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Mrs M Cobbett
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Cobbett

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 15 and 16 November 2010 to look at work in modern languages.

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 without their consent.

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

The overall effectiveness of modern languages is satisfactory.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is satisfactory.

- Attainment is above average in both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 and three quarters of students chose to take a language in years 10 and 11 in 2010. The percentage gaining a grade C or above in modern languages rose from 28% in 2009 to 44.9% in 2010 and every student gained a pass.
- From above average starting points, progress is satisfactory overall, but slower in Spanish and for more able students. However, data on the progress being made this year in Key Stage 4 indicate this is increasing, except for more able students. The progress of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, and of the small number of students with English as an additional language, is good.

- Students have very positive attitudes in lessons and behaviour is good. Students willingly participate in pair and group work with little prompting from the teacher, although use of the language being studied to communicate in lessons is minimal.
- The work sample scrutinised showed that across Key Stage 3, the range and complexity of structures being used extend rapidly, so that by Year 9 more able students can produce complex and interesting writing in French and the quality is almost as good in German in less time. In Key Stage 4, accuracy is good in French and satisfactory in German and Spanish.
- Students' pronunciation is broadly accurate, but they are less confident when dealing with unpredictable items in conversations. They have a satisfactory understanding of the culture of the countries where the languages they are learning are studied. Their understanding of the usefulness of learning languages is weaker.
- In the sixth form, numbers are exceptionally low, but those who do continue with a language reach average standards and make satisfactory progress. Achievement in French is better than in German.

Quality of teaching in languages

The quality of teaching in languages is satisfactory.

- Teachers plan their lessons well with a range of different types of activity which results in good engagement and little off-task behaviour. Students enjoy the good resources used. In the most effective lessons, teachers make good use of repetition drills and differentiated questioning. However, sometimes students are required to move to productive use of the new language and structures too soon and this inhibits their progress.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and they present a good model of the language being studied for students. However, its underuse for routine communication in lessons results in the weaker aspects of students' speaking.
- Books are generally well presented and are marked regularly with helpful feedback from teachers on how to improve.
- Assessment is satisfactory. As a result of collaborative work on moderation with another school, teachers are now confident with grading work according to different levels.
- Sixth form teaching is satisfactory and students benefit from the close attention afforded by small group size. However, English is sometimes used more than necessary which impacts on the students' fluency.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

The quality of the curriculum in languages is satisfactory.

- There are opportunities to study two languages but no student does so currently. The only accreditation is GCSE.

- There are limited extra-curricular activities and trips, although, those on offer are well supported. Pen-pal clubs have recently been started and are well-attended.
- The school is increasing provision of interactive whiteboards but access to computers for students is limited by the booking system which prevents access for some classes. The department has recently invested in a software system that is being used well for independent study and homework.
- The classrooms are bright and welcoming. Displays support students' language acquisition well and provide some support for the development of cultural understanding. There is scope for them to promote the usefulness of language learning more.
- Schemes of work have been revised by the new subject leader to reflect changes to frameworks for Key Stages 2 and 3. They identify clearly the progression for different year groups in all three languages. Opportunities for creativity have been built in, but reading for pleasure is not supported well. The good selection of readers in the library is underused.
- The sixth form curriculum is restricted by small numbers but there are positive signs of improved recruitment to courses for next year.
- Students are very positive about the personal support they receive.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

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

- Under the strong leadership of the new subject leader, there is a positive and collegiate feel to the development of the department. She is working collaboratively on development planning with colleagues, good practice is being shared effectively and teaching and learning are regular features in departmental meetings.
- She regularly gathers information on students' progress from data collection and directly from teachers and undertakes other monitoring activities. The departmental self-evaluation shows a good understanding of the strengths and areas for development.
- Her enthusiasm and dedication together with your own strong support is already having an impact. This can be seen in the improving quality of teaching, rising standards and greater take-up of languages post-16.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that the schemes of work highlight opportunities to challenge more able students
- maximising the use of the language being studied to improve students' ability to deal with the unexpected
- increasing the use of information and communication technology by all students to support differentiation

- expanding the range of enrichment activities and increasing the promotion of the benefits of language learning to increase take-up in the sixth form.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Elaine Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector