An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Mercy Heights Secondary School
Skibbereen, County Cork
Roll number: 62490T

Date of inspection: 5 February 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Mercy Heights 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 and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. 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

There is good provision for the study of European languages in the school and it is very positive that students can opt to take more than one foreign language. The study of French is a core component in junior cycle and Spanish is also offered at all levels. Students are taught in mixed-ability groupings in junior cycle. Transition Year (TY) is compulsory and the study of a European language is a key element of the programme. At the end of junior cycle, the students select their optional subjects for senior cycle with the help of the guidance counsellor. An information evening is held for parents to inform them of the option process. A wide range of subjects is offered at senior cycle and this is facilitated through cooperation with the neighbouring boys’ school. Procedures are also in place to assist students in changing subjects if they so wish.

The timetabling allocation for French in junior cycle is satisfactory although there are only three single class periods per week in first year. This is in order to facilitate students in sampling all subjects. The allocation increases to four periods in second year and third year. This allocation of single periods in junior cycle is important as it allows for regular class contact in the early years of language learning. TY students have four periods of French per week while students in fifth year and sixth year have five periods per week.

There are clear procedures in place for supporting students with additional educational needs and there is close liaison between the language departments and the learning-support team. Regular meetings are held to coordinate the one-to-one assistance that is offered to students who may need extra help. Collaborative planning takes place between the teachers and learning-support team in order to plan for differentiated learning and for the use of active teaching methodologies that promote student involvement.

The teachers do not have designated rooms as the students are classroom based. Consequently they have to bring equipment such as a CD player with them when they change rooms. However, they have access to a fully-equipped computer room and to a language laboratory. They also have access to a wide range of equipment and resources including a data projector, laptop, CDs, DVDs,
newspapers and magazines. Additional resources may be requested through the subject co-ordinator. The language laboratory is a bright, spacious and airy room that is regularly used by class groups. The teachers have looked at how to optimise the use of this facility and as a result, the laboratory is a significant asset and adds greatly to the facilities available in the school for the teaching of languages. It was evident that students enjoy the experience of having lessons in the laboratory and benefit from the opportunities it offers for independent learning. The classroom walls are used to good effect to display posters, maps and samples of students’ work. This emphasis on highlighting both current affairs and the culture of the target language country in the displays is very worthwhile as it creates a stimulating learning environment and enhances the learning experience.

Co-curricular and extracurricular support for the subject is strong and involves co-operation with teachers from a number of other subject areas each year. A range of activities including boules, cookery, music, film and the students’ own French drama production form part of the TY programme. A French theatre company, specifically for schools, also visits. In addition, students in senior cycle have the opportunity to participate in an annual tour to the Ardèche region of France during the summer holidays. The visit affords the students an opportunity to experience French language and culture at first hand and enriches their language skills while also providing them with a memorable holiday. It is very positive to note the ongoing commitment of the teachers to the organisation of this tour.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject-department planning is well organised and is facilitated by school management. One of the teachers acts as a co-ordinator for the subject on a rotational basis. The role includes convening meetings, facilitating subject planning and teacher development within the department and the updating of resources. Subject meetings are organised each term and records are kept of decisions taken.

Subject planning for French is well advanced and a comprehensive subject plan has been compiled. The plan is evaluated and reviewed by the teachers at the end of the school year. While the plan begins with the mission statement for French, it is suggested that this mission statement be reviewed and updated so as to more accurately capture the very positive work that is being done in the subject. Yearly schemes of work for each class group have been drawn up that include long-term planning for the subject. It is recommended that more detail be added to these plans in future, in particular the inclusion of the specific learning outcomes to be achieved by students during the school year. These outcomes could be used as a basis for the assessment of students’ progress in the various language skills. The planning documentation also advocates the use of an approach based on Multiple Intelligences (MI) in the teaching of the subject. This is good practice as MI focuses attention on students’ learning styles and so encourages a learner-centred approach.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

It was very positive to observe that French was used extensively by the teachers for classroom communication and for teaching lesson content in both junior cycle and senior cycle. Instructions, questions and affirmation were in French as well as general conversation with students. This emphasis on spoken French helped to maximise the opportunities for students to speak the language as part of normal classroom interaction, and it was obvious that they were accustomed to hearing the language spoken. As a result, they showed a high level of understanding and were
able to answer questions with ease. Attention was paid to pronunciation and mistakes were corrected sensitively. In order to further improve students’ pronunciation and intonation, it is recommended that the teachers include strategies targeting pronunciation as part of future lesson planning. This might involve allocating more time to drills and to the practice of new words especially in junior cycle, in order to promote an awareness of the specific sounds of the language. The exploitation of listening material for this purpose should also be considered.

Lessons were well structured. They generally began with a review of previous work followed by the presentation and practice of new content which was suited to the level and interests of the class. Good lesson management ensured that students had time to practice any new material. This is very positive as it helps to develop students’ confidence in language-learning. There was generally a good balance between whole-class teaching and more student-centred activities. Students were sometimes given worksheets while at other times they worked in pairs or in small groups on an activity. In some instances, the teacher modelled questions and answers on a topic before the students asked each other the same questions. This helped students to focus on the task and enabled the teacher to monitor students’ efforts. The language skills of listening and oral work were well integrated into the lesson and there was a smooth progression from one activity to the next.

There was a strong emphasis on active-learning methodologies in the lessons observed and the creative influence of the Multiple Intelligences approach was evident. Visual material such as country flags, a film clip and photographs were used extensively to illustrate the lesson topic. Flash-cards and coloured pens helped students to understand the meaning of words and to highlight grammatical structures while graphic organisers enabled them to make word associations and so facilitated vocabulary learning. The selection of post-cards added a touch of authenticity to a written activity. In a senior cycle lesson, a team debate served as a worthwhile example of how written work on an examination-type question can be transformed into a memorable lesson through the use of an active-learning approach. Attention to detail such as the layout of the room together with the earnestness and seriousness of the students in their individual contributions to the debate led to a successful learning experience. In another lesson, students gave short oral presentations describing their projects on an aspect of French culture and engaged in a question and answer session in the target language. An effective follow-through to this activity served as preparation for a homework assignment on the topic. It is suggested that ways of further developing the project work should be considered such as a presentation to other class groups or an inter-class quiz. This would facilitate the sharing of good practice and would promote the language among students.

Lesson time spent in the language laboratory was used in some instances to promote students’ oral competence in French. The provision of a handout with suggestions for questions helped ensure that students of all abilities were able to participate. It was noticeable that students remained on task and worked away diligently while the teachers gave assistance as required. Grammar formed an integral part of many lessons and was taught for a purpose as recommended in the syllabus. It was linked to the lesson content and provided support for the assigned homework.

There was a very good emphasis on cultural awareness in all the lessons observed. Reference was made to a range of topics including current affairs, politics, sport, cultural icons, geography and music. The frequent use of songs was particularly noticeable and was appreciated by students. Cultural awareness is an important aspect of the syllabus which is often overlooked and yet it can make a significant contribution to the enrichment of a student’s language-learning experience as evidenced in this school.
The quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was very good. The students showed an understanding of lesson content and an ability to apply what they had learnt. The atmosphere was relaxed and conducive to learning in all the classes visited. The student-teacher rapport was very good. It was evident that the students enjoyed studying the language and were motivated and interested in their work.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is regular assessment of students’ progress in French. The modes of assessment include classroom activities, homework, and both oral and aural assessments. Students in third year and sixth year sit formal school examinations at Christmas while other year groups have formal examinations in the summer. Common tests are used where appropriate. With senior classes, the final result is often subdivided into a grade for written and oral work. This is good practice as it highlights the importance of oral proficiency and reflects the emphasis on spoken communication in the school. An analysis of results in the certificate examinations is carried out and the results are used to inform teaching and learning in the subject.

An examination of a selection of student copybooks and files showed that homework is assigned regularly and that work is corrected. The good practice of including positive comments and suggestions for improvement is also noted. Students and parents are provided with information about progress in the subject through regular feedback, twice-yearly reports and the annual parent-teacher meetings.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a strong commitment to teaching European languages in the school and access to the study of a language is open to all students.
- The standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was very good.
- The target language was used extensively for communication and for teaching purposes.
- Active-teaching methodologies were used very effectively to encourage students’ participation.
- The emphasis on cultural awareness is a particular strength.
- The student-teacher rapport was very good.

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

- The subject plan should be further developed to include specific learning outcomes for each year group.
- It is recommended that a focus be placed on strategies targeting pronunciation, in particular in junior cycle.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.