

22 March 2010

Mr J Nixon
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Dear Mr Nixon

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages (ML)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 17 and 18 March 2010 to look at work in ML.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on take-up in Key Stage 4, and the use of information and communication technology (ICT) to improve language learning.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of parts of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML is satisfactory.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is satisfactory.

- Students gained higher than average results in GCSE examinations at grades A* to C in French and German over the last three years. In 2009, they attained less well but were still broadly in line with national averages with significantly good A* to C grades in German.
- They achieved higher than average results in AS and A2 level.
- Progress in lessons is highly variable and dependent on the wide range of teaching in the department. For example, in a low ability Year 7 lesson, students showed that they had good prior learning of the different parts of a verb and were also retaining new vocabulary well so that they could make up sentences. In

a good Year 10 lesson, students were able to concentrate well playing different games for sufficient time to enable them to make good progress in consolidating three tenses for GCSE work.

- However, where there was a low level of challenge, lower expectations and too low level of work for the particular class, students made satisfactory progress and, in one lesson, it was inadequate. Overall, progress is satisfactory.
- Speaking skills are weak either relying on writing or memorising for GCSE questions. Year 9 students were unable to answer very simple questions posed by the inspector.
- Behaviour and working relationships are very good.
- Students' cultural awareness in Key Stages 3 and 4 is weak.
- Their awareness of the contribution of ML to their economic well-being is satisfactory.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is satisfactory.

- In better lessons, teaching is enthusiastic and infectious. There was a buzz of activity in Year 7 as they worked together. There is good pace and intensive group and collaborative work. Self- and peer-assessment is good and time for plenary sessions is sufficient to embed learning.
- Less strong features are weak planning for one-hour lessons; a lack of differentiation for more and less able students; too simple activities for the level of the class. In one lesson seen, behaviour management was weak.
- In a Year 7 lesson, good language-learning strategies were planned. However, the teacher did not realise that half of the students had covered these at primary school as the school does not audit prior learning and review its provision in the light of this.
- Teachers do not use the target languages routinely to conduct lessons and so students have no role-models. Even praise and the simplest of instructions are mostly given in English. Neither do they teach their students to respond in the target languages.
- Marking is inconsistent in Key Stage 3; some students reported that their books had not been marked in a long time. Some books had no subject targets. The marking of Key Stage 4 coursework is good with next steps clearly iterated. This would make ideal practice for marking written work across the department. Marking in the sixth form is good, particularly where it is done using email and track changes. Assessment of speaking is variable.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is satisfactory.

- Suitable time is devoted to ML in both key stages for both languages and in the sixth form.

- Key Stage 3 students reported that where they had the same teacher for both French and German, one language was sometimes given more time. They also said that they had few opportunities to speak, that it was mostly writing, and that work was repetitive year on year.
- Students from both key stages reported that few resources beyond the text book (and past papers in Key Stage 4) were used, for example for reading.
- Schemes of work are being updated to include areas of the latest QCA curriculum, such as thinking skills. Currently, they vary significantly in terms of what is included. There is no reference to where language-learning strategies or intercultural awareness will be taught.
- There is a wealth of opportunities for extra study sessions, including after school, on Saturdays and in the holidays, but curricular enhancement is not currently broad enough with no clubs and few trips.
- The school hosts quite a lot of visitors from Europe, for example from Norway and Belgium. A cycling trip to the Netherlands is led by a department teacher. These add to the promotion of community cohesion.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

The effectiveness of the leadership and management in languages is satisfactory.

- You are very supportive of languages and it is clear that the senior leadership team has an accurate view of the current effectiveness of ML.
- Departmental aims are good and the latest draft of the self-evaluation of languages paints an accurate picture of the current provision.
- These judgements do not yet lead the department towards focused improvement.
- There are no policies for important aspects of work, such as the use of the target languages in lessons or reading.
- Some text books are old and not conducive to pride in the subject.
- The school supports a local primary school in its delivery of languages.

Subject issue: take-up in Key Stage 4

- Take-up does not meet the Secretary of State's 50% benchmark. However, take-up in Key Stage 4 in 2008 and 2009 was broadly in line with the national average. Although Year 9 option choices show a rise to 36%, it has dropped in both Years 10 and 11 this year.
- The school's two specialist designations of technology and art detract from the number of choices available to students, as does the specialist language college close by. The school does well to retain French as the third most popular option.

Subject issue: the use of ICT to improve language learning

This is satisfactory.

- There is no vision or policy for regular use of ICT during school time nor what it can do to enhance language learning. It is in some schemes of work and not others.

- Students painted a varied picture with some never having used ICT in school for ML and some intermittently. They say they are encouraged to use it out of school.
- Regular access is an issue.
- One lesson was observed where ICT was used well to enable Year 11 students to develop their writing skills. Later, they told inspectors it was a rare occasion but that they had found it very helpful and better than writing by hand because they could expand their text easily on screen.
- Teachers use interactive whiteboards to present language and this sometimes enhances presentations, for example, in a Year 11 French lesson on healthy eating.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving progress in lessons through better teaching, assessment and marking
- ensuring that the target languages are used more in lessons by both teachers and students so that teachers act as role-models and students can become more spontaneous speakers
- developing students' intercultural awareness
- auditing students' knowledge on intake so that preparation for Year 7 takes account of and builds on knowledge and understanding from primary school work.
- improving provision for ICT so that all students have equal opportunities to use it to enhance their language learning
- considering the departmental re-organisation to make improvements to provision and outcomes.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop languages in the school.

A copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Pam Haezewindt
Her Majesty's Inspector