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Dear Mr Hoyle

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 7-8 November 2007 to look at work in modern languages (ML).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on how reading skills are developing and how reading is used to develop language skills. It also looked at where you are in reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

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

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- All learners make satisfactory progress from their starting points. In tests and examinations standards are just below average by the end of Year 9 but above average by the end of Year 11.
- The skills of speaking and responding are less well developed than those of reading and listening. There is little evidence of students writing at length or creatively.
- Differences in performance between boys and girls are similar to those found nationally.
- Standards are broadly average in Key Stage 3. This represents satisfactory achievement in relation to their starting points.
- The percentage of students attaining A*-C at GCSE is above average in French and improving. However the proportion of the cohort entered for examination is low in relation to national figures. Very few students gain A*/A grades. All students entered for vocational qualifications in languages gained a pass.
- The school's data indicates that there is no significant difference between the performance of boys and girls.
- Most students make satisfactory progress in lessons. They have a sound understanding of grammatical structures and the rules of pronunciation, and a good range of vocabulary. High attaining students use a wide range of structures and expressions in their extended writing.
- Students use their reading skills to good effect to increase the range of language they use in their own speaking and writing and to increase their understanding of patterns in the language.
- Students enjoy learning a language, their behaviour in class is exemplary, they have very good working relationships with their teachers and carry out their work responsibly and with care.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- There is evidence of outstanding practice within the department but the quality of teaching and learning overall varies. In most lessons there is reliance upon the routine activities from the course books.
- Planning is thorough and results in well structured and well organised lessons, with manageable steps in learning so that students build effectively on previous learning.
- Teachers' presentations and explanations are clear so that students rapidly understand new language and use it themselves in controlled situations.
- When teachers use the target language effectively to conduct activities, students benefit from excellent role models and their listening skills are well developed. Higher attaining students are effectively challenged to interpret some unfamiliar or more complex language for others. However this is not consistent across the department.

- Question/answer techniques do not always ensure students are able to respond successfully. This leads to some reluctance amongst students to participate in whole class activities.
- Students are given opportunities to practise new language informally and this results in increased confidence and competence. However, there is scope to provide more opportunities for them to do this and to use the language for real purposes.
- Assessment procedures are clear and followed consistently but marking does not always give students useful or specific guidance about how to improve their work. Similarly less able and more able language learners are not always given adequate support or challenge to achieve their best.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum meets the needs and aspirations of the students well, offering the opportunity to study either for GCSE or vocational examinations. Some students, successfully completing GCSE examinations early or completing vocational examinations, opt to study a second language in Key Stage 4. This is having a positive impact upon take-up of modern languages in Key Stage 4.
- The school's specialist status as an Engineering college is also having a positive impact on the take up of languages in conjunction with technical subjects and business studies.
- There is an awareness of students' prior language learning experience but, as yet, planning for this in the curriculum is in the early stages of development.
- Schemes of work provide detailed information of what is to be taught and ensure continuity and progression. However there is too little information about how the needs of groups of differing ability, particularly the most and least able, are to be met.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- There is a thorough analysis of performance in modern languages. This forms the basis for self evaluation and strategic planning.
- Departmental self evaluation is effective. The head of department has a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and has identified appropriate priorities for improvement.
- Appropriate targets are set and students are increasingly involved in tracking and planning their own progress towards these targets.
- The senior leadership team monitors and evaluates standards and provision in languages.

- There is good leadership and management of the subject and this has led to significant improvements in standards and in attitudes towards language learning over the past three years. However, too much variability in the quality of teaching and learning across the department exists so that not all students get the same opportunities.
- There is a need to review the way assessment criteria are applied, and employ robust standardisation procedures.
- There is scope to further develop links with primary feeder schools in order to better ensure continuity and progression for students joining the school and who have begun studying a language in Year 6.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- Only 20 percent of students in Years 10 and 11 are studying a language; this is a significant increase over previous years.
- The school has plans to increase take-up in Key Stage 4 through the new vocational curriculum and through the introduction of Spanish.

The development of reading skills and how well reading is used to develop language skills

- Teachers place an appropriate emphasis on reading skills in lessons.
- Students are able to understand and translate what they are set to read.
- They skim for general understanding and can scan for specific information. They are able to use context, clues (e.g. pictures, headlines) and their knowledge of English or other languages to work out meaning.
- They use dictionaries and reference material proactively and proficiently to check meaning. They 'interpret' for others.
- They are fairly confident when reading aloud; their pronunciation does not hinder communication. Students are able to re-use language they have read in speaking and writing tasks.
- Although students use sites on the Internet to find out cultural information, there are few opportunities for students to read for pleasure in MFL.
- Text is used to improve students' pronunciation and knowledge of grammar; it is used well as a 'cue' for speaking and writing.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- All students take a modern language in Key Stage 3 and have the option to do so in Key Stage 4.
- Low attaining students have difficulty with listening tasks because they have insufficient support to complete tasks successfully.

- Students are sometimes too dependent upon teachers to complete tasks. This hampers their progress in some lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included to:

- share and spread the outstanding practice which exists in the department and eliminate inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and learning
- increase students' opportunities to use the language themselves for practice and for real purposes
- improve the use of assessment in lesson planning to ensure groups of differing ability are effectively supported and challenged
- develop effective liaison with feeder primary schools to ensure effective continuity and progression in language learning.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Judith Tolley
Additional Inspector

