REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Carrick-on-Shannon Community 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 to the subject 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

Carrick-on-Shannon Community School is a co-educational, post-primary, school with an enrolment of 586 students in the current school year. The school offers a wide range of curricular programmes, namely the Junior Certificate, Junior Certificate Schools Programme (JCSP), Transition Year Programme (TYP) Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP). This broad range of programmes is evidence of the school’s resolve to serve the diverse educational needs of its students.

Prior to their entry to Carrick-on-Shannon Community School, students, together with their parents, select their preferred optional subjects from a list of nine offered. The possibility of offering a sampler programme in all optional subjects to next year’s first-year students is under active consideration and this is a positive development. This programme would run over an eight-week period. Two modern languages, French and German, are included in the range of optional subjects. While there is no obligation on students to study a modern language, it is very positive that the majority of students in junior cycle opt to do so.

Time allocation to French is good. Junior-cycle students have four periods of French per week and class groups are of mixed ability. Most lessons are single periods, the preferred time allocation for language teaching. There are three periods of French in Transition Year while senior-cycle students have five class periods per week. Classes are timetabled concurrently in senior cycle to facilitate student movement between ordinary and higher level and the flexibility of this practice is commended.

The provision of designated classrooms enables teachers to create a personalised, supportive learning space for their students. The classrooms visited were bright and attractively decorated with well-chosen visual stimuli such as maps, posters, photographs and projects. All classrooms are fitted with blinds, are broadband enabled and equipped with a computer and data projector.
The teachers of French are members of the subject association with the annual membership fee being paid by the school. The teachers have availed of continuous professional development opportunities both in Ireland and in France.

School management and the teachers of French acknowledge the very positive impact of having a fully qualified teacher who is a native of France in the school during the academic year 2010-2011. The teacher is employed in Carrick-on-Shannon Community School under a teacher placement scheme (Programme Jules Verne) which is fully funded by the French Ministry of Education. The teacher has a full programme of work with all year groups in the school. During the evaluation, she was engaged in team teaching and a high level of co-operation was noted in the classrooms between the French teacher and her Irish counterparts.

Good co-curricular support ensures that French has a high profile in the school. The French department has built up a significant store of DVDs which is regularly updated and made available to students. This is a good additional resource. Carrick-on-Shannon Community School has established links with two French schools; Collège Nicolas Vauquelin in Toulouse and Collège Alain Fournier, in Alban, southwest France, the base school of the visiting teacher. Many authentic resources, photographs and postcards have already been exchanged between the Irish and the French schools. A group of students from Collège Alain Fournier will visit the school in May 2011 and, in the meantime, it is intended that the new webcam link-up will further enhance the ongoing communication between the schools in Carrick-on-Shannon and Alban.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

The school is actively engaged in the process of school development planning. A co-ordinator has been appointed to lead the whole-school planning process and the initial focus has been on the development of policies and a Code of Behaviour. Development planning in subject areas is now an integral part of the planning procedures in the school and a clear department structure has been put in place. The teachers of French and German have wisely formed a modern languages department and formal collaborative planning meetings take place once a term. The minutes of these meetings are stored in the department’s electronic planning folder. The syllabuses for junior cycle and for senior cycle French are also available in this electronic folder, thus ensuring easy access for teachers. The modern language team operates a system of rotating the role of subject co-ordinator. This is good practice as it allows all members of the team to experience and contribute to the role. The considerable benefits of modern language teachers working collaboratively, including the sharing of good practice, has encouraged the team to maximise all opportunities to meet on a regular basis and informal meetings take place throughout the school year.

A good standard of planning was evident in the subject department plan which was presented during the evaluation. One of the templates devised by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) has been used to provide broad statements of aims and objectives, to list text choices and timetabling arrangements and to outline procedures in relation to areas such as cross-curricular planning and planning for a culturally diverse society. Commendably, the subject plan also documents some effective teaching methodologies and includes a list of resources for language teaching.

A brief description of the school’s information communications technology (ICT) facilities is included in the subject plan for French and the modern language teachers have successfully produced a substantial bank of materials on a shared electronic folder. This is very good practice.
It is suggested that ideas on how ICT could integrate with and enhance other teaching methodologies could be written into the subject plan. Good practice was seen in the documenting of proposed learning outcomes in the department plan as this helps teachers to focus on the most effective ways of measuring students’ learning.

In addition to the general subject plan, schemes of work have been drawn up for each year group under seven different headings including topics, grammar, written work, oral work and cultural awareness. Reflective practice is commendably promoted through a dedicated column for self-evaluation. Scrutiny of the work schemes suggests, however, that there are significant gaps in the proposed material to be covered in all year groups. In some cases, the work scheme does not contain sufficient documented material to take classes through to the end of the first term and there is little information on work to be covered in the second and third terms. It is recommended that the teachers of French revisit the agreed work schemes for each year group with a view to setting out in more detail the work to be done in each term. A full programme for the teaching of French in Transition Year needs to be agreed and drawn up by the department. In senior cycle, it is necessary to have discrete work schemes for the teaching of higher-level classes and ordinary-level classes.

The visiting native French teacher has drawn up a separate set of work schemes which were presented during the evaluation. These schemes cover a comprehensive range of topics and list various cultural awareness aspects to be explored with various class groups throughout the full academic year. In order to avoid possible repetition or overlap, it would be preferable that the work schemes of the teachers of French in the school and those of the visiting teacher from France be integrated into a single planning document. Responsibility for the delivery of the curriculum rests with the permanent teachers of French in the school and careful, ongoing liaison between them and their colleague from France will ensure that lesson content and teaching approaches are age-appropriate and syllabus-based.

Individual short-term planning and preparation for lessons were good in the majority of cases. Teaching resources, such as visual materials, audio equipment, power point presentations, flashcards and additional worksheets were well chosen.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In the course of the subject evaluation, six lessons were observed. A wide range of teaching approaches was employed including global and individual questioning, pair work, reading and writing exercises and some innovative pronunciation games. Given that some year groups have double periods of French of eighty minutes duration, it is vital to have a wide variety of different language activities to ensure optimum student concentration and engagement. A thematic approach was evident in all lessons and this ensured that work was appropriately structured and that the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking were well integrated.

In one lesson, the topic chosen was too advanced and the vocabulary presented too difficult for the group in question. In such situations, students may feel overwhelmed and this can lead to a loss of interest and confidence. It is important, therefore, to plan lesson content thoroughly and to select topics and a level of language that are wholly appropriate to the age and linguistic ability of the learners. For younger learners in particular, the use of vocabulary games, songs, word searches, crosswords and interactive computer work are practical and effective means of learning a new language in an enjoyable way.
The salient feature of all lessons observed was the integration of ICT. A laptop computer and data projector were available in all classrooms visited and it was heartening to note that all teachers of French had embraced the new technology. The teachers had made determined efforts to upskill and they demonstrated a willingness to innovate, experimenting with ICT and using it in parallel with more traditional teaching methodologies. In discussions with the inspector, the teachers of French reported that the gradual integration of ICT into lessons had had a very positive impact on the teaching and learning of the language in the school and this assertion was borne out during the observation of lessons.

In a junior-cycle class, the potentially mundane topic of weather forecasts was enlivened when turned into a language game in which all students participated. Having done a quick recap of vocabulary and phrases learned the previous day from the textbook, the teacher proceeded to engage the students’ attention by projecting a large colourful map of France, taken from the website www.french.ie, on to the white board. Students were asked to listen to the weather forecast and then match various regions and cities with the corresponding weather forecast. Flashing lights and sound effects signalled the correct answer when it was written up electronically on the map and the young students responded with enthusiasm. The lesson was very well paced and very competently managed by the teacher. The complementary language skills of listening, reading and speaking were effectively integrated in this lively and enjoyable session.

In another junior-cycle lesson observed, the focus was on food and students were able to choose their breakfast menu items online. Colourful, attractive images of various foods were accompanied by the flashing written word on the whiteboard. Students practised the correct pronunciation while choosing their favourite foods to assemble their individual breakfast menu. A high level of attention was evident during this exercise and class work was effectively consolidated when students were given a handout containing new vocabulary and a homework assignment based on the lesson topic.

In a senior-cycle class, students were learning the present subjunctive tense and its possible uses. The teacher gave clear examples and explanations, and it was obvious that there was good continuity with prior learning. Students had a firm grasp of this verb tense although some tended to use it in situations where the use of present indicative or future tense might have been more natural and appropriate. An extract from the film Entre les Murs was used effectively to illustrate the attitude of some French students towards the use of the present subjunctive tense. The fact that the short film extract had subtitles in French, rather than in English, ensured that students were able to see the link between the written and the spoken word and they were not simply relying on an English language text to understand the dialogue. The teacher gave the class a brief oral summary of the context of the film clip and this strategy also helped the students’ understanding of the extract.

Other examples of how ICT supported teaching and learning and enhanced cultural awareness were seen when an authentic timetable from a French school and an online map of the Paris metro were used in lessons. Great credit is due to all teachers of French for incorporating interactive methods of language teaching into their lessons.

In all lessons observed, teachers made sustained efforts to use the target language for classroom communication. It was clear that the majority of students had a good understanding of various instructions and affirmations in French. They should also be encouraged to interact as much as possible in the target language by asking questions and making requests. The role of the visiting teacher from France in improving students’ pronunciation and in building their confidence to
speak French is warmly acknowledged. Teachers are advised to refrain from repeating instructions in English or from speaking a combination of both French and English in the same sentence. This practice may only serve to lessen the positive impact of using the target language.

Very good classroom management was a feature of all lessons observed. Teachers were committed and professional in their approach to language teaching and the student-teacher relationship was positive and pleasant. Students answered questions readily, showed an interest in their work and cooperated fully with their teachers.

**ASSESSMENT**

The assessment of students’ progress is a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process in Carrick-on-Shannon Community School. Teachers of French use a combination of questioning, homework assignments, projects, regular class tests and formal examinations to monitor students’ achievement.

All year groups, apart from TY, have formal written and aural examinations in French at Christmas and in summer. Commendably, common assessments are set. Certificate examination classes sit “mock” written and aural examinations in the spring. It would be good practice to conduct a formal “mock” oral examination for Leaving Certificate students. In order to promote the importance of oral proficiency for every year group, it is further recommended that a short, informal oral test be given to all students as part of the French department’s assessment procedures. The systematic use of oral assessments affords students the opportunity to grow in confidence in relation to oral proficiency.

Some students maintain specific vocabulary notebooks. This is good practice as such a notebook can be a most useful reference and revision aid to students provided that it is properly and logically arranged. It is best to store new words and phrases under thematic headings. If students merely write down words and phrases at random in their vocabulary copybooks, there is little chance that they will be able to access them correctly and efficiently when revising.

Recognising that productive homework consolidates and extends learning, the school has drawn up a comprehensive homework policy. In order to ensure steady progress in modern language acquisition, it is essential that all students be assigned regular homework exercises in the target language. Syllabus-based tasks such as the writing of postcards, messages, letters, diary entries and personal opinions enable students to practise and improve their writing skills. All homework assignments should be corrected, dated and signed by teachers and students should be required to write out corrections and ensure that they understand them. As all students have a CD which accompanies the textbook, teachers assign listening exercises as homework. This is a very good method of improving students’ aural skills.

When preparing students for the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations, the members of the French department integrate work on past examination papers with the use of the textbook and other resources throughout the school year. This is good practice. The results achieved by students in the certificate examinations are analysed, discussed at subject department level and used to inform planning and teaching for the following year.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable makes good provision for the delivery of French and all year groups have appropriate time allocation.
- The school promotes collaborative planning and a formal modern languages department has been established. Planning for the subject is ongoing.
- The development of an electronic folder for French has facilitated the creation and storage of a wide range of language resources.
- All teachers have systematically and successfully integrated ICT into lessons.
- The thematic approach to lesson delivery, adopted by all teachers, ensured a good balance and integration of the four language skills.
- The visiting teacher from France is contributing significantly to the work of the French department during this school year.
- Student-teacher relationships were positive and pleasant. Students worked well and co-operated fully with their teachers.

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

- Detailed work schemes for each year group should be collaboratively drawn up, ensuring that sufficient material is documented and covered in each term.
- It is important to plan lesson content thoroughly and to select topics and a level of language that are appropriate to the age and linguistic ability of the students.
- Oral testing, either formal or informal, should form part of the assessment procedures for all year groups.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

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