

IMPROVING Modern Languages

in Post-Primary Schools

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The Education and Training
Inspectorate



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Providing Inspection Services for

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Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

More than 90%	-	almost/nearly all
75%-90%	-	most
50%-74%	-	a majority
30%-49%	-	a significant minority
10%-29%	-	a minority
Less than 10%	-	very few/a small number.

INTRODUCTION

The findings in this paper are based on inspections of and visits to modern languages departments in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland during the period 1996-2000.

1. Strengths

- 1.1 Relationships in a majority of language classrooms are good and a majority of the pupils respond well where the teaching is effective.
- 1.2 In many grammar and maintained secondary schools pupils have a degree of choice of modern language in key stage 3 (KS3). Where they have studied more than one language in KS3, they are often able to choose their preferred language for General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE). In a minority of schools which provide vocational courses in the sixth form, the pupils have the opportunity to take a modern language as an additional element. A majority of schools ensure that all pupils follow a course which leads to appropriate external accreditation.
- 1.3 A minority of departments have developed well thought out action plans which focus on issues of teaching and learning and specific areas of language teaching which they have targeted for improvement. In the best practice, there is effective planning for progression in the teaching and learning, resulting in the development of competence in more complex vocabulary and language patterns.
- 1.4 A majority of teachers make extensive use of the target language and have appropriately high expectations of the pupils' ability to understand and communicate. Good use is made of language games and effective pair work to

motivate pupils and provide contexts for language practice. Audio and visual aids are well used in many classes to stimulate good oral work.

- 1.5 Good language learning was observed in a majority of lessons and the pupils were involved fully. In the best practice, the pupils' enjoyment in language learning was evident and the quality of their responses was high. They took full advantage of the opportunities offered by pair work to develop their command of the spoken language. The pupils' enthusiastic participation in oral work was matched by their pride in the quality and range of their written work.
- 1.6 In a majority of schools work is marked regularly and conscientiously, with comments intended to promote improvement; there is regular assessment of progress in all four attainment targets. In a minority, assessment appropriately includes an aspect of moderation and standardisation.
- 1.7 Most departments have a complement of adequately trained specialist staff, and most departments have some access to the services of a modern language assistant for continental languages.
- 1.8 Several departments report on the beneficial effects of in-service training (INSET), the positive influence of which is strongly reflected in a minority of departments.
- 1.9 A small number of schools achieve a high standard in public examinations, consistently outperforming, by a considerable margin, schools of similar type. A minority of schools have begun to target under-achievement by providing additional guidance and support to those pupils who are likely to achieve 'D' grades in GCSE; this strategy has resulted in improvement.
- 1.10 Most departments are well resourced in terms of books and audio-visual equipment and a small number of schools are making good use of the Internet.
- 1.11 A majority of schools now have some form of regular exchange with at least one of the countries whose language is taught.

2. Areas for Improvement

- 2.1 French continues to be the dominant language in the curriculum; there has been some increase in the provision for Spanish, but a decrease in the provision for German. Schools need to address the issue of diversification to ensure that a broader language base is available in Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 The practice - even from the earliest stages - of substantially reducing the timetable allocation for pupils deemed to be of lower academic ability, does little to help their expectations and prospect of success.
- 2.3 In many schools, the planning emphasises content and topics and provides little illustration of the methodology to be employed, the sorts of learning activities in which the pupils will be engaged, or the outcomes anticipated.

- 2.4 In a minority of schools, the policies outlined in the department's documentation are not reflected, or are reflected inconsistently, in the work of the department.
- 2.5 A minority of teachers need to reduce substantially the amount of English used in their lessons and to have higher expectations of what the pupils can do.
- 2.6 In a significant minority of the lessons observed, pupils were passive, the lessons were excessively teacher-led and pupils had insufficient opportunities to use the language. In too many lessons, pupils' contributions were limited to occasional single word or short-phrase utterances. In such lessons the pupils' competence, pronunciation and fluency remained under-developed and they did not achieve a level in keeping with their stage of development.
- 2.7 The pupils' writing and reading skills are generally not sufficiently developed in imaginative ways.
- 2.8 Some departments do not have any differentiated approach to the work with pupils who struggle with their learning, other than to provide them with less time for language study. There is a need for improved liaison between language teachers and their school's co-ordinator for special educational needs.
- 2.9 The provision for information and communications technology (ICT) is under-developed in a majority of departments. Little use was seen to be made of expensive equipment, such as the Perimeter Audio Learning Equipment (PALE) system.
- 2.10 In a small minority of schools there is little or no formal assessment other than an end-of-year examination. Written work is marked inconsistently and too much is left unmarked.
- 2.11 Few departments include staff development in their forward planning and there is a continuing problem with the supply of Irish language assistants.
- 2.12 The variations between the public examination results achieved by schools of similar type are wide. Some schools have changed their choice of examining board with a view to improving results; where this has not been supported by a reconsideration of their approaches to teaching and learning, the standard of work achieved in the classroom remains low.
- 2.13 A minority of schools have no real links of any kind with the countries whose language(s) they teach. The absence of this contact deprives the pupils of a sense of purpose and relevance in their studies.

3. Priorities for Action

Given the areas of weakness above, and to promote further improvement in the teaching and learning of modern languages there is a need for improvement as follows:

- 3.1 more thought needs to be given to ways of actively involving the pupils in language learning and use, through more thorough planning for a range of interesting and stimulating activities, including effective pair or group work, and through a clearer focus on, and communication to the pupils, of the expected learning outcomes;
- 3.2 greater emphasis needs to be placed on the provision of more communicative contexts for language learning and on encouragement to the pupils to use structures independently and progressively, and to adapt language to new situations; the overall standards of fluency in the target language need to higher;
- 3.3 in their development plans and practice many departments need to place a greater emphasis on teaching and learning, monitoring and evaluation and strategies for improvement;
- 3.4 the language outcomes of units of work and the methodology required to achieve them need to be articulated more clearly; the objectives should be shared with and understood by the pupils and reflected in the subsequent assessment of their progress;
- 3.5 within a minority of departments there is an unacceptably wide variation in practice with regard to teaching methods, the use of the target language, assessment and marking of pupils' work;
- 3.6 there is a need to address the imbalance in the numbers of pupils studying the various languages;
- 3.7 a minority of schools which lack any structured links with the countries and areas in which the target language is spoken need to consider establishing a wider context for the pupils' language learning;
- 3.8 greater and more appropriate use could be made of ICT in many departments.

CONCLUSION

Schools and the Inspectorate recognise the importance of self-evaluation as a basis for improvement and development. It is intended that this publication, and the publication 'Evaluating Modern Languages', will support modern languages teachers and departments in their evaluation and improvement of their teaching and of their pupils' learning and standards of achievement.

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