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Mr W Sedgwick  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Sedgwick

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 12 - 13 May 2008 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are good overall.

- By the end of Key Stage 3 students are working above the nationally expected level. Students understand a range of tenses and they have good pronunciation when speaking, although some are not very confident at oral work. Students' writing is mostly accurate but quite

short. Achievement is satisfactory overall but higher attaining students achieve well.

- In 2007, boys in Key Stage 3 did not make as much progress as girls. Current assessments show that boys' progress has improved for the present cohort.
- In 2007, standards at the end of Key Stage 4 were well above the national average and achievement was outstanding in French, German and Spanish with students doing very well in all three languages compared to other subjects they took in the school, although relatively small numbers took French.
- Higher ability students did especially well in 2007 and there was a very high number of students achieving A\* and A grades. Boys achieved better than girls at Key Stage 4, especially in German.
- Achievement of the current cohort at Key Stage 4 is excellent in all languages. Teachers prepare students extremely well for the requirements of the GCSE course, especially for the writing and listening.
- At all levels students are well aware of the usefulness of learning a language and know that it is important when applying for higher education courses or a job. Most students, especially those in Key Stage 4, enjoy learning a language and think they are well taught. However, many students have a limited understanding of the culture of the country whose language they are studying and they say that they would like to do more of this.

## Quality of teaching and learning in ML

Teaching and learning are good.

- Relationships between staff and students are excellent and students behave very well. Students appreciate the extra support they are given, both from teachers after school and also in the form of the revision booklets and vocabulary and grammar sheets. Teachers regularly expect students to use the reference materials and students do this very effectively.
- Students work very well together and teachers often give them the opportunity to work in groups. Students do this sensibly and productively, as seen in one lesson when they were expected to work collaboratively to piece together a text that had been divided up.
- Students are expected to do a lot of work at home and they mostly do this diligently.
- There is a very explicit focus on helping students to learn strategies to make sure they understand how they learn. This is mostly effective in Key Stage 4 when it is linked to examination preparation but in Key Stage 3 there are occasions when students are not made to apply the strategy in the foreign language and so do not make enough progress in using the language itself. For example, students were asked to work

out how to learn some adjectives but were not actually expected to remember them or be able to use them accurately.

- Activities are well prepared; they often include games and competitions which students enjoy. Pace is good in Key Stage 4, although some students in Key Stage 3 find it a little too fast and a few of the lower attaining students find the work too difficult.
- The teachers prepare students extremely well for examinations, as one Year 11 pupil said, 'I know exactly what is going to happen and what I have to do to get a good grade – it's up to me now'. Students are given excellent feedback on their performance, they are very aware of how they can improve their work and they know precisely how they are doing and what grades they can expect. Work is moderated across the department and the school makes excellent use of national guidelines for assessing students' levels and is confident in the accuracy of their judgements. This is an improvement on the findings of the previous inspection.
- Students sometimes use computers to improve their language skills and to find out information from the internet but many say they would appreciate being able to do more of this. Students enjoy the work that is prepared for them on the interactive whiteboard as they say it makes it clearer, and teachers are skilled at using the boards to make work more interesting.
- Teachers have excellent knowledge of the languages they teach and so provide an accurate model from which students can learn, but they often fail to capitalise on this. They miss opportunities to allow students to speak and listen to the foreign language for real purposes, such as instructions and everyday comments.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Students have to do one of two languages during Key Stage 3. The current Year 8 have done an accelerated Key Stage 3 course and will start their options in Year 9. About one third of students has chosen to continue with a language and the rest will have a reduced timetable until the end of Year 9. The different possibilities for the Year 9 course are currently being discussed and it is likely that those students who are not aiming for a GCSE at the end of Year 11 will follow a course that will be accredited at the end of Year 9.
- Students find it difficult to fit two languages into their Key Stage 4 options and only about one third chooses to continue with one language.
- There are trips for all languages which are well subscribed and help students to develop their language skills.
- The school offers students the opportunity to visit local businesses to see languages being used at work and also invites in a local drama group so that students can watch plays in the foreign language. On

occasions students also get to act out a play in the foreign language such as when they did Romeo and Juliet in French.

- Students do not regularly read or listen to extended authentic texts for pleasure or interest.
- The school has been involved in local strategic learning network for Key Stage 3 which has focussed on transition and so has some understanding of primary language experience the students have had, but it has not yet formally adapted its scheme of work to take into account the different experiences of students on entry to the school.

## Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are good.

- The department has a strong focus on achieving very high standards for all students and is always striving to improve what it offers. The Head of Department has a very clear idea about what needs to be worked on next, for example she has identified the need to improve students' speaking and their ability to produce more extended and creative texts and the need to work on Key Stage 3 to ensure that boys do as well as girls.
- Innovation and a desire to make language learning a fruitful and engaging experience are always at the heart of any plans so the department takes risks when trying new things and then evaluates the outcomes carefully, taking students' opinions into account.
- The department has made improvements since the previous inspection, especially in the areas of teaching sound-spelling links and in assessment.
- The school's rigorous assessment system means that both staff and students are aware of progress and results are carefully analysed to ensure that any problems can be remedied.
- The department is well supported by senior managers who encourage effective teaching and learning but there has been less of an emphasis on improving the curriculum to meet the varying needs of students at Key Stage 3 so that they choose to continue with a language into Key Stage 4.

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

- Just over one third of students continues with a language into Key Stage 4 and this figure has been fairly stable over the past three years.
- Very few students currently study two languages because they have not had the opportunity to do two languages in Key Stage 3.
- The department works very hard to try to ensure that students know about the benefits of studying a language and about the very high success rate at GCSE. Nevertheless, given the many other subjects

and courses on offer, the majority of students still do not choose to continue with a language, often saying they find languages difficult and that they would like it to be easier for them to opt for a language without giving up other subjects they enjoy. The school is considering how it can address this problem and is developing a plan to increase the numbers.

## The development of reading skills

Reading skills are well developed.

- In Key Stage 3 students are aware of different strategies for understanding texts, such as using cognates and similarities with other languages. In several lessons the teacher made this very explicit by asking students to articulate what strategies they could use. However, in one lesson the teacher focussed solely on listing the strategies and did not allow students time to see if they could use them when reading the text.
- Reading texts are regularly used as a model for writing activities, for example, students prepared a model answer for an examination question using one that they had read and analysed. There were, however, fewer examples of students using creative texts to produce their own work.
- Students generally have good pronunciation when reading aloud as students are systematically taught about the relationship between sounds and spellings and have pronunciation guides to help them remember the rules.
- Students have access to dictionaries when they need them and often use the support sheets with key vocabulary when working at home or in class.
- There are some books and magazines which students can read for pleasure but this does not often form part of a lesson.

## Inclusion

Inclusion is satisfactory.

- A few students in Key Stage 3 are disappled and do not study a language.
- A few students in Key Stage 3 with learning difficulties find the pace and challenge of lessons too difficult.
- Able students are given challenging work which they enjoy and many achieve the very highest grades at GCSE. Students who already speak another language are given the opportunity to take a GCSE in it.
- Boys did not achieve as well as girls in Key Stage 3 in 2007 but this problem has been addressed for the current cohort and all students achieve extremely well at Key Stage 4 as they are very well prepared for the examinations.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to adapt the Year 7 and 8 programmes in the light of students' language learning experience at Key Stage 2 and progress during Key Stage 3
- encouraging students to read texts from a wider range of sources and to apply the strategies that they have learnt
- ensuring that students have every opportunity to speak and hear the language in class and to be more creative and spontaneous in their use of language
- continuing to explore ways to increase the numbers of students studying a language in Key Stage 4.

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

Joanna Peach  
Additional Inspector