Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

St Brigid’s Secondary School
Killarney, County Kerry
Roll number: 61340S

Date of inspection: 27 January 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Brigid’s Secondary School. 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 the subject teachers. 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 post-primary school. The subject is offered at junior cycle and at senior cycle, where it is offered in Transition Year (TY) and in both the Leaving Certificate established and Leaving Certificate Vocational (LCVP) programmes. All students study both languages in first year. French is then offered as one of the optional subjects in second and subsequent years.

Access to the subject is good, and it is to the credit of the school that a student who wishes to study both modern languages will be facilitated. Uptake of French is good at junior cycle but the percentage of students opting to pursue their study of French at senior cycle is smaller. It is advised that the French department should monitor uptake at this level and work to raise it over time. Students with additional educational needs are supported in their study of French. They may also be exempted from the study of a modern language but only on foot of professional advice and following consultation with parents or guardians.

Time allocation to the subject is in line with practice nationally. The distribution of lesson periods across the week is not entirely satisfactory as class groups have double periods in years two, three, five and six. Whilst appreciating the obvious constraints involved, it is recommended that, where possible, the timetabling of double periods be avoided when timetabling modern languages.

Classes are organised on a mixed-ability basis and average class size is conducive to student oral participation.

There are two teachers in the French department; one of whom is currently being replaced by a substitute teacher. The work of the French department is co-ordinated by one of their number on a rotational basis. School management has established very effective co-ordination structures and
departmental systems. The role of the subject co-ordinator is clearly specified. Departmental meetings are held on a termly basis and minutes are recorded in line with best practice.

It is school policy to promote teacher professional development. Membership of the professional association is encouraged and supported. The commitment of school management to the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers is evidenced by the proactive role they took in organising in-service locally and by their involvement in the Learning School Project 1 with a particular focus on using information and communication technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning of languages; French, Spanish and Japanese. The professional development of French teachers has also been supported by previous successful applications for the services of a French language assistant. The French department is advised to re-apply for a language assistant when possible and to consider also the benefits of 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.

Students are classroom based in this school. Language teachers do however share access to a designated language room. Equipment, including a photocopier is available here. Language teachers also have access to the school’s computer and media rooms. School management is proactive in developing its ICT infra-structure and many of the classrooms are now equipped with ultra-short throw-projectors and whiteboards. Classrooms in which lessons were observed contained some visual supports such as maps and posters of vocabulary to support classroom interaction. Teachers of French are encouraged to continue to create and develop a linguistically and culturally supportive learning environment. There are plans to re-develop the school’s library and this will provide the French department with an opportunity to build the stock of reading and visual material in French.

Cross-curricular work occurs in TY where links are made with Geography and Computer Studies. There is a link with Home Economics in second year. The school does not currently have a link with a French school. It is recommended that this be kept under review and that the benefits of a possible e-twinning be considered.

French is an important part of curricular provision in this school. Whole-school support and structures and systems are excellent. Management awareness, commitment and dynamism are commended. The French department is urged to monitor uptake at senior cycle and to plan to raise it as possible. It is recommended that an action plan for the general development of the subject be devised by the French department and approved by school management.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Whole-school and subject-specific planning for French is comprehensive. At whole-school level a number of policies have a direct bearing on teaching and learning; the assessment, homework and special educational needs policies in particular. It is also to the credit of the school that it has developed a policy for modern languages.

Subject specific plans include relevant whole-school policies, syllabus documents, organisational details, records and year-specific teaching and learning plans. As good practice would suggest, the subject departmental plan includes the analysis of results in certificate examinations, reference to differentiation and support for students with additional education needs and to teacher professional development. It was suggested that teaching and learning in the subject could be
enhanced by also planning for the incremental development of the various language skills and by the inclusion of reference to the tracking of student progress.

All lessons observed had been thoroughly and thoughtfully prepared. Preparation had included attention to the sourcing and development of handouts, to material to be used electronically in the lesson and also to visual supports. Where relevant, thought had also been given to support for a student of English as an additional language in one of the classes. It was clear that consideration had also been given to prior learning and to the selection of homework to be assigned.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Three lessons were observed as part of the evaluation; two at junior and one at senior cycle. One of the junior cycle lessons was a double-period lesson.

Lesson content was appropriate to the level concerned and to the point in the school year. The focus on cultural awareness was a particular strength especially where it was clear that this had required a decision to move beyond the confines of the textbook. Selection of content had also take account of the importance of the teaching of grammar in context and of the integration of the various language skills.

Lessons were well paced with students being required to engage in a variety of tasks and being supported to engage actively in the lessons.

The target language was used in the lessons observed. Acquisition of the target language was best supported where it was the medium for normal class communication; where it was common to seek alternatives in the target language rather than to have recourse to translation and where students had been taught, and were using, the alphabet in French.

A variety of methodologies was used in lessons including group work, pair work, games and singing. In one instance a song was used very effectively at the start of the lesson to begin the lesson orally and to review prior learning. Very good use was made of visual material to reinforce and support understanding.

There were a number of examples of effective support for the development of the various language skills. Students’ reading skills were supported by provision for a pre-reading, a reading and post-reading task. Student written production was very ably supported where composition was undertaken as a group oral task in the first instance. Discussions with teachers encouraged the use of pre-listening tasks and the promotion of the acquisition of global listening skills.

Every effort was also made to integrate either the teaching or the revision of grammar into the lessons as appropriate. The benefits of emphasising the teaching of re-producible grammatical structures were also discussed with the teachers.

Student contributions were supported by the use of effective error correction, good teacher circulation and the use of probing questions. Teachers were encouraged to promote opportunities for student-talk in lessons.

All lessons observed were well managed. Teacher-student rapport was very good.
In order to support teacher reflection and the development of practice it was suggested that teachers might consider the balance of time spent on teaching versus testing; the extent to which there was an emphasis on the teaching and acquisition of re-producible linguistic structures versus items of vocabulary in isolation; the extent to which the target language was used and the balance between teacher and student-talk in lessons.

ASSESSMENT

The school has developed a number of policies which support effective assessment practices. Homework is assigned and monitored. Assessment of student progress is on-going. Pre-examinations are held for certificate examination classes and formal tests are administered at the end of the year for all other year groups. Information in relation to a student’s progress is conveyed to parents through the student’s journal, bi-annual reports and at parent-teacher meetings.

The school sets high expectations for its students. It monitors student achievement and performance in the context of national norms. It carries out an analysis of results. School management’s analysis and communication and interrogation of this analysis are most thorough.

It is recommended that arrangements be made to begin to formally assess students’ oral competence in the language. It is also suggested that, in order to support maximum performance at junior certificate in particular, the French department might use some predictive testing to help monitor student progress and evaluate individual student performance in the certificate examination.

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.
- Access to the subject is very good although the percentage of students taking French at senior cycle is of some concern.
- Whole-school support, structures and systems are excellent.
- Whole-school and subject-specific planning for French is comprehensive.
- The target language was used in lessons observed.
- Student-teacher rapport and classroom management were very good in lessons observed.
- Teachers are committed to their students for whom they have high expectations.
- Evidence of the initial integration of ICT was promising.

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

- The French department should work to raise up-take of the subject at senior cycle.
- The French department should develop an action plan for the subject to include a focus on resources, the professional development of teachers and a link with a French speaking school.
- Arrangements should be made to begin to formally assess students’ oral competence in the language.
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.
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 have made every effort to encourage students to take on French as one of their subjects.
- Resources for the subject have been expanded.
- The school is linking with a school in Brittany.
- Teachers are already assessing students’ oral competency.