Subject Inspection of German
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire,
Greenhills, Carrick-On-Suir,
County Tipperary.
Roll number: 65280A

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GERMAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir. 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 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 deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

School management is commended for the fact that modern languages form a central strand of the school’s curriculum for students. While a modern language is not designated as a core subject, most students pursue the study of a language to Leaving Certificate unless, in some small number of individual cases, it is not advised due to learning difficulties. Students continue with the study of their chosen language to Leaving Certificate and in this way, such as in the case of the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP), requirements for students to study a European language are met.

The uptake of German has varied across the years and is a theme which has appeared regularly in records of meetings of the German department in Scoil Mhuire. Incoming first years benefit from receiving a taster programme in the all optional subjects until the end of October and this has impacted positively on the uptake in German. In the current school year, 2009/2010, thirty students of the eighty-eight first years have opted for German. An uptake of up to thirty students is ideal, as it is a sustainable number from which to create a German class group from year to year, particularly in the optional Transition year (TY).

The allocation of time to the subject is good. Four periods are allocated to German in second and third years, three periods in TY and five periods in fifth and sixth years. First-year students have two periods for German for four weeks of the eight-week taster programme. The benefits accruing from increased uptake outweigh the loss of time allocated to German at the beginning of first year. Senior management has provided an additional period in sixth year to allow the German teachers to divide the sixth-year group into higher and ordinary level once a week. As all class groups in German are of mixed ability, this helps the teachers to focus on targeted examination preparation and strategies with their students at an appropriate stage in student learning of the language. Senior management is urged to retain this measure if possible from year to year. As German is presented within the option bands, each year group has two or three single periods and one double period. While daily contact with the language is not always possible, these lesson periods are distributed across the week to facilitate regular contact with the target language which is optimal.

The teachers of German are fully qualified in German and have very good competence in the German language which enables them to effectively create and sustain a German environment for
their students. Senior management regularly applies to participate in the foreign language assistant scheme and has operated the system successfully in both French and German. This is commendable. Senior management facilitates the attendance of teachers at available in-service. Both teachers of German are members of the German Teachers’ Association and attend seminars regularly. Trips to the target-language country are undertaken by the teachers from time to time to update their linguistic skills and cultural knowledge and awareness, the benefit of which was evident in the teaching observed. Senior management has also provided in-school training on relevant topics such as mixed-ability teaching and differentiation. Senior management has also promoted the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into teaching and learning through the provision of ICT training. This has helped to ensure teacher confidence and competence in the integration of ICT into the language classroom.

The provision of teacher-based classrooms facilitates the creation of a stimulating German learning environment. There were examples of posters, maps, charts and class sets of books in the German classrooms. The display of students’ own work should also be considered, where possible and appropriate. Teachers store shared resources for German in their classrooms and have access to data projectors, TV, DVD and CD players. There is also regular access to the computer room on a booking basis.

The co-curricular provision for German includes celebration of German festivals and traditions, and attendance at screenings of German films suitable for young learners. The German notice board provides students with a range of themes relating to the language and raises the profile of the subject in the school. Displays included latest news from Germany; items of interest to students; information about activities; and brochures relating to language courses and exchanges. The idea of a notice board for each language serves to highlight the importance of a modern European language and the diversity of the language provision.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

School management facilitates regular meetings of the German department, as well as meetings of the modern language teachers. This is good practice, as it provides cohesion to the modern language provision in the school, as well as facilitating collaboration and sharing of practice across the languages.

The German plan has all the elements of good planning. While it was described by the teachers as a work in progress, it was clear that much thought had been put into the work completed to date. It is good that the plan sets out some admirable objectives, such as maximising the use of German in the classroom, building student confidence in using German and developing independent learning. The teaching observed showed clearly the implementation of these recorded objectives. The plan opens with the school’s mission statement; a more explicit linking of the German objectives with those of the mission statement is suggested. Some generic aims and objectives also included should be customised to the school context. Particularly commendable is the inclusion of learning outcomes for students. The range of methodologies deployed by teachers and observed in the course of the evaluation should be recorded in the German plan to accurately reflect the richness of the learning experiences provided to students.

The TY plan is in line with the philosophy of the programme, including items such as film studies in German, the completion of projects on themes of cultural and intercultural interest, as well as native German cities and industries. The recapitulation of linguistic skills also forms a central component of the TY plan for German. Consideration should be given to presenting the
consolidation and development of linguistic skills in terms of German for the world of work and life which would be in keeping with the vocational orientation of the TY programme.

A subject plan can have a twofold purpose: to record the plan and schemes of work for each year group for teachers, and also to provide a curriculum summary which will inform both students and parents regarding the content, knowledge and skills development involved in learning the subject. It is suggested that the development of such a curriculum summary may be useful in informing parents about the subject and, therefore, in promoting uptake of German.

Good short-term and individual planning was in evidence in the lessons observed at the time of the evaluation.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching observed was very good. There was very good use of the target language as the main language of instruction and communication during German lessons and an authentic German learning environment was effectively created and sustained. Teachers explained terms and concepts in natural idiomatic German drawing effectively on students’ prior knowledge, introducing new lexical items and broadening out the linguistic structures in an effortless manner.

The use of authentic German texts enhanced the effectiveness of the lesson and stimulated student interest. Lessons were characterised by clarity of direction, teachers used the time well and lessons opened with the explicit sharing of objectives with students. This is very good practice.

Teachers employed an integrated thematic approach which is in line syllabus guidelines and recommended approach. Themes chosen were appropriate and relevant to student interest. The transition from one text type and one skill development to the next was seamless, integrating the skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing.

Teachers used some very imaginative and innovative approaches to engage students in learning. The focus was very much on providing students with opportunities to be active in their learning. Consequently, students participated well and applied themselves to tasks set with enthusiasm. It was clear that the students were used to pair and group work and they organised themselves into groups with ease and little loss of time. Classroom layout was conducive to the speedy formation of groups and groups were formed to facilitate peer support and ease of interaction between students. The use of the German language as students worked together was noteworthy; students suggested sentences and words and sought help from their teacher from time to time but worked independently and co-operatively. The good work ethic of the students was noted. Students were provided with a variety of learning experiences.

Teachers also used effective strategies to support students and to reinforce learning. The use of visual stimuli, contemporary contexts, music and song and gestures are some examples of the effective strategies deployed. Visual stimuli were used to facilitate ease of recapitulation on key terms, phrases and linguistic structures. The use of synonyms in the target language to broaden the vocabulary base of students was a further strategy used to ensure student understanding without recourse to mother tongue. Indeed, there was very judicious use of translation to check meaning by both teachers and students which is desirable. The linking with students’ interests and prior knowledge stimulated interest and eased recollection of key linguistic items. Reinforcement of learning also occurred through use of repetition in unison, role play and the formation of mixed-ability small groups. When gathering student responses, teachers affirmed and recorded student contributions and were sensitively attentive to error correction. Students appeared to enjoy their learning and finished the lesson with a feeling of success.
The student notebooks and copybooks examined illustrated how the teachers systematically built up vocabulary through the use of word fields, diagrams and charts. Creating links between related words and word fields is an effective way to help students to organise their revision of vocabulary and structures in a simple way. The assignment and correction of homework was regular. The sample of copybooks examined showed thorough correction on the part of teachers with commentary and grades assigned. The use of German stickers served to both motivate and affirm students and is commended. Students had also completed follow-up corrections on some occasions which resulted in accurate idiomatic pieces of writing. Students were accurate in their use of language in interaction with the inspector. Student uptake of higher level is good and attainment at both levels is good. It is recommended that from time to time teachers create opportunities for spontaneous use of the target language by students without recourse to the written word and visual support.

The classroom atmosphere was conducive to learning, and was characterised by mutual respect and enjoyment of the learning experience.

ASSESSMENT

A range of appropriate assessment modes is deployed which incorporate both formative and summative forms of assessment. The positive, distinctive features of the assessment developed for German in Scoil Mhuire is the use of common assessments in first and second year, with the introduction of a differentiated assessment in third year. This is appropriate and in keeping with the philosophy and approach of the German department. Oral, aural and written skills are tested from first year onwards and this is very good practice. At the time of the evaluation, fifth year students were preparing for their in-school oral examinations. Student folders demonstrated frequent written and vocabulary work and practice of linguistic structures working on both fluency and accuracy in the target language.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The quality of teaching observed was very good. There was very good use of the target language as the main language of instruction and communication during German lessons.
- Teachers used some very imaginative and innovative approaches to engage students in learning.
- The use of visual stimuli, contemporary contexts, music and song and gestures are some examples of the effective strategies deployed to support students in their language learning.
- Student uptake of higher level is good and attainment at both levels is good.
- Oral, aural and written skills are tested from first year onwards which is very good practice.

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

- The range of methodologies deployed by teachers and observed in the course of the evaluation should be recorded in the German plan to accurately reflect the richness of the learning experiences provided to students.
It is recommended that from time to time teachers create opportunities for spontaneous use of the target language by students without recourse to the written word and visual support.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of German and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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