

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Presentation Secondary School
Listowel, County Kerry
Roll number: 61380H**

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**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 as part of a whole-school evaluation in Presentation 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 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

Provision for modern languages is very good with students offered the opportunity to learn more than one language during their time in the school. French and German are compulsory subjects in first year after which students have the option of continuing with one or both languages to Junior Certificate. Students and parents are advised with regard to subject options and students are facilitated to meet with the guidance counsellor to discuss their choices. Option bands are set by students' demand. However, it is positive that every effort is made to facilitate students who wish to continue with more than one language. Students with additional educational needs may decide, in consultation with the principal, parents and class teacher, to discontinue the study of a language. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes in first and second year. All students are encouraged to study French at higher level but a provision is made at the beginning of third year, depending on resources, to facilitate those students who choose the ordinary-level option. The teachers advise both students and parents should a change in levels be required.

During Transition Year (TY), students continue their study of French. In recent years, they have also had the option of taking a module of Japanese or Italian. In senior cycle, French is offered as an optional subject. The setting of subjects varies from year to year depending on students' demand. Classes in first year are timetabled for three periods per week. This allocation increases to four periods per week in second and third year. Transition Year is optional and students have two periods of French per week. The timetabling allocation for fifth year and sixth year is very good with students benefiting from six periods per week.

Teachers do not have designated base classrooms but move from room to room. A language laboratory with fixed seating is available and teachers are timetabled for the room. As the language laboratory and some other rooms such as the demonstration room are not easily adapted for group work, it is suggested that management consider the allocation of a designated room for use by language teachers. Other resources include internet access and data projectors as well as a supply of magazines, dictionaries and DVDs. While the language laboratory is used to good effect to display posters and to create an attractive learning environment, there are few examples of posters or students' work on display in the classrooms. It is recommended that consideration be

given to displaying posters and samples of students' work as visual displays enhance the classroom environment while seeing their work displayed can help to give students a sense of achievement. A map of France is also an essential resource for highlighting cultural awareness while displays of newspaper headlines and articles related to current affairs can be of interest and benefit in particular to senior students.

Extracurricular support for the language is evident and includes an annual outing to the cinema in conjunction with the Kerry film festival, opportunities for penpals online through organisations such as the Big Challenge Club and ongoing support for the twinning arrangements with a town in France. The teachers are to be commended for their work in this regard.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The French department is well organised as regards subject planning. Subject co-ordination is rotated among the teachers and the role includes organising subject-department meetings, consultation with colleagues regarding the acquisition of new resources and the dissemination of information. It is positive that the subject department is allocated an annual budget. Meetings are scheduled on a regular basis throughout the year while informal meetings also take place. The good practice of recording minutes is maintained and the minutes show that a range of issues has been discussed at meetings. The French teachers are to be commended for the extensive subject planning that they have undertaken to date.

As part of their ongoing work, the teachers have made use of tools such as a diagnostic window to inform their planning. They have already prepared an action plan for the subject that identifies a number of key areas for future development including the use of the target language, continuity and curriculum planning. This is good practice and it is recommended that the next stage of implementation of the action plan be focused on the strategies needed to bring about these improvements, in particular with regard to communication in the target language. This stage should also include details of the monitoring and evaluation of these strategies.

An extensive subject-department plan has been prepared. Common schemes of work have been compiled for each year group outlining the textbook references, grammatical points and resources available. It is suggested that future planning should look at developing these schemes to include the desired learning outcomes and appropriate teaching methodologies. The development of the current TY plan would provide a suitable starting point for this work. It is good to note that information and teaching strategies to support students with special educational needs as well as research on effective teaching methods are also part of the subject folder. Annual results from the certificate examinations are analysed by the subject teachers with reference to national norms with a view to maintaining and improving standards. The subject plan is reviewed at the start of each school year.

There was evidence of very good individual planning and preparation in the teachers' files and records of work as well as in the preparation of materials for use in class.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Inspection activities included the observation of six lessons, two in junior cycle and four in senior cycle. In addition, there was an opportunity to interact with students during the lessons. The language areas and skills covered during the lessons included language awareness and grammar

points, examination practice, oral and aural work. The teaching methodologies included whole-class questioning and pair work. Teaching aids such as authentic documents, maps and handouts were used effectively to support teaching and learning. It was positive that within most individual lessons, students were encouraged to participate in a range of language tasks. It was evident that there was good continuity with previous lessons and there were frequent references made to prior learning. In some lessons, the objectives 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 use of French by some teachers for classroom communication and for the delivery of lesson content was very good. Examples of good practice were seen when explanations and instructions were given in French, when synonyms were used and when students asked questions and were encouraged to spell words in French. This is positive as it helps to ensure that French is seen as a living language. It was obvious that these students were accustomed to hearing French spoken and consequently, they showed a good level of understanding and a degree of fluency in the language. However, in a small number of lessons, English was primarily used both for lesson content and classroom management and students had few opportunities to use the language. As use of the target language was identified in the subject action plan as a key area for development, it is recommended that the teachers decide on an agreed approach and key strategies relevant to the use of French by teachers and students in the classroom. In order to encourage students, it is recommended that the teachers look at how best to support the students' active use of the language. This could be achieved through the introduction of classroom phrases for use with and by junior cycle students from the very start of their language learning as well as competitions and other incentives. A change in questioning techniques to promote answering in French rather than English by the students can also have an impact. A focus on pronunciation is also suggested as a way of establishing habits of correct pronunciation. The use of CDs and other resources may be helpful in this regard as students will benefit from a few minutes of targeted work at regular intervals while the use of recorded material enables the teacher to monitor and advise students as necessary.

The beneficial effect of having a small number of students in some class groups was evident in lessons where the work was centred on oral production. The combination of teacher-directed questioning and the small numbers meant that each student received individual attention and had a chance to respond to questions. As well as whole-class teaching on the chosen topic, pair work was used to good effect to give students an opportunity to practise asking each other questions. This in turn allowed the teacher to assist students in building up their own individual profile in preparation for their examination and to reassure and encourage them in their efforts. It is suggested that the playing of a listening extract based on the theme of the questions could be used as an introductory exercise and would provide a model for good pronunciation for the students before they begin speaking.

Pair and group work was used successfully with some classes to encourage active participation in the lesson and to engage in peer learning. It was obvious that the students enjoyed these activities which help them to become autonomous learners. 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.

There was a focus on vocabulary building in some lessons. Often this was done in conjunction with work on information-retrieval exercises and reading comprehensions. Good practice was evident when activities took place which helped the students to work with the vocabulary in the

lesson. The activity selected was sometimes as simple as encouraging students to identify the words they already knew in a cloze-type exercise or giving them time to evaluate their own understanding of vocabulary. New vocabulary was also effectively utilised to demonstrate to students how they could build sentences into a paragraph. This is commendable as it helps students to gain confidence in their writing skills. In a small number of lessons, students took down lists of words but time was not factored into the lesson plan for providing them with opportunities to use the words in context. Time management and the use of active-learning methodologies are recommended in order to allow students to learn and practise vocabulary through games and exercises. This approach would encourage their active participation in the lesson and would build their communication skills.

Cultural awareness and current affairs such as the Paris *métro*, *art nouveau*, homelessness and youth culture in France were themes used to engage students' interest and to involve them in a range of language-learning activities. The selection of authentic texts ensured the students' interest in the lesson and they were also provided with website addresses where they could access additional information. The successful integration of the four key skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing around a theme helped to ensure a smooth progression from one activity to the next and enhanced students' learning. Students were able to contribute ideas and to make use of their prior learning while the assigned homework was related to the theme and was well prepared in advance in class. It was evident that students enjoyed the variety of activities and the opportunity to work in small groups.

Where time is given to the correction of homework or of exercises done during the lesson, it is important to monitor students' understanding of the work, for example through the identification of questions that they found difficult. This allows the teacher to identify areas for further study. Good practice was seen in lessons where the comprehension exercises were clearly chosen to link with a particular theme. However if the exercises are selected at random from a textbook or the examination papers, a lesson can become disjointed since the lack of a theme can make it more difficult to structure the lesson so as to ensure a smooth transition from one activity to the next. This approach should be avoided.

Grammar was well-taught with students encouraged to form sentences using different structures and verb tenses. It is commendable that this work was done orally and in the target language before progressing to an exploration of the rule in the textbook. There was time allowed for all students to make a contribution and so to remain engaged with the activity. A handout explaining and illustrating the grammar points was a helpful way of reinforcing the work done during the lesson and provided students with a detailed explanation in the target language.

The atmosphere in the classes visited was positive and conducive to learning. There was a good rapport between the teachers and students and it was noteworthy that students were co-operative and motivated. 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.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is used including class questioning, homework, class tests and formal school examinations. Regular assessments at the end of units of work are carried out by the teachers during class time. Formal house examinations are held for all students with the exception of TY classes, in February and in the summer. Common assessments are often

administered at these times and this is good practice. The TY students are assessed on the projects that they complete during the year and which they present in class as well as on the results of class tests. An assessment of aural comprehension is generally included in the annual assessment while an oral component forms part of the summer test for students in fifth year. Senior cycle students benefit from the practice oral lessons that the teachers offer them during lunch-time and the teachers are to be praised for their work in this regard. It is suggested that the inclusion of an oral component in the annual assessment be extended to all classes in order to complement efforts to improve students' pronunciation.

It is good to note that there is a French 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 as well as marks is also noted. Detailed records are kept of students' attainment by the teachers. 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 very good and access to the study of French is open to all students.
- The allocation of six class periods per week in senior cycle helps to support language learning.
- Subject planning is well advanced and a comprehensive plan for French has been prepared. The preparation of an action plan for the subject is commended.
- There was excellent use of French by some teachers both for teaching lesson content and as the language of communication in the classroom.
- A variety of activities were used in some lessons to enhance students' learning.
- 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 maps, posters and samples of students' work be displayed in the classrooms.
- Future subject planning should focus on key areas identified in the action plan including target language use and active teaching and learning methodologies.
- In order to encourage all students to speak French with confidence, it is recommended that the teachers look at ways of further supporting the students in their use of the language.
- The use of a greater variety of questioning techniques is recommended in order to encourage pair work and to allow students an opportunity to respond in the target 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.