REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Brendan’s 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 and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

French and German are the two foreign languages on the curriculum in this school. In first year, students participate in a subject-sampling programme whereby they have two periods of French and German per week. At the end of the year, the study of a foreign language becomes optional. The students choose two subjects from a list of six subjects for study in second year and third year. At present, French is timetabled against German, Art, Music, Technical Graphics and Woodwork in junior cycle. Students receive advice on their choice of subjects from the guidance counsellors while an information evening on subject choices is provided for parents. In senior cycle, option bands are generated on the basis of student preferences. Students are placed in mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle while separate higher level and ordinary level classes are provided in senior cycle depending on the number of students involved.

In first year, French is only allocated two single periods per week due to the subject-sampling programme. However, the timetabling provision is satisfactory in subsequent years. The number of lessons increases to two single periods and one double period per week in second year and in third year while in senior cycle, French is timetabled for three single periods and one double period per week.

There are three teachers of French on the staff at present and the school also has the services of a French language assistant. The teachers are classroom based and are provided with CD players. They also have access to overhead projectors and a range of videos and DVDs. At present, the teachers do not have access to information and communication technology (ICT) for teaching the subject. It would be beneficial for teachers and students to have access to ICT as it would help to promote more varied learning methodologies and would facilitate independent learning by students. It is therefore suggested that the possibility of language classes having access to ICT should be explored.

Extracurricular support for the subject includes a school tour to France for second year students. It was good to see that posters from that visit were on display in the students’ classroom as well as other language charts and maps. As posters and samples of students’ work can help to create an
interesting and stimulating language-learning environment, it is suggested that efforts should be made to increase the range of materials on display to include phrases for classroom communication and items on current affairs. As well as being of interest to students, the posters would also serve as an aid to students in using the target language.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

One subject department meeting per term is facilitated by management. However, there is no co-ordinator for the subject and no minutes for the meetings were available. The subject plan that was presented on the day of the inspection was very limited in its scope. The documents were not up to date and there was little evidence of any current planning. As a result, the yearly schemes of work, in particular, need to be updated and expanded to include details of the content to be covered in each year of the programme. It is therefore strongly recommended that a subject co-ordinator be appointed and that the subject teachers of French collaborate on developing common written programmes of work for each year group. These programmes should include the learning outcomes, methodologies and modes of assessment for each year group. The learning outcomes could then be used as a basis for student self-assessment and for teacher assessment of students’ progress in each of the language skills. In order to further advance subject planning in French, key areas for development should be identified and an action plan drawn up. As the school intends to introduce Transition Year (TY), it is recommended that a plan for French in TY should be prepared. This plan should be in line with the aims of the TY programme and should incorporate such elements as cultural awareness, project work and portfolio assessment. It is suggested that the languages departments and the TY co-ordinator should work together to ensure that a common framework is in place for languages in TY.

There was no reference to the work of the language assistant in the subject plan. It is very important that planning for the integration of the language assistant’s work with that of the subject teachers takes place if students are to benefit from the assistant’s presence in the school. The role and activities of the assistant should be described in detail in the subject plan.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The extent to which the target language was used by teachers varied considerably. While there was some use of the language, there was no consistency in its use evident in the lessons visited. Where practice was satisfactory, the lesson introduction and instructions were in French and the students were asked questions and were encouraged to spell words in the language. However in a number of lessons, affirmation of students’ efforts, the teaching of lesson content and general interaction was conducted in English. The possibilities for maximising the use of French afforded by the presence of the language assistant were not fully exploited. As a result, students had little opportunity to hear French spoken as part of normal classroom communication and sometimes their opportunities to speak the language were very limited. It is therefore strongly recommended that the teachers increase their use of French for both communication and instruction purposes and that they put in place strategies to support students in using the language. Such strategies should include providing students with the necessary phrases for use in the classroom context and ensuring that they have daily opportunities to produce simple, authentic French.

Where lessons were well prepared, the lesson structure was good and the content and pace were appropriate to the class group and to the time available. There was a smooth transition from one activity to the next when the lesson was constructed around a theme as recommended in the
syllabus. In one instance, there was a good sense of continuity between the homework that had been assigned on the topic of weekend activities and the new work of learning to speak and write about those activities in a different tense. The provision of a handout with some model answers, provided students with a structure that helped them to complete the exercise with confidence. The chosen listening text linked well with the theme of the lesson. In order to focus more on oral skills, it is suggested that a few minutes could be spent on exploiting the text as the basis for a role-play exercise. This would give students an opportunity to practise speaking the language having first checked their pronunciation against the recorded version. The young students in this lesson enjoyed writing their answers on the board and taking an active part in the lesson.

It was good to note that listening comprehension was a feature of some lessons. This is an important aspect of the course at all levels. However, it was disappointing that in some instances the choice of listening material was somewhat arbitrary and appeared to be related to the next page of the book rather than linked to the theme of the lesson, as recommended in the syllabus guidelines. There needs to be more development of students’ listening skills and more careful monitoring of the activity. When vocabulary was written on the board during the initial playing of the recording, students switched to noting down the words instead of concentrating on listening to the text and so the purpose of the activity was defeated. This is not good practice.

In some lessons the teaching methodologies employed were not sufficiently varied and there was an over reliance on translation into English. When a reading comprehension was the focus of a lesson, the preferred method was for the teacher to read aloud a paragraph and for a student to translate the text into English. This led to a slow pace and limited students’ involvement to translation and to the copying of vocabulary. This is not good practice in language teaching. It is recommended that more active-learning methodologies be employed and a more creative approach be taken so as to focus on student engagement and learning. The preparation of a pre-reading activity or an introduction to the text would make the text more accessible. The language assistant could also be invited to read the text aloud for the students and this approach would create a more authentic listening experience.

The questioning strategies used by the teachers varied from lesson to lesson. In some instances there was an emphasis on whole-class questioning with students invited to contribute answers and suggestions. This was effective, in particular, when the focus was on grammar as students were encouraged to point out the differences that they observed in the formation of verb tenses or other grammar rules. This use of an inductive approach is in line with the syllabus guidelines on the teaching of language awareness and it encourages students to make use of their prior learning. As the students had some experience of learning German during first year, it was very positive that a connection was made between the grammar of the two languages and that any similarity was pointed out. However, in some instances, the questioning was primarily teacher directed and as a result, the opportunities for student participation were restricted. It is suggested that giving students an opportunity to work together in pairs would help them to work independently and would allow for a better use of lesson time. Preparation for the certificate examinations was the focus of some lessons, with attention paid to examination technique when answering specific questions. Advice was given with regard to grammatical accuracy and the best approach to take when confronted with a difficult question.

The rapport between the teachers and students in the lessons visited was generally relaxed and positive. The students were polite and co-operative at all times and applied themselves with diligence to the tasks assigned.
ASSESSMENT

Students’ progress is monitored and assessed in a variety of ways including class questioning, homework and tests at regular intervals throughout the year. An aural test forms part of the annual assessment for all classes. It is also positive that an assessment of oral proficiency is carried out at the end of fifth year. In order to highlight the importance of students’ oral skills, it is recommended that this practice be extended to all year groups. This assessment could be carried out by means of a short individual oral test or by awarding a mark for a student’s contribution during the year.

An analysis of results in the certificate examinations in comparison with national norms is carried out by senior management. In this way, the uptake of higher level and ordinary level can be tracked as well as trends within the school with regard to the uptake of foreign languages. This is of particular importance given that a foreign language is a requirement for entry to some third-level institutions. Parents are kept informed of students’ progress through the school journal, regular written reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings. Information evenings and the school website are also used to maintain contact with parents.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Two modern foreign languages are on offer to students.
- The timetabling allocation for French is satisfactory.
- There was some effective use of whole-class questioning.
- The student-teacher rapport was positive and students were polite and cooperative.

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

- A subject co-ordinator should be appointed and future subject-department planning should address a number of issues including the updating and expansion of the subject plan, the inclusion of learning outcomes in the yearly schemes, and the development of a TY programme for French.
- It is strongly recommended that the teachers increase their use of French both for classroom communication and for teaching purposes and that they should provide increased opportunities for students to speak the language.
- It is recommended that there should be greater use of active-learning methodologies and of more varied questioning techniques in order to encourage student engagement and participation.
- An assessment of students’ oral skills should form part of the end of year assessment for all class groups.
- A description of the role and activities of the French language assistant should be included in the subject plan.

A post-evaluation meeting was held 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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