

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna**

**Department of Education and Skills**

**Subject Inspection of French  
REPORT**

**St Joseph's Secondary School  
Castleisland, County Kerry  
Roll number: 61260U**

**Date of inspection: 10 December 2009**



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F  
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N  
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

**REPORT**  
**ON**  
**THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH**

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**SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT**

This report has been written following a subject inspection in St Joseph's 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 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. 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**

There is good provision for the study of modern European languages with French, German and Spanish currently on the curriculum. French is a core subject in junior cycle and access to the study of the language is open to all students. Students are taught in mixed-ability classes. In senior cycle, French is a core subject in fifth year while it is timetabled as an option against German in sixth year. Option bands are generated from student preferences. The students receive advice from the guidance counsellor and from subject teachers in making their choices. Timetabling for the subject is satisfactory and all lessons in junior cycle are single periods. This is in line with best practice as it allows for regular contact with the target language. In first year, students have three class periods per week. This increases to four periods in second year and third year. In fifth year, French is allocated five periods per week with an additional sixth period in the final year.

While the teachers do not have designated classrooms, they have access to a language laboratory and a computer room as well as to a range of equipment such as televisions, overhead projectors and CD players. Supplementary resources include newspapers, magazines and videos. Classes are timetabled for one period per week in the language laboratory. A range of posters, maps and language charts are displayed on the walls. As a stimulating language-learning environment can help to enhance the learning experience, it is suggested that the displays be expanded to include more samples of students' work and articles related to current affairs and French culture. Extracurricular support for the language includes students' participation in the Christmas concert, French drama and a school tour to Paris.

## **PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

One of the teachers of French acts as co-ordinator for the subject and the role involves the distribution of relevant information to the subject teachers. A subject plan has been prepared and this includes schemes of work for each year group, research on special educational needs and language resources. The plan is evaluated by means of formal and informal consultation with staff.

A subject department meeting is held each term and minutes are kept of decisions made. An examination of the minutes suggests that recent discussion has focused on issues such as assessment and the choice of textbooks. It is recommended that future planning meetings focus on teaching and learning strategies and in particular on the need to put in place a department policy on using French as the target language in the classroom. This will involve collaborative planning and the sharing of good practice by the teachers in order to develop a range of strategies for use with all students. Planning should also focus on ways of providing support for the language teachers in implementing and monitoring this policy. It is suggested that the school consider applying for a French language assistant under the Department of Education and Skills scheme in order to promote the language and to assist the teachers and students in bringing about this change.

## **TEACHING AND LEARNING**

The aims and objectives of the lesson were communicated to the students in some classes. This is good practice as it gives a structure to the lesson and ensures a focus on key learning. It is recommended that the practice of sharing planned learning outcomes be extended to all lessons. The lesson content and pace of lessons were generally appropriate to the class group and the time available.

Particular attention was paid to the teaching of grammar in some of the classes visited and the methods employed were effective in ensuring a high level of student learning. Diagrams, drawings and colour were used and clear explanations were given. The students' understanding of the grammar topic was closely monitored by the teacher through questioning of individual students. Their answers demonstrated a clear knowledge of grammar structures and an ability to apply their learning.

The teachers made limited use of French for teaching lesson content and for communication in the classroom. The lesson introduction, instructions, explanations and affirmation of students' efforts were almost always given in English. This gave rise to a situation where the opportunities for students to hear French spoken or to interact with the teacher or their peers in French were greatly reduced. Students' contributions were sometimes limited to translating words or phrases into English. It is therefore strongly recommended that the target language become the language of communication in the classroom for all year groups. This will necessitate a change in teaching practice so as to move to teaching lesson content in French. It will also be necessary to encourage and support students in speaking French and to build up their confidence in using the language. Special attention needs to be paid to providing students with the relevant phrases for classroom communication from the start of first year.

Students' errors in pronunciation were corrected sensitively and an explanation of the rules governing pronunciation was often given. To complement this approach, it is suggested that more use could be made of listening material for pronunciation purposes, for example, students could

be asked to repeat words or to carry out short pronunciation drills on a regular basis. The information and communication facilities in the school could also be used for this work.

Good practice in teaching and learning was seen when the lesson content was structured around a theme and when there was a smooth transition from one activity to the next. In senior cycle, there was good continuity with prior learning when students first revised vocabulary and then listened to a recording before progressing to oral work on the topic. Once the teacher has modelled the question and answer format with a number of students, it is suggested that the students question each other in pairs while the teacher monitors their work rather than continuing with teacher-directed questioning. This would enable the students to ask as well as to answer questions. The use of a visual stimulus such as a photograph or flash-cards can sometimes be of benefit in helping less-able students to formulate their answers.

Students' knowledge of vocabulary was very good. When questioned, they were able to draw on their prior learning. The teachers were assiduous in highlighting key words and phrases on the board while the students took copious notes. It was evident that all students were given help in organising their notes so that the information could be easily accessed for homework or for future reference. As an aid to learning, it is suggested that time for activities that will allow students to practise the new vocabulary be factored into the lesson planning.

A focus on listening comprehension was a feature of some of the lessons observed. It was very positive when the listening material was integrated with the lesson theme as recommended in the syllabus. This enabled the teacher to use the listening activity as a basis for the development of oral and written skills. Good practice was also seen when the students were asked to evaluate the difficulty of the exercise. However, when a listening comprehension test from the certificate examinations is selected, it is important to consider how it might best be used for teaching rather than for testing purposes. For example, when students had access to the tape script as well as the recording, the exercise became a test of reading comprehension skills rather than a development of students' listening skills. There needs to be a clear understanding of how to develop students' global listening skills in addition to the testing of those skills.

Pair-work activities were observed in a small number of lessons. Using group or pair work to engage the students in active learning is good practice as it promotes independent learning. As the questioning in most lessons was largely teacher-directed, it is recommended that the traditional format of the teacher asking the questions be replaced by more pair or group work. This will encourage students' creativity and initiative as well as their active participation in the lesson.

There was good classroom management overall and the students were focused and purposeful in their work. They received affirmation for their efforts as well as help from the teachers in organising their learning. The atmosphere in the classes visited was positive and students were polite and co-operative at all times.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The school has a homework and assessment policy in place. Modes of assessment for French include class questioning, homework, tests and formal examinations. An examination of a sample of students' copybooks showed that homework is assigned and corrected. Students are assessed regularly with three class tests per term and parents are asked to sign the test results. Tests are also held at Christmas and in the summer. Practice orals are organised for Leaving Certificate students. As a way of focusing on oral proficiency, it is recommended that the teachers include an

oral assessment for each year group. This will help to support the ongoing development of good pronunciation.

Parents are kept informed of students' progress by means of the school journal and the twice-yearly reports. Parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group. An analysis of student attainment in the certificate examinations is carried out by management and this is used to inform teaching and learning. This is good practice.

## **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The study of a European language is a key element of the curriculum.
- Timetabling provision for French is satisfactory.
- The teaching of grammar is a particular strength.
- There is evidence of good student learning in the area of vocabulary.
- Classroom management is good and students are focused on their work.

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

- It is strongly recommended that a policy on French as the language of communication in the classroom be developed and implemented.
- Attention should be paid to providing opportunities for students to interact with each other and the teacher in French.
- Subject planning should focus on teaching and learning methodologies and in particular on active teaching methodologies in order to encourage students' participation in lessons.
- Greater use of pair and group work is recommended.
- An annual assessment of oral proficiency should be introduced for all year groups.

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.