

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of French
REPORT**

**Blackrock College
Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 60030V**

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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 Blackrock College. 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, deputy 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

Blackrock College is a voluntary secondary school with 979 male students. The study of a foreign language is mandatory. Most students choose a modern European language, while a small number choose Latin. The school offers three modern languages, French, German and Spanish and students can choose to study more than one language. School management is commended for the choice of modern languages offered to students.

There is very good provision for French in the allocation of time at junior cycle and Transition Year (TY), with all classes having either four or five single periods each week. Senior cycle students alternate between four periods one week and five periods the next week. School management should explore ways in which all students of French could be afforded five periods a week at senior cycle. All students are timetabled for French at the same time each day. This is not optimal particularly for the students who are timetabled for French in the latter half of the day. School management should review their timetabling arrangements to ensure that lessons are more equitably timetabled.

There are eleven teachers of French in the school, all of whom are graduates in the subject. There is a strong commitment by both senior management and staff to continuing professional development (CPD) through the sharing of good practice at regular subject department meetings and the provision of subject-related periodicals. Many have also benefited from national in-service programmes for teachers of French and school management subsidises teachers wishing to attend courses in France. All teachers are members of the French Teachers' Association (FTA) and the subject co-ordinator attends the FTA's annual national seminar and reports back to the other members of staff. Both teachers and school management are commended for their commitment to CPD. In order to ensure the fullest possible engagement with new developments in the teaching and learning of French, it is recommended that all teachers attend or rotate attendance at the FTA's local branch, thereby all benefiting from both in-school and inter-school expertise.

Classrooms are student based, somewhat limiting the opportunity for the creation of a print-rich environment. Given the benefits of such an environment in supporting visual learners, in promoting cultural awareness and in enabling students to assimilate learning over time, consideration should be given to creating a specialist classroom or using one of the classrooms currently used for French to display French maps, posters, grammar points, key expressions and samples of students' work, which can be accessed by all teachers of the subject.

There is very good whole-school provision for resources in Blackrock College. The school has highly sophisticated information and communication technology (ICT) equipment in all classrooms onto which the French audio-visual materials available in the school have been downloaded for easy access during lessons. School management has supported the implementation of ICT for all subjects by subsidising the purchase of laptops by teachers and the provision of in-house in-service. All the teachers of French indicated a willingness and capacity to use ICT as a tool for teaching and learning. In addition, students have access to subject-related work and revision notes through the college's website. Senior management and the teachers involved in making resources available online are highly commended for facilitating easy access to ICT to support teaching and learning.

Co-curricular activities involve the very commendable organisation of a languages week for students and the promotion of e-pals in some year groups for the purpose of intercultural exchange. As part of their Transition Year activities students run a radio station, Blackrock College Radio, from which the students of French broadcast a programme, partly in French. This initiative is highly commended as a means of promoting cultural awareness and of affording the students involved memorable language learning experiences. To further the language learning benefits of co- and extra-curricular activities it is recommended that students be given the opportunity to create a range of activities, such as quizzes, debates, board games and cooking, as an outcome of their learning in the classroom. It is also suggested that to give an added dimension to this work such activities could be organised for other year or class groups. This will not only generate enthusiasm for French but also contribute to positive peer interactions in the target language.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Senior management in Blackrock College facilitates subject department meetings each month. The position of head of department for modern and classical languages is a school-funded contract outside

the posts of responsibility structure. The role was described as involving subject co-ordination, mentoring of new teachers of the subject, promoting collegiality, reporting to the principal and liaising with other heads of department. These responsibilities are carried out with a high level of commitment. To support the good work observed it is recommended that a rotating position of subject co-ordinator specifically for French be considered. This would afford all teachers the opportunity to develop subject-specific expertise and to take ownership of the subject planning process.

All teachers have been issued with a subject plan on which to base their work for the year for each year group. These plans have been devised by the head of department in consultation with members of the subject department. These plans establish the recommended materials to be used in class, available resources, topics or chapters to be covered and a recommended time-frame for the completion of such work. Senior cycle plans also include the grammar points to be covered when engaging in the study of a recommended topic and a series of recommendations in relation to the use of French in the classroom, homework and examination preparation. While the work carried out in planning is commended, the members of the French department should integrate the work completed to date into the creation of a more generic long-term plan for the teaching and learning of French. They should all collaborate to develop statements of learning outcomes for each year group expressed in terms of what the students can do as a result of their learning. This approach, which focuses on the development of transferable skills, affords greater variety in the choice of topic studied and enables teachers to best respond to the needs and interests of a given student cohort. It also facilitates the process of self-evaluation for both teachers and students.

As part of the planning process and to support ongoing developments in the teaching and learning of modern languages, members of the French department carry out surveys with the students to ascertain the benefits or otherwise of current methodologies including ICT in the teaching and learning of the subject. These surveys, which provide valuable insights into current practices, have enabled the members of the French department to better inform their planning and practices in the classroom. This is highly commended.

A Transition Year plan was also submitted. The plan sets out the aims for the teaching and learning of French with a strong focus on oral work and language and cultural awareness. This is commended. In order to take full cognisance of the Department's recommendations to broaden the range of teaching and learning methodologies used when writing a programme for TY, teachers should consider the introduction of some elements of learner autonomy and some of the co-curricular activities mentioned earlier. Teachers should also avoid using a Leaving Certificate text book with TY students.

There was evidence of careful planning and preparation for the lessons observed with the advance readiness of technical equipment and supplementary materials and, in some instances, a detailed individual lesson plan.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Inspection activities involved the observation of eight lessons, three at junior cycle, two in Transition Year and three at senior cycle. There was also the opportunity to review students' copies.

There were very high standards of linguistic competence and very good use of the target language by the teacher. Students in some lessons also made very good efforts to use French as the language of interaction. This is highly commended. Teachers should further encourage this good practice by ensuring that all students have the strategies to ask questions, make requests and express difficulties in French.

The lesson plan was shared with the students in all of the lessons observed. This is very good practice as it engages the students from the outset. To further enhance the benefits of such practice it is recommended that teachers reframe their plans in terms of the proposed learning outcome for the lesson, thereby making students more aware of teaching and learning as a shared role and responsibility. Many of the lessons were very well structured, with a good balance between teacher instruction and student activity. However the need for greater attention to maintaining this balance was indicated in some lessons.

There was very good integration of the different language skills in some of the lessons observed. This approach is highly commended as it facilitates optimal learning whereby skills development in one area feeds into and supports the development of skills in other areas. It should therefore be extended to all lessons. In some lessons there was a strong focus on revision or examination preparation. While such work is necessary, care should be taken to ensure that it does not become the dominant approach. At all times an integrated, thematic approach is the preferred option even with examination material as it broadens the context of the language learning experience. To this end teachers should identify the themes in the examination material and use the questions within an integrated thematic approach to assess the learning achieved. An integrated approach also makes students more aware of the cumulative nature of learning and how they can transfer their knowledge and skills to support them in all aspects of their learning.

Student-centred activities including pair work were observed in some lessons. The use of individual, pair or group work tasks is very good practice in promoting active and independent learning. To this end teachers should incorporate the use of at least one student-based activity into every lesson. When engaging in pair or group work it is also important to establish the ground rules where students have to focus on the achievement of specific outcomes requiring group interaction within a short specified timeframe.

Commendable use was made of ICT in many lessons, where PowerPoint presentations provided visual supports in addition to introducing elements of cultural awareness and facilitating the speedy correction of homework or class exercises. Teachers are commended for their use of ICT as a tool for teaching and learning. The use of supplementary materials from magazines and the distribution of worksheets as observed in some lessons enabled teachers to move out from the work of the textbook, thereby providing variety in the work carried out in the lesson. These good practices should be extended to all lessons. The wealth of up-to-date authentic materials available on the internet should be further exploited to respond to the needs and interests of the given student cohort. The use of film with guided worksheets, as observed in one lesson, was also a very effective means of engaging the students in an enjoyable and productive learning activity. As a means of further supporting students' comprehension, consideration should be given to purchasing DVDs which include subtitles in French.

A positive learning environment was observed in all lessons and students applied themselves to the tasks given. Most students indicated a good understanding of the work in hand. In some lessons the students asked questions and sought clarifications in the target language. This is highly commended. There were some lessons however where the main responsibility for work fell on the teacher. In these instances greater use of pair and group work activities should facilitate more active participation and dialogue in the lesson, thereby enhancing the teaching and learning partnership. Interaction with the inspector revealed many students to be confident and competent learners of the language.

ASSESSMENT

The teachers of French monitor and assess student progress in a variety of ways, including questions and answers in class, homework assignments and corrections, progress cards, tests and formal examinations. A review of students' copies indicated that homework is assigned and corrected. Highly commendable practice was noted in the detailed correction of some copies and the inclusion of a comment. This very good practice should be extended to all lessons where it is not currently happening, as a comment both affirms and informs student progress. There were a number of students who did not have their homework copies in class with them. Students should be encouraged to bring all their work to class and to organise their copies for ease of reference when revising.

Teachers fill in weekly application cards for all year groups. These cards are sent home and parents are asked to sign and return cards in instances where the student's application is unsatisfactory. Parents also receive monthly progress cards detailing students' performance in their ongoing assessments. Formal tests are held at Christmas and Easter and in the summer for second and fifth year students. TY students are assessed at the end of the year on their portfolio work. An aural assessment is included in all formal tests and provision is made for Leaving Certificate students to engage in oral assessments with a teacher assigned for this purpose. Some teachers carry out informal oral assessments with other year groups. This good practice should be extended to all year groups and incorporated into students' overall results.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole-school provision for French in the allocation of time and the provision of resources.
- Teachers demonstrated high levels of linguistic competence and very good use of the target language. Some very good student interactions in the target language were also observed.
- A variety of methodologies including ICT was observed, and many were used to very good effect.
- A wide and commendable range of assessment and reporting practices are used to monitor students' progress.

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

- The timetabling of lessons should be reviewed to ensure that students do not have French at the same time each day.
- The work completed to date in subject planning should be progressed into the development of a generic long-term plan for the teaching and learning of the subject. This plan should include the desired learning outcomes for each year group, and the linguistic strategies and proposed methodologies to support such outcomes.
- Where it is currently not happening a thematic approach integrating the different language skills is recommended. This approach should also be adopted for the teaching of revision and examination preparation.
- Student-based tasks including pair and group work should be used more extensively to support more active and independent learning.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of French 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.

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