson content was well chosen and appropriate to the cohorts concerned at the particular juncture in the school year. It was clear also that thought had been given to relating lesson material to the lives of the students.

Lessons pace was very good in most instances. Where most effective, it was evident that planning had taken account of lesson pace so as to ensure student engagement, smooth transitions between phases of the lesson and the achievement of lesson objectives.

All lessons involved the use of the target language. However, the extent to which it was used varied from lesson to lesson. In some instances classroom observation provided evidence of a habit of undue and automatic reversion to, and reliance on, translation. Teachers reflected on this with the inspector, and it was agreed that it may have been unnecessary, and that it may create an unnecessary dependency in students. The importance of classroom use of the target language, of maximising the communicative opportunities which classroom interaction affords and of balancing teacher-talk with student use of the target language was discussed.

Lessons provided evidence of how the use of pair work could support and scaffold student use of the target language. In order to promote greater student use of the target language, it was suggested that teachers make more use of open whole-class questions and that they make sure that students are expected to ask, as well as answer, questions. It was also suggested that teachers endeavour to stimulate, draw from and elicit oral contributions from students in the collaborative preparation of written production exercises and in the preparation and correction of listening comprehension exercises.

Language acquisition was most effectively supported where students were taught structures rather than simply items of vocabulary in isolation. Further support was provided through the use of relevant visuals.

Students showed good language awareness and it was evident that the building of this awareness was part of normal teaching practice in the school. Students were encouraged to use dictionaries available in the classrooms. It was particularly good to see some examples of students being supported to induce a new grammatical concept or rule from their own use and understanding of the language.

Lessons observed showed clearly that the teachers were cognisant of the importance of the integration of the various language skills. It was suggested however that it would be very beneficial to consider the matter of the development of these skills in students. Consideration should be given to the manner in which listening comprehension exercises are exploited for example so as to make sure that students are acquiring and developing transferable listening skills and techniques rather than merely being tested in that skill.

A very good work ethic was established in all lessons observed. Students were encouraged to be organised and to take notes. In order to foster learner autonomy, it was suggested that teachers should support and train students to interpret content, and construct and take their own notes.

All lessons observed were well managed. There was a very comfortable student-teacher rapport. Students felt free to ask questions and were affirmed in their responses.

Classroom observation and interaction with the students provided evidence of student learning. Where most effective, prior learning was acknowledged and recalled, and new learning was reviewed and applied through homework assigned.

Discussions with the teachers raised the benefits of teacher reflective practice. It was suggested that student learning could be enhanced by considering issues such as the balance of time spent on testing versus teaching; the balance of teacher versus student talk; how best to promote the development of the various language skills and the balance of time spent on the receptive versus the productive skills.

ASSESSMENT

Students' learning is supported by the allocation of homework tasks. All lessons concluded with attention to the preparation and allocation of a relevant homework exercise. Students record homework assigned in their journals. Inspector activity included the examination of a selection of students' copies. It was evident that work is being assigned. Monitoring of student work was most effective where clear feedback was given to students, and where there was evidence that students had corrected their work based on this feedback. It is suggested that monitoring of student work should be consistent, and that it should be carried out at agreed intervals, to be decided perhaps as part of the possible development of a homework policy in the school.

There is some assessment of students' oral competence in senior cycle. It is suggested that arrangements be made to begin to formally assess the oral competence of students more generally. It is also recommended that the results of such assessments be documented in reports and commented on as appropriate. Consideration should be given to the introduction of portfolio assessment in TY.

Formal tests are held at Christmas and at the end of the year and pre-examinations are also organised for certificate examination classes. Reports are sent to parents twice a year. Communication with parents is ongoing and the school is commended for the organisation of several parent teacher meetings also.

Students' achievement generally is also monitored. School management analyses results in certificate examinations. A review by the inspector of results and discussions with school management showed that student achievement in French is consistent with achievement in other subjects.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- French is a key element of curricular provision in this school.
- School management is supportive of quality provision in the subject.
- The subject is well supported in terms of the allocation of time and timetabling and in terms of resources and facilities available.
- French teachers are committed to their subject and to working collaboratively.
- Planning is good and preparation thoughtful.
- Teaching and learning was good, or very good, in all lessons observed.
- The target language was used to a greater or lesser extent in all lessons.
- Student-teacher rapport is very good.

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

- School management should ensure that arrangements are made for the provision of a module in French for those LCVP students for whom it is relevant.
- French teachers should reflect on provision and devise and agree an action plan for the development of the teaching and learning of the subject.
- Teacher reflection and planning should consider how best to challenge and support the able learner.
- Efforts should be made to maximise classroom opportunities for student use of the target language.
- The school should extend its practice of formally assessing students' oral competence.

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.