

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Scoil Dara
Kilcock, County Kildare
Roll number: 61691B

Date of inspection: 1& 2 May 2007
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**AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA** | **DEPARTMENT OF
EDUCATION
AND SCIENCE**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Dara, Kilcock. 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, 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 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

Scoil Dara, Kilcock is a large co-educational community school of 808 students. The school draws students from a wide catchment area and serves their educational needs through the provision of a variety of programmes namely Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY) Leaving Certificate Established, Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP)

The study of a modern European language is compulsory both in junior and in senior cycle. A small number of students with special educational needs, in consultation with their parents, may choose to avail of extra tuition in English in preference to studying a modern language. Prior to entry to the school, students may select French or German. The uptake of French throughout the school is good. LCA students study Spanish *ab initio*. School management is to be commended for facilitating and promoting the study of European languages.

Timetabling provision of four periods per week in junior cycle, three periods in Transition Year and five periods in senior cycle is most satisfactory, particularly as all lessons are single periods. In addition, senior-cycle students have a sixth period specifically dedicated to oral practice. Given the fact that teachers who are assigned to take the additional (6th) period in senior-cycle French are required to teach a different mixed ability group of students to those they teach daily (in streamed groups), it is imperative that a distinct, focused and well structured programme be agreed, documented and adhered to. It is of great benefit to students to have an extra period dedicated to the improvement and development of their oral and aural skills. A well planned programme will ensure that learners derive optimum benefit from the extra tuition and that neither students nor teachers are engaged in repetitive and limited "oral practice" over a two-year period. One potential use of the extra period, in sixth year, could be the preparation of individual documents with students for presentation and discussion at the Leaving Certificate French oral examination.

Scrutiny of the school timetable shows that a very good effort has been made to spread lesson periods fairly across timeslots and days of the week. Classes are of mixed ability in junior cycle

while concurrent timetabling for five periods in senior cycle facilitates the provision of higher and ordinary level classes and allows for movement within groupings.

The French department is quite large with seven teachers engaged in the delivery of the subject in the school. There are two substitute teachers of French employed in the current school year. All teachers are members of the subject association for which the school pays the group membership.

The majority of the teachers of French have been allocated their own base classroom. All teachers have individual CD players and access to television sets and DVD players. The department has built up a good bank of materials to support the teaching and learning of the language. While there is no fixed budget for French, additional resources are provided on a needs basis. The teacher-based classrooms visited were well appointed and provided a rich environment for the teaching of French through the display of visual material, verb charts, students' work and key communicative phrases. The teachers of French are lauded for their dedication and enthusiasm in providing such a stimulating setting for their students. In some classrooms, posters in Irish, German or Spanish were also displayed. This is a good way of promoting language awareness. In order to focus students' attention on the relevant language, it is suggested that discrete areas be delineated in the classrooms for the separate display of materials relating to the different languages.

Co-curricular activities, such as visits from a theatre group and a trip to the Irish Film Institute for Transition Year students, have helped to enhance the teaching of French. The school does not have a tour to France or student exchange in operation at present. It is suggested that some further, enjoyable, in-school activities such as a table quiz, food tasting, e-mail exchanges or a European Languages Day would do much to promote interest and cultural awareness among students. Information on establishing links with a school in France may be obtained from *Léargas* (www.leargas.ie).

In the area of information communications technology (ICT) the school is well resourced with two fully equipped computer rooms, a computer in every classroom, six data projectors and a further fifteen due to be made available in September 2007. ICT has been used to a limited extent to teach French to date. Members of the department reported difficulties with gaining access to the computer rooms due to the fact that no timetable for class access and use of computers has been drawn up. It is recommended that management devise a suitable timetable which would allow teachers of French and their students access to the school's ICT facilities on a rotational basis. The teachers have made commendable efforts to download material and they are urged to continue to explore and develop the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of the language.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Scoil Dara is engaging in whole school planning, with particular emphasis now being placed on subject planning. The members of the French department are commended for their collaborative action in setting up a departmental structure. A formal meeting takes place in September and at staff meetings during the school year when some time is set aside for formal subject planning. One teacher, working in a voluntary and rotating capacity, assumes the responsibility of subject co-ordinator. The drawing up of an agenda and the maintenance of minutes ensure that departmental meetings are focused and productive. It was clear that the members of the French department engage in a high level of collaborative planning.

A comprehensive subject plan that serves as an informative guide for teachers was presented during the evaluation. In content and in presentation the plan was of a high quality and it was

obvious that serious consideration had been given to the drawing up of aims and objectives. Commendably, the subject objectives include reference to the use of the target language in class and to communicative methods of teaching grammar. Choice of texts, lesson content, homework, assessment and record keeping procedures are clearly documented. A separate plan and programme for French in Transition Year was made available. The good work completed to date by the French department in the area of collaborative planning is fully acknowledged.

In order to progress subject planning further the teachers of French have identified and documented areas to be addressed at future planning meetings. Such focused forward planning is admirable as subject planning should be viewed as an ongoing process. In addition to the possible areas documented, it is suggested that the subject plan would benefit from the inclusion of tried and tested active teaching methodologies, shared ideas for the promotion of greater student participation and oral production, an inventory of available resources and suggestions for the integration of ICT into the teaching and learning of French.

There was clear evidence of very good individual planning for the lessons observed, including the presentation of class profiles to inform the inspector, the preparation of equipment and additional materials and, in some instances, the effective use of authentic resources.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In the course of the subject inspection, seven lessons were observed over a two-day period. A good variety of teaching methodologies was noted, including global and individual questioning, brainstorming, and pair work.

In planning lessons, it is important to build in opportunities for students to assimilate and practise, both orally and in writing, what has been taught and to avoid a situation where learning is entirely teacher-led. Student-student interaction, discussion, language games and songs all enable students to participate actively in learning French. Theme-based lessons in which all four language skills are taught and practised in an integrated way during the lesson period are the most productive.

In some lessons, authentic materials were used successfully and creatively to supplement the textbook, to promote cultural awareness and to hold students' interest. Among the best examples of such materials was a selection of camping brochures accompanied by photographs of French campsites in powerpoint form. A lively and energetic style of delivery ensured that students were interested and engaged in the presentation which gave a whole new dimension to the textbook topic of *Le Camping*. The use of such authentic materials is highly commendable and their value can be further increased when they are used as stimuli to ask extended questions. For example, using the photographs, students could be asked to imagine the interior of the mobile homes or tents.

Some good techniques for the teaching of grammar were observed. In one lesson, the verbs associated with pocket money and teenage spending patterns were explored through brainstorming on the board. The infinitives of key verbs were written up and the ensuing class survey on how students spend their pocket money facilitated work on the present tense of those verbs. The level of students' participation was high and the lesson clearly demonstrated the value of selecting topics related to the lives and interests of the learners. Examples of good practice observed in other lessons included teaching the various uses of the verb *faire* and the use of different colour markers to focus the attention of students on verb endings. Further commendable strategies included the use of cloze tests and of exercises where students were invited to link pictures with matching captions.

Notwithstanding the difficulties of gaining access to the computer room on a regular basis, it was heartening to observe some students using computers to design a tourist brochure on Kilcock. The potential for student-directed learning here is considerable as a wide variety of authentic material is available on websites. Work in the computer room should, as far as possible, concentrate on the development of language skills rather than on technical proficiency and good advance preparation will ensure that students apply themselves to the language task immediately.

In general, use of the target language for classroom interaction was very good although English was used quite extensively in a small minority of lessons. In order to afford students the opportunity to hear and speak French in the classroom, it is strongly recommended that the target language be used to the greatest extent possible with all year groups. It was good to note that, in some instances, synonyms were skilfully used to avoid translation to English and that students were familiar with the French alphabet and able to spell using it. Some senior-cycle students displayed a good knowledge of vocabulary and well-developed oral competence when communicating with the inspector.

The revision of necessary phrases for message and letter writing, if handled unimaginatively, can prove to be tedious for students and teachers alike. In one junior-cycle class however, “magic slates” were used successfully to turn such revision into an exciting challenge. The teacher called out the relevant phrases in English, as they appeared on a previous Junior Certificate paper, students wrote in French on the slates provided which were then held up for the teacher to scrutinise. There was a high level of participation and friendly rivalry on the part of students and while they could not see the answers of their peers, the teacher was clearly able to see everyone’s efforts and to check spellings. Exercises such as this are very productive and it is recommended that they be limited to about fifteen minutes in order to maintain momentum and optimum concentration.

Very good classroom management was a feature of all lessons observed. Students were courteous and co-operative. Most made a good attempt to respond to teacher questioning and a warm rapport between students and teachers was evident. For their part, all teachers were professional and kind in their approach, affirming and encouraging their students.

ASSESSMENT

In Scoil Dara, the assessment of students’ progress is a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process and it was noted that very good records of attendance and test results of individual students are maintained. Teachers of French use a combination of questioning, homework assignments, projects, regular class tests and formal examinations to monitor students’ achievement.

Students sit in-house examinations in November and at the end of the school year after which reports are sent home to parents. The good practice of setting common examinations is well established among the teachers of French. Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate students sit mock examinations in the Spring. Sixth-year students do an externally administered mock oral examination and receive comprehensive written feedback on their performance. Teachers also give a formal oral test to Transition Year and to fifth-year students. This is good practice. A new initiative is planned for Summer 2007 when first-year students will also have a short oral test. This is a laudable development which will place emphasis on the importance of oral competence from the start and validate the use of the target language in the classroom.

Commendably, the French department has agreed and documented its homework procedures. There was clear evidence in the students' copybooks that homework had been assigned, checked and corrected. Best practice suggests that the correction of students' work should be formative in nature, accompanied by a written comment to affirm progress or to point out particular difficulties in language accuracy. Such formative assessment was evident in some copybooks and it is a practice which is worth extending to all year groups. To ensure good progress in language acquisition, it is essential that all students be set regular, productive homework exercises in the target language. Students sitting State Examinations require plenty of practice at working through previous examination papers. It is recommended, therefore, that students be directed to purchase past examination papers in September and that throughout the academic year, the topics on the papers be interwoven with the theme-based units in the textbook.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is very good provision for modern languages with French, German and Spanish being taught in the school.
- The timetable allocation and distribution of lesson periods are supportive of the teaching and learning of French.
- A comprehensive subject plan has been collaboratively drawn up.
- Well appointed classrooms provide a rich learning environment.
- Some innovative teaching methodologies and materials were used effectively to engage learners.
- A communicative approach to the teaching of grammar worked effectively.
- Most teachers used the target language wisely and extensively for classroom communication. This good practice should be extended to all lessons.
- There was a positive and productive atmosphere in all lessons observed. Classroom management was very good and the commitment of the teachers to their students was obvious.

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

- The integration of the four language learning skills and the inclusion of active teaching methodologies in all lessons would help to promote greater student engagement.
- The preparation of a timetable for the use of the computer room would ensure ready access for teachers and students of French on a rotational basis.
- In order to avoid repetition and overlap, careful consideration needs to be given to the development and implementation of a separate programme for the additional period in senior-cycle French.
- It is important to give students the opportunity to assimilate and practise what has been taught in class and to avoid an excessive amount of teacher input.
- It is best to adopt a thematic approach to past examination questions (reading, written and listening tasks) and to integrate them with textbook topics throughout the school year.

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.

SCHOOL DATA

Name of school	Scoil Dara Kilcock		
School number	61691B		
Chairperson of BOM	Mr Noel Keating		
Principal	Mr PJ Gannon		
School contact details	Phone: 01-6287258 Fax: 01-6284075 e-mail:		
School enrolment	Total: 808	Boys: 413	Girls: 395
Curriculum provision (please)	Junior Cycle		✓
	Junior Certificate School Programme		
	Transition Year		✓
	Leaving Certificate		✓
	Leaving Certificate Applied		✓
	Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme		✓

SUBJECT DATA

Subject inspected	French
Junior Cycle provision in that subject	Four periods per week
Senior Cycle provision in that subject	Three periods per week in TY and six periods in fifth and in sixth year

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Date of inspection	1&2 May 2007
Focus of inspection	Junior and senior cycle French
Number of teachers visited during inspection	7
Number of class periods observed	7
Inspection activities undertaken	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Introductory meeting with teachers/principal ▪ Feedback to individual teachers ▪ Interaction with students ▪ Examination of students' work ▪ Examination of school documentation ▪ Feedback to teachers and principal ▪ Inspection of the following classes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ First Year ○ Second Year ○ Third Year x2 ○ Transition Year ○ Fifth Year x 2