

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**St Patrick's Comprehensive School
Shannon, County Clare
Roll number: 81007U**

Date of inspection: 30 April 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Patrick's Comprehensive 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 and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

French and German are the modern foreign languages offered to students in the school and access to the study of a language is open to all students. Prior to enrolment in first year, students are invited to select one of the two languages. French is set against German on the timetable in both junior cycle and senior cycle. Students are taught in mixed-ability groupings in the first two years of junior cycle while there are higher level and ordinary level classes in third year. Class groupings in the optional Transition Year (TY) are mixed ability. As there is a clear commitment to the teaching of foreign languages, it is suggested that ways of increasing students' access to languages be explored. In this regard, the provision of a module in a second language during TY should be considered.

Timetabling provision for the subject is satisfactory with four single periods per week allocated in first year and second year. This increases to five periods in third year. TY classes have four periods per week while students in fifth year and in sixth year have five periods. The allocation of single periods is an advantage in language learning as it allows for regular class contact.

There is a strong commitment to the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the school. Many classrooms are equipped with a computer and an interactive whiteboard with Promethean Active Studio software, and it is planned to have a computer in every classroom within the next school year. Computer laboratories are available for use by the language teachers on request. There are extensive resources for language learning including equipment such as data projectors and CD players as well as a range of DVDs and sets of novels suitable for different age groups. Some of the teachers of French have designated classrooms while other teachers move from room to room. Posters, maps and samples of students' work decorate many rooms and create a stimulating and attractive environment.

There are currently six teachers of French on the staff. Continuing professional development (CPD) is actively encouraged by management and funds are made available to pay for

membership fees for the relevant subject association. The teachers have undertaken CPD both in Ireland and in France, including ICT courses such as computer-assisted language learning (CALL). It is very positive that there is ongoing collaboration and sharing of expertise in the use of ICT among colleagues. As the use of ICT becomes more widespread, it is planned to encourage students to have contact with their French pen pals by means of a French *blog*, with occasional oral and visual contact made possible through the use of *Skype*.

Cross-curricular support for the subject in the school is very good. Students take part in the school's annual Creative Writing Competition and a selection of their entries in French are on display. Posters and invitations for the annual French breakfast for junior cycle students are prepared in conjunction with the Art department; a visit is arranged to the local French market; and students in fourth year have an opportunity to visit Lourdes. A student exchange took place in 2007-2008 with a school in Brittany as part of Shannon's town-twinning arrangement and a further exchange visit is planned.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

One of the teachers of French acts as co-ordinator for the subject and the role includes chairing department meetings as well as the co-ordination of department policy. Welcoming and inducting new or substitute teachers is another key aspect of the role. Management facilitates the holding of one subject meeting each term. This is good practice as it promotes discussion and the sharing of ideas among the members of the department.

A subject plan has been prepared which provides information on areas such as subject aims and objectives, class organisation, planning for students with special educational needs, resources and curriculum content for the various year groups. However, the yearly schemes of work are limited in the detail provided. In order to further progress the subject plan and to ensure that it becomes a blueprint for future development, it is recommended that the teachers identify a number of key areas as their focus. These areas might include teaching methodologies, students' use of the target language and the use of ICT. Some of these areas are already being targeted in class but have not to date been documented in the plan. In particular, it is recommended that the section on curriculum content be expanded so as to include learning outcomes for each year group and details of the methodologies to be used. Minutes of meetings should also form part of the subject plan so as to ensure a record of decisions taken and of the progress made. This will facilitate the review of the plan and will help to identify areas for future development.

There was evidence of some very good individual planning by teachers in the schemes of work for the lessons visited. The lesson notes revealed an emphasis on student learning with clear aims and objectives for each lesson. The sharing of this good practice is suggested as a way for the teachers to collaborate on the development of common written programmes of work for each year group.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The standard of teaching and learning was very high in the lessons visited. The lessons were well structured and content and pace were appropriate to the class group. Good practice was seen when there was good lesson management, when a range of teaching strategies was used and when students were engaged in the learning process. The integration of the key language skills of

listening, reading, speaking and writing around a theme ensured a smooth transition from one activity to the next and facilitated student learning.

There was very good use of French by the teachers for teaching lesson content and for classroom communication. It was especially good to note that this practice was also implemented with junior classes and that from the start of first year, grammar terminology was given in French. In this way, students are encouraged to become more language aware and they become accustomed to hearing French spoken as part of daily classroom interaction. There was also an awareness of the importance of ensuring that students develop habits of correct pronunciation. However, while the teachers' use of French was very consistent, there is a need to increase students' confidence in speaking the language. At times, a slight adjustment in the way questions are asked by the teacher would ensure that students have more opportunities to communicate in French. Phrasing questions in such a way that students respond in French rather than English would help to reinforce the emphasis on the target language. Providing students with the necessary phrases for use with ICT equipment is also suggested as a strategy that could be utilised to increase classroom communication.

The lessons were consistent with the planned programme of work and it was very positive to see the continuity with prior learning. However, while many lessons had clear aims and objectives, as evidenced in the teacher's lesson plan, these aims were not always communicated to students. It is recommended that this practice be extended and that the learning outcomes be shared with students as a way of encouraging an awareness of the purpose of the lesson.

The use of games and strategies to support learning was a particular strength of the teaching observed. Many lessons included a *mot du jour* or word of the day which was highlighted during the lesson. Asking junior cycle students to answer the roll using the chosen word was a quick and effective way of improving vocabulary and word recognition. Games were often used as a warm-up activity at the start of a lesson. Cards with weather images, a guessing game on objects in a suitcase and a clock caught the students' attention and helped to get them involved in the learning process. The use of such active-learning methodologies and the support offered by visual aids helped students to participate in the lesson and so created a successful environment for learning.

It was very positive to note the emphasis on cultural awareness in many lessons. In senior cycle, a letter from France created a sense of authentic communication between the teacher and the students and was well integrated into the work of the lesson. In TY, a video on young people's leisure activities in French-speaking countries was aptly linked to the students' own lives and to their project work. Students in junior cycle made presentations on French transport or studied a text on a French singer followed by work on a song. Allowing students to select the song helped to engage them in discussion on the topic. In another instance, an extract from a literary text by Daudet was used to build awareness of European history and civilisation. The text served as a starting point for a range of activities including examination preparation. The choice of a literary text enriched the work of the lesson and provided an insight into the short story *genre*. It clearly demonstrated how such texts can enhance learning, and how they can create a rich linguistic and cultural world for students to explore.

New vocabulary was presented clearly and in a variety of ways. There was good use of the whiteboard to consolidate grammar and vocabulary work, and handouts were used appropriately as a support for learning. When the primary purpose of a lesson is the teaching of vocabulary, it is suggested that the provision of a reading text would help students to see the words used in context and so would facilitate learning. This would be particularly important in senior cycle when a number of short texts could be used to allow for differentiation in levels of knowledge.

The layout of the classrooms allowed for flexibility in the seating arrangements, and this was of benefit when pair and group work was organised. It was good to note that activities based on pair work were well integrated into the lesson and allowed for students to learn from each other. The interactive whiteboards were used very effectively during the lessons and allowed for whole-class exercises to be carried out while the teacher monitored students' participation. In order to maximise learning, it is suggested that such on-line texts could be further exploited by asking students to read the text aloud with the on-line commentary. An interactive clock and PowerPoint presentations were also used to teach new content and to assess students' knowledge of a topic.

The atmosphere in the classes visited was relaxed and good humoured. The rapport between the teachers and students was very positive and this helped to support learning. The teachers' enthusiasm and energy played a key part in encouraging participation and students' efforts were affirmed and encouraged. Students demonstrated an interest in their work and were fully engaged in the learning process.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is in place to monitor students' progress including classroom tests and twice-yearly house examinations. An oral assessment is included at senior cycle. Feedback is given to students on their performance and the results are used to inform future work. An examination of a sample of copybooks showed that homework is regularly assigned and corrected and there was evidence of a good standard of work being achieved. As there is a strong emphasis on supporting learning, it is suggested that the teachers might find the Assessment for Learning (AfL) techniques of interest as they help students to improve their language proficiency. Information on AfL can be found on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (www.ncca.ie).

The teachers keep a record of students' results. Parents are kept informed of students' progress through the student journal, the twice yearly reports and the annual parent-teacher meeting.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision and support for languages is very good.
- The use of ICT for teaching and learning purposes is actively promoted.
- There was a high standard of teaching and learning in the lessons observed.
- Good planning for lessons was observed and a wide range of classroom activities was in evidence.
- There is a very good emphasis on the development of cultural awareness and this helps to enhance the learning experience for students.

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

- It is recommended that future subject planning focus on a number of key areas, including the development of learning outcomes for each year group.

- The practice of sharing learning outcomes with students should be extended to all classes.
- As part of lesson planning, the teachers should look at strategies to improve students' confidence in speaking French.

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.