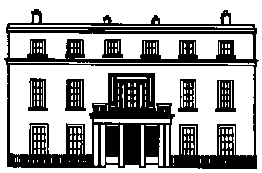
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of French
REPORT

Saint Vincent's Secondary School
Dundalk, County Louth
Roll number: 63900R

Date of inspection: 3 March 2015



AN ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS SCILEANNA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SKILLS

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN FRENCH

INFORMATION ON THE INSPECTION

Dates of inspection	2 and 3 March 2015
Inspection activities undertaken • Review of relevant documents • Discussion with principal and teachers • Interaction with students	• Observation of teaching and learning during eight class periods • Examination of students' work • Feedback to principal and teachers

MAIN FINDINGS

- The teaching and learning observed in most lessons ranged from good to excellent, while considerable improvement is required in a small minority of lessons.
- There were varied practices regarding the use of French as the language of instruction.
- Methodologies observed ranged from the traditional grammar-translation approach to the use of strategies that actively and creatively engaged students in their own learning.
- While homework was assigned and formative feedback included with some corrections, unsatisfactory assessment practices were noted in a small number of lessons.
- There is good whole-school provision and support for French.
- A number of good planning practices were noted.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

- All students should be enabled to use more French during lessons through answering questions, interacting with their peers and engaging in more spontaneous communication.
- A thematic approach incorporating the development of all the language skills should be implemented in lessons where a grammar-translation methodology dominated and where students did not have the opportunity to interact in French.
- The assessment deficiencies noted should be addressed and the practice of giving good formative feedback should be further developed.

INTRODUCTION

St Vincent's' Secondary school is a voluntary secondary school with 910 female students, serving the community of Dundalk and its hinterland. The school offers Junior and Leaving Certificate, Transition Year and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. The study of a modern European language is mandatory in junior cycle and optional in senior cycle.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

- The quality of teaching and learning ranged from good to excellent in most of the lessons observed. In a small minority of lessons there was significant scope for development regarding the methodologies and assessment practices used.
- Some teachers commendably spoke in French throughout the entire lesson, while others scaffolded their use of French to varying degrees by explanation in English. Teachers should endeavour to reduce the dependency on translation for comprehension purposes by using alternative strategies and by challenging the students to work out the meaning for themselves.
- Students' use of the target language should be further extended by creating opportunities for them to interact more spontaneously. In one lesson students put newly-learned expressions into sentences relevant to themselves and articulated them at the beginning of the lesson. Good practices such as this should become integral components of all lessons. There was one instance where students were given no opportunity to use French throughout the lesson
- The lesson plan was communicated to students at the beginning of all lessons. Best practice was noted where the plan was articulated in terms of the proposed learning outcome and, in one instance, how this outcome would be achieved and where students were asked to reflect on their own learning and assess their progress at the end of the lesson.
- Due attention was given in some lessons to developing all of the language skills, while in others a greater focus was placed on the receptive skills of comprehension than on the productive skills of speaking and writing. In lessons where the grammar-translation methodology dominated, the use of a thematic approach incorporating the development of all the language skills is recommended.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) was used effectively in some lessons to support learning. In one instance the creative use of a video-clip facilitated good follow-through tasks and learning, while in another lesson more judicious follow-through activities would have enhanced the benefits of a very apt video-clip. Attention to the choice of video-clip is recommended in some instances to ensure that it is appropriately pitched to the level of the students.
- Songs were very well exploited in some lessons, facilitating follow-through oral and writing skills development. Where song was used to teach grammar, further exploitation of the text would have improved the learning outcomes for the students.
- Effective use of pair work was observed in many lessons. In a small number of instances, students were told to work in pairs, but continued to work individually in silence. Where this occurred teachers need to review the nature of the task to ensure that it facilitates oral skills development.

- Homework was assigned in all lessons and some of the corrections included affirming and informing comments. All teachers should build up the practice of using formative feedback. Where formative feedback is given orally, students should be asked to note it in their copybooks.
- There was insufficient evidence of appropriate monitoring and correction of students' work in a small minority of lessons. A number of exercises in the copybooks examined were stamped with a positive comment, but contained mistakes that had not been corrected. This practice limits the learning opportunities for students thereby impeding progress and should be addressed.
- Students' behaviour was exemplary in all lessons and they were very receptive to learning. There was need in some lessons to challenge the students further by affording them more opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning. Assessment for learning strategies such as 'think pair share' should be considered to facilitate this.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

- There is very good whole-school provision and support for French in the allocation of time, timetabling and the provision of resources.
- Since classrooms are student based, teachers should consider establishing a French corner in the school where key words, and expressions could be posted up by both teachers and students and where French related successes and achievements could be acknowledged.
- To ensure ongoing upskilling in pedagogy as well as linguistic competence, teachers should inform themselves of the range of scholarships and seminars available for teachers of French in both Ireland and France. Consideration in some instances should also be given to attendance at courses such as co-operative learning often held in local education centres.
- The broad range of co-curricular activities reflects the commitment of the French department to the subject and to its profile within the school. Of particular note is the peer-support system established to help junior-cycle students preparing for their Junior Certificate oral assessment.
- The work currently being undertaken to develop a twinning programme with a French school is welcomed as a means of promoting intercultural dialogue and the exchange of resources for all students.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

- The permanent section of the subject plan for French provides good information on the school context and support for the subject. Schemes of work are in place for each year group. However to ensure greater clarity of purpose and consistency in practice, it is recommended that, over time, they be reframed in terms of topic, learning outcomes, methodologies and assessment protocols to be used.
- To further enhance the Transition Year programme, teachers should consider more cross-curricular activities where practical initiatives or projects in other subject areas could be linked into their language learning.

- The minutes of subject planning meetings include discussions of both an organisational nature and the ongoing review of student outcomes for the purpose of advancing and maintaining the high attainment levels achieved in recent years. To further this good work, teachers should include the sharing of ideas and practices that will further enhance teaching, learning and formative assessment.

The draft findings and recommendations arising out of this evaluation were discussed with the principal, deputy principal and subject teachers at the conclusion of the evaluation. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

Published September 2015

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

(i) The Board welcomes the report.
(ii) The Board notes that the school's French department found the process to be both helpful and affirmative.
(iii) The Board commends the school's French department on the excellent quality of teaching and learning referenced in the report.
(iv) The Board commends the school's French department on the use of subject department planning time for the purpose of advancing and maintaining the high attainment levels achieved in the school, which has resulted in 86% of the 2014 leaving cert cohort taking French at Higher level and 45% of those achieving a grade B or higher.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

(i) The French Department intends to maintain and develop the excellent planning, preparation and good classroom practice referenced in this report. They intend to continue their engagement in the optional Oral Component in the Junior Certificate Examination which has led to the greatly improved attainment levels at Leaving Certificate in recent years. Work has already commenced on reframing schemes of work as suggested in the report.
(ii) The provision of French Literacy Boards for the display of key words in first year classrooms, will be extended on a phased basis to all junior cycle classrooms. A French corner in a public area of the school has been established as suggested.
(iii) A programme of upskilling in pedagogy is planned which includes in-service on 'Assessment for Learning' strategies. The department is actively engaged in drawing up a protocol and agreeing a common terminology to ensure uniform constructive and informative Assessment of Learning feedback to students.
(iv) It is planned that subject department meeting time will be structured to facilitate the sharing of methodologies. The school senior management team will also facilitate peer observation to support pedagogic development. The school's established teaching and learning team will also continue their programme of sharing best practice with subject departments. Teachers who have already availed of pedagogy in-service offered by the Cultural Services plan to share their learning at subject department meetings.