An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of German
REPORT

Coláiste Naomh Mhuire,
Naas, County Kildare
Roll number: 61730I

Date of inspection: 16 March 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GERMAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Naomh Mhuire, Naas. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in German 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 the German 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

St Mary’s College Naas offers a range of subjects and programmes: the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). At the time of the evaluation, the total enrolment was 899 students. Languages form a central strand of the school’s curriculum and the diversity of the language provision is praiseworthy. Students are offered a choice of three modern languages on entry in first year, French, German or Spanish. Prior to entry to the school in first year, students indicate their subject choices, including their language preference, in ranked order and senior management endeavours to ensure that students can study their preferred language of choice or their second choice. The school also facilitates students studying more than one language if they wish. However, in line with national trends, fewer students are opting for two languages. The support of school management for languages and the enthusiasm of the German teachers for their subject are noteworthy.

All students are expected to study a modern language and students, in the main, continue with the same language into senior cycle. It is good practice that all students are encouraged to learn a language and the first-year experience of language learning gives each individual student an opportunity to assess their own capabilities. A small number of students who are identified as having special educational needs (SEN) may discontinue with the study of a modern language in either second, third or fifth year. An LCVP language module is available to those students who are not pursuing a Leaving Certificate language and is allocated time on the school timetable.

St Mary’s Naas has a long and successful tradition in German and uptake of German remains at a consistent sustainable level from year to year. Of the one hundred and seventy students in first year at the time of the evaluation, twenty eight had opted to study German. The numbers at senior cycle were slightly lower in TY where twenty students were studying German and in fifth year where in eighteen students had chosen German. In sixth year, numbers were such that two class groups could be formed from the thirty-five students who had opted to continue with German to the Leaving Certificate. TY is a compulsory element of the school’s provision and the students’
chosen languages are offered throughout the duration of the year. The allocation of time to the
teaching of German and the distribution of those units of time across the week are good. Lesson
periods are of 35 or 40 minutes duration. Teachers are assigned to class groups and levels on a
rotational basis which affords all teachers the opportunity to experience the teaching of students
at different stages and levels.

Classrooms for the German teachers, where possible, are teacher based. An authentic and
stimulating German learning environment had been created in the German classrooms visited.
The display of posters, charts and student project work from different year groups supported co-
operative learning as students could learn from each others’ work. The provision of a teacher-
based classroom enables teachers to integrate a range of resources into the modern-language
classroom and the availability of a range of resources supports the integration of skills
recommended for syllabus delivery and implementation. A language media room is also available
and all the necessary audio-visual resources such as DVD and CD players are available in base
classrooms. Resources for the integration of information and communication technologies (ICT),
such as data projectors and laptops, are shared by the German teachers.

Teachers are members of their subject association and regularly attend seminars and in-service
courses in German, when available. Teachers have also availed of in-service at whole-school
level in areas such as ICT in the classroom and the integration and management of students with
learning difficulties. The school regularly participates with the Language Assistant Scheme and
the integration of the language assistant has been successfully monitored and implemented by the
German teachers over the years. The benefit of participation in such schemes to both students and
language teachers is acknowledged by senior management and the German language teachers
alike.

There are many examples of co-curricular and extracurricular activities relating to the subject in
place, including involvement in the inter-school German debating competitions and attendance at
German film screenings. German cultural events and festivities are celebrated with German music
and a Christmas module is presented to each class group which involves collaborative work, co-
operation and organisation among the German teachers and students. Information is also given to
students in relation to German language courses in the target language countries and in Ireland.

Language exchanges have been a feature of the co-curricular provision in the past and efforts are
being made to revitalise this element and organise an exchange for TY. St Mary’s has a partner
school in Germany which encourages regular contact between individual students and between
class groups using technology via e-mail. The TY International Week, as described, is an
excellent example of cross-curricular and interdisciplinary undertakings in line with the
philosophy of TY. Activities include music and dance appreciation, film screenings, food tasting,
table quiz and treasure hunt. The co-curricular provision enhances and enriches the language
learning experience for students and is praiseworthy.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

German teachers work collaboratively as a subject department. There is a co-ordinator for subject
planning appointed on a rotational basis whose role involves disseminating relevant material and
information, convening meetings of the subject department and retaining minutes of meetings.
This is good practice. Subject planning meetings, facilitated by school management, take place
each term and a part of each staff meeting is allocated to enable subject teachers to meet
regularly. There are also frequent other meetings among the German teachers. The German
department holds a curriculum planning meeting at the beginning of the year which involves
discussion of the syllabus content for each year group, examinations and assessment and cultural diversity. For example, from year to year, different nationalities can be represented in year groups and their experiences in terms of language learning and intercultural differences and similarities are drawn upon and integrated into classroom activity and discussion by the German teachers. This is very good practice as it celebrates cultural diversity, focuses on effective integration of the students and is tailored to the year group in question.

A subject department plan has been prepared for German and this is referenced in the school plan. Units of work to be covered per term are outlined initially for each year group from first year onwards through second and third year and onto senior cycle. The content is detailed in terms of topic and themes, linguistic structures and lexicons required to fulfil objectives together with the textbooks, authentic materials and other resources for delivery of the content. The subject plan includes an inventory of resources. As there is generally only one class group per year for German, the use of common written programmes of work for each year group is not applicable in German. However, the frequency of rotation of German teachers across year groups ensures input from each teacher into yearly schemes of work and the German teachers work on this basis. The cross-curricular provision is also outlined. The teachers are praised for the work completed to date.

The planning documentation for German had all the elements of good planning. The subject plan should be viewed as a working planning document and therefore would be enhanced by being presented electronically to ease review and incorporation of changes from year to year. The inclusion of the range of methodologies and approaches as observed would also enrich the plan and would detail for parents, students and the wider-school community the richness of the learning experiences provided for students. Different elements of the plan could be elaborated upon over time, such as the linguistic structures and components for each stage of learning, as well as incorporating learning outcomes in terms of skills and what the students will be able to do. It is a good idea to incorporate the syllabus documents and these should be further customised to the school’s student cohort. The overall aims and objectives for the subject could form the introductory section of the plan.

While the current TY plan for German contains different elements which are effective in ensuring retention of the language structures and standards achieved up to Junior Certificate, these different elements should be more explicitly expressed in terms of modules. Modules such as Business German, Cultural Awareness, German Film, Literature and History are suggested as examples of the modular approach recommended for TY, and would reflect the different elements included in the existing TY provision for German. The student-centred approach observed, together with the assessment forms deployed, such as the completion of projects and the collection of portfolio items are in keeping with the philosophy of TY and are commended.

Annual meetings of the modern languages department are also organised. This is good practice, as it promotes collaboration across the modern languages, sharing of ideas and contributes to cohesion in approach across the languages. While the school does not have a modern languages policy, the planning documentation examined indicates that to agree a language policy for the school would be achievable in the short term. It is therefore recommended that the modern languages department prioritise the completion of a modern language policy for the school.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching observed was good. Teachers were attentive to checking attendance and punctuality at the beginning of each lesson observed. The learning objectives of lessons were
shared explicitly with students from the outset. Lessons were therefore characterised by clarity of direction and learning was purposeful. Some lessons opened with an introductory phase to a new topic which linked with the homework set and students were immediately set a task to complete in pairs. This ensured that students immediately became active in the target language. This is very good practice. In other lessons, worksheets were distributed or a handout to the theme had been prepared which included both visual and lexical stimuli. Questions were carefully prepared to direct students. Careful and thorough teacher preparation resulted in good lesson structure, appropriate pace and ensured that time was used efficiently and effectively.

The linguistic and pedagogical competence of the teachers is to be praised. The use of the target language as the main language of communication and instruction in the classroom was good. Teachers used the target language competently with good pronunciation and natural idiom. The German heard by the students was fluent and accurate and in this way, the German teachers effectively created an authentic German environment. The enthusiasm for the subject and energy of the teachers transmitted itself to the students who reciprocated with equal enthusiasm. This was a pleasure to observe. On some occasions, teachers used a mixture of English and German in communicating in the classroom and teachers interspersed the target language with speaking bilingually. The translation of instructions appropriately presented in German was not necessary and the amount of translation should be gradually reduced and replaced with different strategies to support learners. When understanding of new vocabulary was checked, the use of translation was unnecessary as it was clear from observation that students understood. It is therefore recommended that teachers should be consistent in their use of the target language, thereby strengthening and sustaining the German world created.

The approach to the development of language awareness and accuracy of expression was systematic and well structured. The grouping of the adverbial phrases was effective to ensure retention of lexical items as well as their effect on the syntax and sentence structure. The simple strategy of repetition in unison of a correct version of a frequent error was effective to reinforce the correction. Where the skill of listening formed the next phase of a lesson, it was good to see that the answering required of the listening was conducted in German which both succeeded in checking comprehension and reinforcing the learning of vocabulary and useful structures to the theme. The note-taking of students was systematic and neat and well organised. There were some very good examples of linguistic structures being practised in communicative contexts. The student workbooks and copybooks examined also showed the systematic approach to the acquisition of grammar adopted by the teachers.

Providing students with opportunities for spontaneous oral production on a daily basis is important in building student competence and confidence in the target language. When tasks were assigned to students in pairs or small groups, students became active in using German, applied themselves with diligence and worked together well and quietly. Students were accurate in completion of the tasks set as observed by the inspector. When individual students were then called upon to answer the questions in the plenary, students responded confidently and accurately. Having students make their own personal choice of place to describe, for example, encourages a personal individual response and independent learning which is praiseworthy. While students were working on a role play in pairs, teachers circulated and monitored completion of the task.

Teachers employed good strategies to engage and ensure attention of class groups. Very good relationships and rapport between teachers and students was in evidence. Lessons were enjoyable, the content of lessons was appropriate and texts chosen were authentic, relevant and accessible. There were some very good strategies for examination preparation observed, strategies which succeeded in focusing on the development of the individual at the particular level of ability and
competence. The integration of a video clip in German was affected with ease and served to stimulate students’ interest. It was good to see ICT integrated so seamlessly into the language lesson, and while it served its purpose well, the clip could have been exploited more fully. Further opportunities for the integration of ICT into the German language classroom should be explored by the German teachers. The cultural awareness dimension of language learning was well catered for within the classroom, as well as through the cultural activities outside of the classroom.

Students demonstrated a good level of comprehension, ability to communicate and accurate use of linguistic structures both orally and written. Student copybooks examined showed that a good range of themes had been covered. Students were very accurate in their writing and neat in their note-taking. From first year onwards there was clearly regular assignment and correction of homework. The copybooks contained many examples of systematic practise of structures and corrections of errors identified completed by students. The use of visual stimuli to reinforce learning was also in evidence. Longer pieces and passages of writing became more evident as students progressed. The students were very capable at answering. The students also demonstrated good pronunciation and intonation. Students were achieving the learning objectives set.

ASSESSMENT

There is a school homework policy and an assessment policy implemented in the school. There was obviously regular setting and correction of homework which marked both the opening and closing of lessons. Homework in the form of research on computer which was to be conducted by students at home, if possible, was referred to at the opening of some lessons. Continuous formative assessment is an important component of the assessment policy. Assessment includes end-of-topic tests, vocabulary tests, in-school examinations at Christmas and summer tests. Aural and oral modes of assessment are also employed and common assessments are used, where applicable. Portfolio assessment forms part of the assessment for TY and there is also an annual exhibition of TY projects.

Reporting to parents on student progress is regular, thorough and systematic with parent-teacher meetings, use of the student journal and information evenings. Students are also encouraged to strive towards the highest level commensurate with their ability for as long as possible. The analysis of results of state examinations should be introduced at subject department level as a self-evaluation mechanism to inform review and improvement. Attainment by students in German in state examinations is consistently good at both higher and ordinary level with the majority if not all students achieving higher level with very few fails at Junior Certificate and none at Leaving Certificate. For this reason, students of German in Coláiste Naomh Mhuire have been recipients of German language scholarships awarded by the German government on the basis of their Junior Certificate results over the years.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Languages form a central strand of the school’s curriculum and the diversity of the language provision is praiseworthy.
- The very good practice of celebrating cultural diversity and integrating the language learning and intercultural experiences of students into the German language classroom is praised.
The quality of teaching observed was good. Lessons were characterised by clarity of direction and learning was purposeful.

The approach to the development of language awareness and accuracy of expression was systematic and well structured.

Continuous formative assessment is an important component of the school’s assessment policy and setting and correction of homework marked both the opening and closing of lessons.

Students demonstrated a good level of comprehension, ability to communicate and accurate use of linguistic structures both orally and written. Attainment by students in German in state examinations is consistently good at both higher and ordinary level

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

- It is recommended that the German plan be reviewed to include the range of methodologies and approaches employed by teachers and student learning outcomes expressed in terms of skills and can-do statements.
- It is recommended that the modern languages department prioritise the completion of a modern language policy for the school.
- It is recommended that teachers should be consistent in their use of the target language and the use of translation should be gradually reduced and replaced with different strategies to support learners.
- Further opportunities for the integration of ICT into the German language classroom should be explored by the German teachers.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of German and 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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