



An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Coláiste Chiaráin
Leixlip, County Kildare
Roll number: 91371B**

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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Chiaráin. 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

Coláiste Chiaráin is a co-educational community school situated in Leixlip, Co. Kildare. Two modern languages, French and German, are taught in the school. French features in all programmes offered to students: Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

The study of a modern language is mandatory, both in junior and in senior cycle, and students have access to either French or German, depending on which language they select prior to entering the school. The uptake of French is very good. It is noteworthy that the school operates the inclusive policy of affording students with special learning needs the opportunity of studying a modern language.

Classes are of mixed ability in first year, while streaming occurs in second and third year. Management and the French department are

keeping the present streaming arrangements under review as the common syllabus for Junior Certificate French allows for and facilitates the teaching of the language in a mixed-ability setting. Advice and support on planning, preparation, approaches and teaching strategies suited to mixed ability classes may be obtained from the Second Level Support Service (01-2365021 or www.slss.ie)

Good provision for French is evident in both the number and distribution of class periods. The allocation of four periods per week throughout junior cycle is fully in line with syllabus requirements. It is commendable that single rather than double periods have been allocated to junior cycle French, as best practice suggests that students derive maximum benefit from regular contact with the language.

Senior cycle classes have an allocation of five periods, one double and three single, per week. All senior cycle classes are timetabled concurrently in order to facilitate higher and ordinary level groups. Examination of the timetable has shown that a very good effort has been made to spread class periods evenly throughout the week.

Due to a shortage of space, the school has to operate a parallel system of teacher-based and student-based classrooms. Classrooms are allocated to individual teachers on the basis of seniority. The advantages of the teacher-based rooms became evident during the inspection as they contained some excellent wall charts, large maps, displays of students' work, photographs of school tours and, in one room, an impressive mural of Astérix! Such an array of visual resources has helped to create a rich learning environment and a good French ambience for the students.

Teachers of French can access information and communications technology (ICT) by booking a lesson period in one of the school's two computer rooms. The multi-media room is also available to language teachers and it can accommodate two class groups at a time. In addition, all classrooms are now Broadband enabled and the school is in the process of installing a PC in each room. Individual teachers have been provided with laptops. ICT was not used to teach French during the evaluation but teachers reported that they download authentic material for classroom use from www.french.ie and from many other language-learning sites. All students, and particularly those attempting higher level French in the Leaving Certificate, would benefit from guidance on how to use ICT to learn independently and to access informative, interactive language-learning sites.

A good range of co-curricular activities ensures that French has a high profile in the school. For the past ten years, fifth year students have taken part in a school exchange programme school to Bressuire, a town in western France which is twinned with Leixlip. Outside of the obvious benefits to the participating students, all students in the school can profit from this invaluable resource. Areas of possibility include the development of regular contact with the students of Bressuire through e-mails, video links, exchange of articles, photos and information for school magazines. The exchange programme also provides the opportunity for teachers to acquire from their French colleagues some authentic materials such as school reports and timetables, brochures, menus from local restaurants, posters and photographs of the area. Such resources could be used effectively in all classes to promote interest in the lifestyle and culture of France. A school tour to Paris took place in 2005 and a French theatre group visits the school annually. It may be possible to organise some in-school-language activities such as an inter-class table quiz, concert or debate on occasion as such activities do much to enhance the learning of the language and to promote cultural awareness.

All teachers of French are members of the French Teachers Association and two members of the department have worked for the State Examinations Commission, correcting Junior Certificate French. In order to maintain and develop their language proficiency, teachers are advised to keep up regular contact with the target language community through use of the Internet, television and radio, and, when feasible, through availing of continuous professional development opportunities, in Ireland and in France.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Coláiste Chiaráin has engaged fully with the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) team and also with the TL21 team who have delivered a workshop to the staff. Management is fully supportive of whole school planning and has facilitated collaborative planning through the provision of a designated planning meeting once a month.

A well-developed departmental structure operates in the school. The French department is headed up by a voluntary co-ordinator and all members of the department have collaborated to produce a detailed plan incorporating its aims and objectives, lists of topics to be studied, together with the desired learning outcomes for students in each year group. The inclusion of the latter is particularly significant as all teachers of French now have identifiable, achievable targets to aspire to in relation to the teaching of the subject. In addition, the comprehensive planning documents contain an inventory of shared resources, information on useful language-learning websites as well as strategies on how to teach vocabulary effectively. All those concerned with its production are deserving of high praise. Future planning meetings might focus on how best to integrate ICT into the teaching and learning of French as well as some discussion on the teaching methods that work most effectively in mixed ability settings. It is obvious that a high level of co-operation, collaboration and sharing of best practice exists between the members of the French department and they continue to review (and revise when necessary) the existing subject plan.

There was clear evidence of excellent individual lesson planning in terms of very detailed personal schemes of work, the preparation of audio equipment, handouts, worksheets and supplementary resources.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Inspection activities carried out included the observation of five lessons, three in junior cycle and two in senior cycle. In addition, there was an opportunity to interact with the students in each class.

The pace and content of all lessons observed were suited to the ability and interests of the students in the various class groups. Teachers were au fait with Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate syllabus requirements and lesson topics were selected wisely with a view to engaging students in the learning process. All lessons, which were theme based, were well prepared and presented in a competent manner. Themes chosen included the weather, daily routines, directions, sport and life in a disadvantaged area. In some

classes, the topic of the lesson, accompanied by key words and phrases, was written on the board at the outset. This is good practice. A clear structure and a good sense of timing ensured that students remained focused and alert during the class periods.

A good variety of teaching methodologies was observed, including whole-class and individual questioning, the exploitation of extra resources, the integration of oral and aural activities, brainstorming and pair work.

In addition to the textbooks, visual stimuli, such as maps, posters, photographs and amusing cartoon flashcards, were used most successfully to stimulate students' interest and to encourage oral production. Large, laminated flashcards were skilfully exploited in one class to teach and revise vocabulary around daily routines and time while practice on the present tense of commonly used reflexive verbs fitted easily and effortlessly into the same activity. Similarly, photographs of well-known sports personalities served as a good stimulus for some senior cycle discussion. Teachers are to be complimented for their initiative in researching and producing such high-quality visual stimuli and it was evident that students enjoyed working with these engaging materials. In the context of a review of current textbook provision, it is recommended that a more interesting, colourful and language-rich textbook be chosen instead of the narrowly-focused, monochrome revision book in use in one class during the evaluation.

Considerable use was made of the large white boards in all classrooms in order to reinforce learning. For example, the board was used creatively, in one class, to draw the symbols associated with the weather. The strategy of inviting some students to work on the board worked well in another junior cycle class and the level of participation and enthusiasm generated by this exercise was particularly noteworthy. In a senior cycle class, a lively brainstorming session, conducted on the board at the start of the lesson, gave students the opportunity to express their opinions on life in a disadvantaged area. Students were enthusiastic and articulate and participated energetically in this collective exercise.

Good integration of an aural component was seen in some lessons. For example, some junior cycle students had learned the names of major cities in France and had located them on a large map. They were then asked to say whether the city was situated in the north, south etc. This oral activity was followed by a simple listening comprehension about the cities concerned. The lesson was a very good example of the linkage of the different language skills. It is recommended that a short, relevant listening exercise form part of every lesson so as to develop the students' aural aptitudes.

The use of the target language by teachers was very good overall and exemplary in some cases. Instructions and affirmations were given in French and most teachers skilfully avoided using English through the innovative use of synonyms, facial expressions and mime. In a minority of cases, instructions given in French were subsequently translated into English. Teachers are urged to avoid this approach as students can come to rely on the English translation rather than making a genuine effort to understand the French. All teachers were thorough but sensitive in their insistence on correct pronunciation and intonation. Students made a good effort to speak French in the classroom and one class group participated fully in a well-paced, teacher-led pronunciation practice. Some students also demonstrated a good familiarity with the French alphabet, an essential aspect of learning the language.

Pair work sessions were integrated into a number of lessons and some worked relatively well. This teaching strategy would have been more effective if students had one set of questions or worksheet only per pair and if there had been a stronger emphasis on oral rather than written responses. Short, timed pair work sessions are particularly effective for practising simple question and answer routines. Pair work also promotes students' self-confidence, lessens some of the anxiety associated, at times, with speaking French and gives the teacher the opportunity to circulate and to check students' pronunciation.

In the French lessons observed, the general classroom atmosphere was very good. Teachers were competent and professional in their approach to discipline and to the creation of a positive and supportive environment in the classroom. Students were co-operative and diligent and responded well to questioning.

ASSESSMENT

The range of assessment methods used to monitor student progress in Coláiste Chiaráin includes questioning in class, the assignment and correction of homework, regular class tests and formal school examinations.

It is good to note that the French department engages in the setting of common assessments, where feasible. Written and aural assessments are given to all year groups and teachers maintain comprehensive sets of students' results. The testing of oral proficiency occurs at the end of fifth year and in sixth year. It is recommended that an element of oral assessment be introduced into every year group, either in a formal or informal capacity, in order to promote students' competence and confidence in speaking French. The Chief Examiner's report on the Leaving Certificate French, 2003 states: *The benefits resulting from devoting considerable time to the development of students' fluency at all stages of their secondary education are not limited to the mark achieved in the oral examination*

Students who are not due to take state examinations have formal, in-house examinations at Christmas and in Summer. Third and sixth-year students sit class-based tests at Christmas and mock Junior and Leaving Certificate examinations in early February. The good practice of analysing State Examination results against national norms is well established in the school and students are encouraged and enabled to sit higher level papers in French. Parent-teacher meetings take place annually for all year groups.

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. Homework assignments that require students to copy out verb tenses or to translate passages from French into English do not prepare them adequately for the State Examinations. Translation from one language to another does not form part of the Junior or Leaving Certificate syllabus and it is much more beneficial for students to practise syllabus-guided tasks such as the writing of postcards, messages, letters, diary entries and personal opinions. An example of good practice seen was the inclusion of supportive formative comments in some students' copybooks. This practice is worth extending to all year groups.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall timetable allocation for French is most satisfactory.
- A good spirit of co-operation and collaboration is evident among the teachers of French.
- The process of departmental planning has been used effectively to produce a reflective, good-quality plan that guides the teaching and learning of French in the school.
- Individual lesson planning was of a high standard.
- Visual stimuli were used to good effect to supplement textbooks and to stimulate students' interest.
- The whiteboards were used productively and creatively.
- The teachers of French are professional and conscientious and have a very good rapport with their students.
- The target language was used wisely and extensively in most classes.

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

- Pair work is best used as a strategy to promote oral confidence and competence.
- A short, aural component should be integrated into lessons.
- The use of ICT in language learning needs to be further developed if students and teachers are to obtain maximum benefit from the schools' excellent ICT facilities.
- Regular and relevant homework exercises in the target language should be assigned to all class groups in order to consolidate and complement the very good classroom learning observed.

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.