Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Sutton Park School
Sutton, Dublin 13
Roll number: 60381E

Date of inspection: 4 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sutton Park School, Dublin 13. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Sutton Park School is a co-educational, fee-paying, post-primary school in Sutton, Dublin 13. There are 263 students enrolled in the current school year. The school seeks to uphold best practice in international education and is accredited by the Council of International Schools (CIS) and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC).

Modern languages feature prominently in the school curriculum and the diversity of languages on offer to students is notable. With approximately twenty percent of the student cohort coming from other European countries, the school enjoys a wide cultural mix which in turn enhances the milieu in which modern languages are taught. While French is a core subject for all students, three other European languages, Spanish, German and Italian, are offered as optional subjects, depending on demand in any given year. It is worth noting that seventeen percent of the students in the school are studying two European languages. This uptake is well above the national norm.

Timetabling arrangements for French are very satisfactory. In junior cycle and in transition year (TY) four periods per week are allocated, while in senior cycle there are five periods per week. The provision of single periods and the distribution of those periods across the week allow for regular and frequent contact with the target language which is optimal. The student-teacher ratio is extremely favourable and class groups generally retain the same teacher within a cycle. This is good practice.

Class formation is based on mixed ability in first year and in second year. In third year, the French classes are divided into higher-level and ordinary-level groups. It is suggested that this arrangement be reviewed, as only a very small minority of students sit the ordinary-level paper and the common syllabus for ordinary-level and higher-level Junior Certificate French is designed to facilitate the learning of the language in a mixed-ability setting. With differentiated class work and home work assignments, it should be possible to address the learning needs of all third-year students within a single class group. All students spend three years in senior cycle as TY is
compulsory in the school. Classes in fifth year and in sixth year are timetabled concurrently to facilitate movement between higher-level and ordinary-level groups.

Broad, whole-school support for French is good. The provision of a base classroom for each teacher of French facilitates the development of a well equipped, stimulating language learning environment. Teachers have access to good quality audio and visual equipment. Classrooms are very spacious and all are attractively and imaginatively decorated with colourful resources such as maps, posters, charts and photographs. The vibrancy of one classroom in particular was striking, with large posters and jerseys of the French football team on display, a glass cabinet filled with typical French products, a floor-to-ceiling painting of Parisien scenes, vertical blinds in the colours of the French flag, and shelves crammed with ceramic French frogs! The corridor outside the language classrooms has been designated as an additional modern languages area and again flags, notice boards and photographs create a colourful and motivational environment for students. French novels, short stories, dictionaries and magazines are available in the school library.

In August 2010, a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) laboratory was installed in the school. This state-of-the-art language laboratory supplements the existing general purpose computer room. The teachers of French have had some preliminary training in how to use the CALL laboratory and an information and communications technology (ICT) technician is employed on a full time basis by the school. During the evaluation, the CALL laboratory was not used by the teachers of French. As the school year progresses, it is strongly recommended that teachers use the school’s excellent ICT facilities extensively for the teaching and learning of French. The internet is a rich source of current, stimulating material for language teachers and language learners and it is essential that optimum use be made of that resource by teachers and students alike. The school is fully broadband-enabled and, in addition to the ICT facilities described above, some classrooms are equipped with a computer and a data projector.

French has been well supported in the school through the provision of various co-curricular activities. Senior students have participated in a French debating competition, Les Joutes Oratoires, and a student from the school had been given the award of Best Individual Speaker in the 2009 round of debates. Leaving Certificate students may attend a French conversation club on Wednesday afternoons. A French theatre group visits the school annually. Other co-curricular activities such as the serving of French meals and the organisation of a French soirée, hosted by the TY students, do much to enhance the learning of the language and the promotion of cultural awareness. As the pupils in Grades 4, 5 and 6 in the adjoining Junior School study French, there is scope for TY students to take a leadership role in the organisation of some enjoyable language activities such as games, songs or an occasional table quiz for the younger learners. While the school does not have links with a partner French school, students are encouraged to participate in personal exchanges and visits to France. With the enhanced ICT facilities now available, it may be possible to create links, which could be computer-mediated, with a school in France or in a francophone country. Information on establishing links with French schools may be obtained from www.leargas.ie

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject planning has become an integral part of the planning process in the school and subject departments have been put in place. All the modern language teachers come together to form a cohesive modern languages department. This is good practice. Collaborative planning is commendably facilitated through the allocation of time for a formal monthly meeting. There are three teachers in the French department; one permanent full-time teacher, one teacher who is
employed in a temporary, whole-time capacity and one part-time teacher who is paid privately by the school. Two members of the team act as joint co-ordinators of the subject and they have assembled a large folder containing documents pertaining to the teaching of French, including copies of the syllabuses and the accompanying NCCA guidelines. Other practical documents such as the timetable for the use of the language laboratory, copies of various school policies and information on co-curricular activities are stored in the French folder. It may also be useful to store a copy of the Chief Examiners’ Reports on Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate French in the department folder. These reports are available on the State Examinations Commission’s website, www.examinations.ie and they may help to guide the teaching and learning of the language in the school.

The minutes of the modern languages department meetings are retained in the French folder and this is good practice. It is noted however, that, at subject department meetings, much time is taken up with organisational issues. As reflection on teaching and learning is the most important aspect of departmental planning, a balance should be sought between system maintenance and the sharing of best practice at meetings.

Work schedule templates have been developed by the teachers of French and these detail the topics to be taught, the timeframe assigned to each topic, the assessment techniques to be used and the learning outcomes expected. It is particularly noteworthy that the learning outcomes for each year group are stated in clear, precise terms. As a next step in the subject planning process, it is recommended that the teachers of French discuss, agree and document appropriate strategies and teaching methodologies to achieve the stated learning outcomes. Future planning meetings might also focus on how best to integrate ICT into the teaching and learning of French as well as some discussion on differentiated teaching methods best suited to mixed-ability settings.

The existing plan for TY is in need of reworking to reflect the principles of the programme. This programme presents a wonderful opportunity to innovate and to introduce new topics and varied teaching approaches. Planning for French in TY should include ideas on how to promote the concept of self-directed learning, especially in terms of students accessing and using suitable interactive language websites on a regular basis. Students in TY could also be introduced to various aspects of French cinema as a means of stimulating interest in culture and the arts.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Most lessons began with a roll call, the checking of homework and the writing of the lesson objectives on the board. Sharing the proposed learning objectives with students is good practice. It is recommended that the learning objectives be written in the target language only rather than in both French and English. It would also be useful, at the end of the lesson period, to collectively review the extent to which the objectives had been achieved. The French department adopted an integrated, thematic approach in line with guidelines for syllabus implementation and the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing were promoted successfully through various language activities.

In a junior-cycle lesson, an effective revision exercise on numbers was carried out. It was clear that the students had a good knowledge of the numbers up to a hundred and the lesson moved at a brisk pace. A stimulating blend of various language-learning activities, including a game of Bingo, ensured that students remained focused and engaged. It was good to note that all students were fully familiar with and able to use the French alphabet with ease. The target language was used exclusively during the lesson and, despite the fact that most of the young learners had been
learning French for a very short time, they were well able to understand their teacher’s instructions and affirmations and they were keen to respond in the target language.

In another junior-cycle class, the focus was on weather and pastimes. Resources used included flashcards, a globe and photographs. Students were asked to describe the weather in Ireland and, using the globe, the teacher asked about typical weather conditions in other countries. Attractive photographs and flashcards represented the different seasons which were in turn linked to various, weather-appropriate pastimes and activities. Students made a good effort to participate and to respond to the teacher’s questioning. In order to maximise the level of participation, care should be taken to ensure that learners are allowed sufficient time to process their thoughts and to construct their answers in the target language.

In a third junior-cycle class, the emphasis was on grammar but this was skilfully combined with other aspects of language learning. Students were learning how to form and use the Futur Proche (near future). On a PowerPoint presentation, there were attractive images and clear explanations to illustrate the use of this verb tense in everyday speech and students quickly grasped the concept. The inclusion of a short listening exercise complemented the reading and written exercises in the textbook. The fact that key words were written on the board helped the students to better understand the aural component. In a group work exercise towards the end of the lesson, some students were unsure of how to proceed. It is recommended that very clear instructions be given in advance of assigning tasks so that all students can get maximum benefit from working in a group.

The revision of the present subjunctive tense was the basis for one lesson in senior cycle while another lesson focused on the revision of the present, past and future tense of the irregular verb boire. In both cases, continuity with previous learning was good and students responded well to the teacher’s questioning. It was clear that the learners had a sound knowledge of the various verb tenses in question. In senior cycle, higher-level students do not have any set textbook and they rely entirely on notes and worksheets supplied by the teacher. The quality of some of the photocopied worksheets which were distributed to students in both senior-cycle classes visited was very poor. While it is not necessary to work from a commercially-produced book, it is essential that all teacher-generated handouts be clear, legible, up-to-date and age-appropriate. The French department is advised to reflect on the considerable benefits of acquiring good quality, colourful, stimulating material for students whether online, in a text-book or in handout format. It is important that all teaching materials cover the various aspects of the Leaving Certificate syllabus in a systematic way and that ample class work and homework exercises are readily to hand.

The commitment of the teachers to use the target language for classroom management, including affirmation and instructions, was generally good and was exceptional in one case. The register of language used in the various classes was appropriate to the needs and the language ability of the students in question. Good attention was paid to correcting sensitively students’ pronunciation errors. Teachers are advised to resist the temptation to repeat instructions in English and to refrain 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. When time is made available during the lesson for student-student interaction, it gives learners optimum opportunities to develop their oral competence and confidence.

In the French lessons observed, the classroom atmosphere was very good. Teachers were competent and professional in their approach to the creation of a positive and supportive environment in the classroom. Students were given much individual attention, encouragement and
affirmation. Interactions between teachers and students, and among the students themselves, were very good.

ASSESSMENT

In Sutton Park School, the assessment of students’ progress is a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process. It was noted that very good records of attendance and test results of individual students are maintained. Teachers of French use a combination of individual and group questioning, homework assignments, projects, regular class tests and formal examinations to monitor students’ achievement.

A review of student copybooks showed a considerable variation in the type and regularity of homework being assigned and corrected. To ensure steady progress in language acquisition, it is important that all students be given regular, productive homework exercises in the target language. It is not necessary to grade all homework assignments. Constructive comments from teachers, together with some supportive recommendations are of more benefit to learners trying to improve their written work. In order to ensure that teachers’ feedback achieves maximum effect, it is recommended that students be required to take note of errors and to write in corrections, where applicable. The French department is urged to discuss homework procedures and to arrive at a consensus, so that teachers’ expectations and their approach to the correction of students’ work are consistent from first year to sixth year. In this regard, the department may find the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) assessment for learning (AfL) web pages useful.

In one class, students had specific vocabulary notebooks where all new words and phrases were recorded. This is a good method of building up vocabulary. In order to ensure the best use of a resource which aids revision and retention, it is recommended that students be directed to organise such vocabulary notebooks under thematic headings.

Class-based tests are conducted regularly in addition to formal in-house examinations. Written and aural assessments are given to all year groups and teachers maintain comprehensive records of students’ results. The testing of oral proficiency occurs in every year group and this is optimal practice as such assessment emphasises the importance of French as a spoken language. It is also praiseworthy that third-year students sit the optional Junior Certificate oral examination. In February, “mock” oral examinations for Leaving Certificate students are conducted by the teachers themselves. The good practice of analysing certificate examination results against national norms is well established in the school and students are encouraged and enabled to sit higher-level papers in French in both the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate examinations.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The diversity of modern languages available to students is noteworthy
- The timetable allocation and distribution of lesson periods are supportive of the teaching and learning of French.
- The school has extensive, state-of-the-art ICT facilities to which teachers and students have access.
- A stimulating language-learning environment has been created in the French classrooms.
There was a positive and productive atmosphere in all lessons observed. Classroom management was very good and the commitment of teachers to their students was obvious.
Lessons were theme-based and incorporated the four skills of language learning.
The assessment of oral proficiency is carried out with all year groups.

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

- At subject department meetings, emphasis should be placed on the sharing of good practice regarding teaching and learning.
- A collaborative review of the TY programme for French should be carried out as part of the subject planning process.
- The French department should extensively use the school’s excellent ICT facilities, including the CALL laboratory, for the teaching and learning of French.
- New teaching materials are needed for use in senior-cycle classes.

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.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

- We feel that it was a very detailed and accurate 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

- At meetings, much more time has been spent on sharing resources and methods, particularly in ICT.

- A review of the TY programme will be a priority in the final term in time for the next academic year.

- An extensive amount of work has been carried out in training and gathering ICT resources – not only for French but for all modern languages.

- More effort is made to make use of the CALL laboratory and students are encouraged to use facilities in free classes and after school.

- A French book has been purchased for Senior Cycle classes.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Inspector for her invaluable advice and assistance in progressing our Department of French.