An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of German
REPORT

St Peter’s College
Wexford, County Wexford
Roll number: 63650U

Date of inspection: 3 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GERMAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Peter’s College, Wexford. 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 subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The fact that modern languages form a central strand in the school’s curriculum is welcomed. Curricular options offered to students on entry to the school include modern languages. Students may choose between German and French and students may choose to study both. At the time of the evaluation, class formation was on the basis of banding, whereby two mixed-ability bands of 60 students were created at junior cycle level. The uptake of German at junior cycle was at a sustainable level of thirty students per year group due to the fact that, within the process of language choices, one band was required to study German. School management was planning for changes to the way in which languages were offered and to a mixed-ability class formation.

Within this new system, all students would study a modern language, either French or German, in first year and all students would then have the option of continuing with the study of a modern language in second and third year. This system, when introduced should impact positively on uptake of languages. At the time of the evaluation, forty-two of the 685 students in the college were not learning a modern language at junior cycle. However, this increases to one hundred and forty-two at senior cycle. This indicates that the changes in the modern language requirements of third level institutions have had a negative impact on uptake of languages, particularly at Leaving Certificate.

The allocation of time to the teaching and learning of German is good and the distribution of those units of time across the week are appropriate and ensure optimal regular class contact with the target language for the students of German. The exception is the provision for German within transition year (TY). Each TY class group has a double period for modern languages, which has to cater for students who studied French or German or indeed both. Less than a third of the students were opting to continue with German into senior cycle. The absence of a dedicated class group and time for German on the TY timetable could be a deciding factor in this regard. This should be addressed by school management in future planning.
The provision of a dedicated classroom for the teaching of German facilitates the creation of an authentic German learning environment as well as the integration of a range of media which support learning. Students also have access to a multi-media/computer room which offers a very good resource for both students and teacher. The dedicated base classroom for German has information and communication technology (ICT) access, an interactive whiteboard, displays of student work, brochures, posters, as well as dictionaries, text books, CDs and DVDs. It was good to observe the integration of a range of resources in the lessons visited.

The most important resource for the modern language classroom is the availability of a teacher who can effectively model the target country’s language and culture. A good level of both linguistic and cultural competence was observed in the course of the inspection, as well as an awareness of how students learn. The German teacher is appropriately qualified in the language and visits the target language countries to maintain linguistic skills and competence. Participating regularly in available continuing professional development (CPD) ensures parallel development of pedagogical competence. Examples include attendance at relevant workshops on co-operative learning for modern languages, assessment for learning (AfL) and using the interactive whiteboard and computers in the classroom. School management is praised for facilitating attendance at available CPD. The German teacher also liaises with other German teachers through active involvement with the German Teachers’ Association and through the organisation of and attendance at regional in-service seminars.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

School management facilitates subject planning through the provision of time once a term for subject teachers to meet, and, as a single teacher department, the German teacher also meets with the French teachers. Minutes of planning meetings are maintained. A subject plan for German has been developed and it is accurately based on the syllabus documents for junior and senior cycle German. The aims for German are appropriate and are in line with syllabus objectives. The German plan, in its introduction, also makes reference to the mission statement of the college and the overall objectives for its students. It is good practice to incorporate overall school objectives as a preamble to the aims and objectives of the subject. This introduction should be adapted to accommodate any changes introduced within the revised system of class formation and student access to languages.

The German plan outlines a scheme of work for each year group. The work completed to date is acknowledged. The references to the chapters in the textbook should be further elaborated to identify the themes and topics covered. The knowledge and skills to be acquired by the students should then be expressed in terms of can-do statements which would provide a useful checklist not only for the teacher but also for the learners themselves. A useful addition to the plan would be the inclusion of the teaching strategies and methodologies deployed by the teacher. On completion of the above suggested additions and amendments, it is recommended that a curriculum summary document for German could be produced to inform parents and students. This could be read prior to their deciding on the modern language of choice and should outline for them the range of learning experiences provided.

There is no self-contained TY plan for German and this should be addressed. A German plan for TY should describe themes which are in line with the philosophy of TY, such as exploring the literature, film and music of the German language and culture, as well as describing the communicative skills in the language and language awareness that are also to be developed. One of the aims of TY is to encourage independent study and as part of their course, TY students...
should be required to complete a project, design a poster of their project and devise an oral presentation of their project, as part of their course of study in German.

Detailed individual lesson plans were provided on the day of the inspection. These plans incorporated lesson objectives for the target group, methodologies, lesson content, homework and student activity. Good quality materials had also been prepared in advance of all lessons.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all lessons observed, the classroom atmosphere was conducive to effective learning and a very good rapport was evident between teacher and students. An authentic German world was created where the main language of instruction and communication was German. However, this was interspersed with English and the challenge for the teacher is to sustain the German environment and decrease the recourse to mother tongue to support learners. It is recommended that the teacher identify alternative strategies to facilitate student understanding, consolidate their use and gradually decrease reliance on English. Such strategies, some of which were observed in practice, should include the use of flash cards and other visual stimuli, mime and gestures, ICT, as well as preparatory work sheets to familiarise students with vocabulary and structures in advance.

Teaching was systematic and an integrated approach as recommended in syllabus guidelines was adopted. A good range of classroom activities was observed and some interesting ideas were used by the teacher to motivate and interest learners. Good use was made of group and pair work. In one lesson observed, it was good to see that the students were already sitting in groups. Students were used to organising themselves and working independently. Students participated well, engaged with tasks diligently and some lively pair work was observed during the course of the evaluation. Some very good and innovative strategies for vocabulary learning and for students to organise and retain vocabulary items were also noted.

The content of lessons was appropriate to student ability and stage of learning and was both stimulating and enjoyable for students. The teacher was diligent in sharing learning objectives with students which ensured clarity of direction. Introducing a phase of systematic checking achievement of objectives at the close of the lesson or series of lessons should be considered. It was evident that the teacher engaged in ongoing reflection of teaching and of the learning taking place. It was interesting to note the teacher changing the sequence of planned activities based on student response and level of understanding. This is very good practice in language teaching. Only on one occasion were students unclear of the purpose of the learning, where, in a sequence of activities a listening exercise was introduced. Attentive, focussed and purposeful listening is achieved by incorporating a pre-listening exercise or activity.

Attention to the development of language awareness and linguistic accuracy was also evident. This was integrated skilfully into lessons, involving teacher recapitulation of the rule or grammatical pattern, students accessing an exercise on the computer in class or a dedicated lesson in the multi-media room where students could practise structures independently. Students demonstrated good knowledge of themes covered and understanding of linguistic structures.

While students made great efforts to speak German, strategies to increase students’ use of German are recommended. A very good example of a simple exercise which required students to create their own sentences and dialogue spontaneously was observed in a first year lesson and could be replicated with other groups. Creating a paper free zone or space for five minutes where students have no recourse to written prompts may help to ensure each student has to produce
some oral response or contribution. The idea of a one-minute soap box with more senior students would achieve the same result.

**ASSESSMENT**

The school has an assessment policy and a well worked out homework policy. A range of procedures for monitoring and reporting on student progress is used. Regular in-class tests and in-school examinations are conducted and examples of in-class examinations were examined at the time of the evaluation. Information on student progress is provided to parents through school reports and parent-teacher meetings. Formative assessment of student written work forms part of the teachers’ ongoing assessment of student learning in the language. Student work had been corrected and annotated with teacher comments. Examination of copy books showed a range of appropriate themes had been covered; the type of writing exercises ranged from short simple sentences to practise of grammatical items in isolation and also integrated within themes, and longer pieces of writing. A very good standard of work was noted in the copy books examined and students demonstrated accurate mastery of the written German structures.

School management conducts an analysis of student uptake of levels in subjects and of attainment at both levels in certificate examinations and communicates this analysis to teachers and parents. The German department also undertakes an analysis in the context of self-review which serves to inform the review of subject planning and implementation. This is good practice.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The planned revisions to access to modern languages and class formation are welcome developments which when introduced should impact positively on uptake of languages.
- The allocation of time to the teaching and learning of German is good and the distribution of those units of time across the week are appropriate and ensure optimal regular class contact with the target language for the students of German, with the exception of TY.
- A good level of both linguistic and cultural competence was observed in the course of the inspection, as well as an awareness of how students learn.
- In all lessons observed, the classroom atmosphere was conducive to effective learning and a very good rapport was evident between teacher and students.
- An authentic German world was created where the main language of instruction and communication was German.
- A good range of classroom activities was observed and some interesting ideas were used by the teacher to motivate and interest learners.
- A very good standard of work was noted in the copy books examined and students demonstrated good knowledge of vocabulary and linguistic structures.

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

- It is recommended that learning outcomes articulated in terms of short-term targets should be included in the German plan which would provide students with a check list for their progress in the different aspects of their language learning.
- A self-contained TY plan for German should be developed.
While students made great efforts to speak German, strategies to increase students’ use of oral German are recommended.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher 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. 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.

*Published June 2012.*