An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of German
REPORT

Rockford Manor Secondary School
Stradbrook Road, Blackrock,
County Dublin.
Roll number: 60081P

Date of inspection: 23 November 2010

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

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN GERMAN

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rockford Manor Secondary School. 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, deputy principal and subject teacher The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Rockford Manor Secondary School offers a range of subjects and programmes to its students: the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY), the Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA). Languages form a central strand of the school's curriculum and, in response to a demand which came from students and parents, school management now offers a choice of languages. On entry to the school, all first year students learn both French and German. This is praiseworthy, as this arrangement allows students to make an informed choice and at the end of first year, students continue with learning their chosen language. The diversity of the modern language provision is commended, as a further modern language, Spanish, is offered in LCA.

The allocation of time to the teaching and learning of German is good and the distribution of those units of time across the week is appropriate and ensures optimal regular class contact with the target language for the students of German. This is commendable. There are three lesson periods allocated to both German and French in first year, four periods allocated to German in second and third year, three periods in TY, and five periods in fifth and sixth year.

Class formation is on the basis of mixed ability and students with special educational needs and students with English as an additional language (EAL) are accommodated within the German class groupings. The teacher demonstrated an awareness of students' needs, and differentiated teaching strategies were deployed to accommodate different learning needs of students. Additional support was provided to students, as necessary. In the context of EAL students, the structures in their own mother tongue are used to help clarify concepts and differences between languages.

Due to the nature of the building, the school operates a system whereby some classrooms are student based and some teacher based. A dedicated classroom for the teaching of German has

been assigned since the beginning of the school year 2010/2011. The dedicated base classroom for German now houses dictionaries, brochures, posters, text books, CDs and DVDs as well as newspapers and authentic articles. This facilitates the creation of an authentic German learning environment as well as the integration of visual and other aids which support learning. As well as notice boards in the classroom, there are notice boards throughout the school dedicated to German. The students of German have access to the computer room for one lesson a week. Authentic sources of materials are used as often as possible and new material is mediated in such ways as to ensure that learners experience success and progress. At the time of the evaluation, the installation of the ICT infrastructure was being planned for 2011.

The German teacher is appropriately qualified in the language, and visits the target language countries of Germany and Austria frequently to maintain linguistic skills and competence. Regular participation in available continuing professional development (CPD) ensures parallel development of pedagogical competence. Examples include attendance at work shops on co-operative learning, teaching mixed-ability, strategies for improving teaching and learning, the development of policies, European Language Portfolio and in-service in EAL. School management is praised for facilitating attendance at available CPD.

The co-curricular activities involve attendance at screening of German films suitable for young learners of German, and attendance at activities organised by the German cultural service, including drama and music activities. German students who come to the school provide students with invaluable access to the native speaker. The most important resource for any language classroom is the teacher who can effectively model the German language and community; this was the case observed in Rockford Manor Secondary School.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The quality of subject planning is very good. The German plan is appropriately and accurately based on the syllabus documents for junior and senior cycle German. The plan also refers to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and draws on its assessment grid to assess the language proficiency of learners and also to help learners themselves to use the European Language Portfolio for self-assessment. This is an example of best practice in language teaching.

The aims for German are appropriate and are in line with syllabus objectives. These include contributing to the learner's awareness of language as a system of communication; providing students with insights into the culture of Germany and a perspective on their own culture; developing the learner's competence across the four language skills; and finally promoting in students a sense of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning. These are laudable objectives. It is suggested as a preamble to the German plan that these aims be linked to the objectives articulated in the school's mission statement.

Methodologies are also outlined in planning documentation which reflect the quality of the learning experiences provided for learners. The teacher sets out to adopt a student-centred approach in an authentic context, with German being the main language of communication and instruction in the classroom and outside the classroom. A thematic approach is recommended in syllabus guidelines, together with the systematic integration of language and cultural awareness. There was clear evidence of both aims and methodologies being implemented in practice in the lessons observed.

Three or four planning meetings are facilitated by school management during the year. The German teacher takes responsibility for the planning of the department and for the acquisition of materials, decisions regarding text books and mentoring of any student teachers. Plans and course content are updated and reviewed from year to year. The TY core team also meets annually to review subject plans for TY and there is a self-contained TY plan for 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 opportunities for student activity. Worksheets and materials had also been prepared in advance of all lessons.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching of German is very good. The enthusiasm of the German teacher for the language was visibly reciprocated with enthusiasm and enjoyment on the part of students. Each lesson was characterised by clarity of direction and lesson objectives were shared with students at the outset of lessons. It was clear to students where the particular lesson belonged in a theme or series of lessons. Lessons were systematically structured with good pace and a judicious balance between challenge and enjoyment in learning. Meticulous short-term planning and preparation ensured a very good pace and structure to lessons. Preparation of worksheets, prepared bilingually in advance, provided additional support to those students who needed it.

There was exemplary use of German as the main language of instruction and communication in all lessons. It was heartening to observe the students speaking German and greeting their teacher in German as they arrived and settled in to the lesson. Frequently, lessons opened with the recording in German of the day and date on the board provided by the students, as well as roll call and checking of home work, routine tasks which were completed entirely in German. The teacher used synonyms in German to explain new vocabulary, with some judicious use of some explanations given in English for those students who may not have understood all the German. Sometimes, the teacher explained using gesture and mime which worked well and held students' attention. New vocabulary was automatically recorded in notebooks and students were attentive and diligent in note-taking. The students heard and used a lot of German and were actively engaged with the lesson content and the language for the whole lesson.

Individual responses were sought from students in relation to home work completed. Ideas were gathered from students who demonstrated correct use of German and appropriate terminology. Individual students spoke about their daily activities in German and the teacher improved pronunciation, when necessary, and provided idiomatic phraseology to enhance student interventions.

There was excellent rapport between students and teacher. The students came to the lesson with enthusiasm and students were provided with a variety of activities and lesson phases. The use of silent reading was an effective strategy for one group in question, given their maturity and stage of learning. When the activity changed to pair work, students organised themselves very quickly. The transition to listening exercises was seamless and careful planning ensured student receptiveness to the new medium. Students heard a listening text to the same theme and with the same range of vocabulary which eased comprehension. Closing exercises served to consolidate learning and usually led to the assigning of appropriate homework to reinforce learning and for the students to apply new learning. Students were affirmed for their achievements and for their

ability to engage with structures and context. Themes were appropriate to the age groups in question and continued variety of activity ensured student engagement and attention.

Time was used well in lessons. While the students recorded sentences in their copybooks, the teacher circulated and checked homework completed. When the infrastructure for information and communication technologies (ICT) is installed, the integration of ICT into the language classroom will provide a broader range of strategies to support learners, which should be explored and exploited. Opportunities for productive use of the language were provided to students throughout lessons. Individual help provided by the teacher enabled each individual to personalise her response and also ensured the authenticity of the German used. The teacher was skilful in drawing out students and in ensuring that each student contributed. Students demonstrated very accurate pronunciation and a good level of fluency and accuracy when speaking German. Further opportunities for spontaneous language production should be built into lessons, and would both challenge and stimulate learners.

ASSESSMENT

Ongoing formative assessment is a feature of the German teacher's work in the classroom, and includes oral questioning, class tests and regular assigning and correction of homework. The approach adopted by the German teacher in relation to assessment is to provide learners with essential feedback on achievements and on areas for development at regular intervals, so that language learning can be seen as a challenge and a joy.

In the sample of copybooks examined at the time of the evaluation, there was evidence of regular assigning of a range of exercise types on the topics covered. These were carefully corrected and annotated with comments by the teacher, and there was also evidence of well-organised systematic note-taking. In senior cycle copybooks, there were examples of the application of grammatical structures in sentences, short pieces of writing on topics covered and longer pieces of extended writing in the target language. The transition from individual sentences in isolation, to joining some related sentences, to a more extended piece of writing was being carefully developed. Student correction of identified errors was also in evidence. Some correction as observed was completed in plenary in class.

There are in-school examinations twice a year and reporting on student progress is regular and transparent with reports to parents and parent-teacher meetings. Student attainment in certificate examinations is analysed by the German department which informs review of planning for teaching and learning. This is good practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The quality of teaching of German is very good.
- There was exemplary use of German as the main language of instruction and communication in all lessons.
- Meticulous short-term planning and preparation ensured a very good pace and structure to lessons and a judicious balance between challenge and enjoyment in learning.

- The enthusiasm of the German teacher for the language was visibly reciprocated with enthusiasm and enjoyment on the part of students.
- Students demonstrated very accurate pronunciation and a good level of fluency and accuracy when speaking German.
- The quality of German planning is very good. Drawing on the CEFR assessment grid to assess the language proficiency of learners is an example of best practice in language teaching.
- Ongoing formative assessment is a feature of the German teacher's work in the classroom, to provide learners with essential feedback on achievements and on areas for development at regular intervals

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

- It is recommended that opportunities for spontaneous language production on the part of students be built into lessons on regular basis.
- It is recommended that the range of strategies to support learners which the integration of ICT into the language classroom can provide be explored and exploited.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teacher of German and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Published November 2011