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Mr B Hamlyn
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Dear Mr Hamlyn

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages.

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 14-15 October 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 information and communication technology (ICT) is being used by teachers and students to improve language learning. 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 satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- In 2008 standards at Key Stage 3 were below the level that would be expected nationally and achievement was unsatisfactory, especially for more able students. Current data shows an improvement on this position. Achievement of students in Key Stage 3 is currently satisfactory in Spanish because teaching has improved.

- In 2008, results in Spanish at the end of Key Stage 4 were below the national average and achievement was satisfactory. In Turkish, which was taught as an option during the extended school day, achievement was also satisfactory.
- Current data shows that students in Key Stage 4 are achieving satisfactory standards in Spanish, which is studied by more students, but in French there is some underachievement among the girls in particular. However, numbers are very small and the data does not indicate a trend.
- Students' writing and listening skills are better than their speaking and reading. Students have mostly good pronunciation because the teachers often correct this in class; their work is accurate but short and simple. When writing coursework students produce better work with a wider variety of structures and more complex language.
- Students have a satisfactory understanding of the culture of the countries whose language they are studying. They talk to native speakers such as the foreign language assistants about similarities and differences and they sometimes read books and watch films.
- Students understand the importance of learning languages. Many of them already speak at least one language other than English and are keen to expand their repertoire, although the opportunity for them to see the similarities and differences between languages is not often made explicit. Nevertheless students are very open to varied customs and traditions and work harmoniously together.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Teaching is satisfactory overall but there is still some inconsistency across the department, especially in Key Stage 3 in French. Nevertheless, teachers have worked hard to improve the quality of their lessons and students' behaviour has improved so that students co-operate with the teacher and each other. Teachers have a range of strategies to reward good behaviour and this encourages students to listen carefully.
- Resources are well prepared and often the interactive whiteboard is used to make teaching points clear. Instructions to tasks are mostly done in the language and students have little difficulty knowing what they have to do.
- Students enjoy the songs and games, which help them to remember vocabulary and structures.
- Students occasionally read magazines and other authentic materials, but students say they would appreciate a wider variety of materials more often.
- Lessons generally have good pace, with students completing several activities but occasionally too much time is spent at the beginning of lessons with students copying out objectives in English.

- Lessons do not always allow all students to participate orally. Pair and group work is not often used so students have to wait their turn and there are occasions when students are over exuberant and call out answers before they are asked.
- Students do not always record important work systematically in their books and files. This means that they find it difficult to work or revise at home.
- Work is not always sufficiently challenging and so higher attaining students do not always achieve as well as they might. For example, students in one French lesson were only expected to work in one tense using very simple language when several were capable of a lot more.
- Students are beginning to understand what they have to do to improve because they are given feedback in class, but marking in books is less helpful and is an aspect that is currently under development.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- In the current Year 7 all students study Spanish and this is part of a plan to rationalise the languages taught. French or Spanish are taught in Years 8 and 9, with a larger group of students studying Spanish. Students do not have enough time to make sufficient progress in Year 8 where they only have two lessons a fortnight.
- Students can study two languages in Key Stage 4 but one of these is studied as part of the extended school day. Turkish is currently a popular choice and the school provides a teacher for this course. Students can also enter for a GCSE in a language that they already speak and last year a few did so, attaining high grades.
- The content of the curriculum in Key Stage 3 is a little restricted. Students learn several tenses by the end of Year 8 but they do not reinforce this knowledge often enough with the result that, especially in French, they do not always make the progress they should.
- The school makes use of its sporting links and offers students the chance to work with Arsenal football club on improving their Spanish, but there are few links with other curriculum areas in the school.
- Students can go on day trips to France and last year about 40 students from Year 7 went to Boulogne and Calais with a further 15 in Year 9 going to Paris. Students enjoy these trips and say they helped them to practise speaking.
- Just over half of students arriving in Year 7 have studied a language at primary school. As there is a very large number of feeder primaries, students have a very varied experience of language learning. The department has carried out a questionnaire to establish which languages have been studied, which are mostly French and Spanish, but as yet has not adapted its curriculum to take account of prior learning.

- The department is considering how it can improve the content of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to make it more interesting and include more creativity but the impact of this has not yet been felt by students.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are satisfactory.

- The senior leadership team has identified ML as a priority area for development. Senior staff have a very good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the department and have recently made a concerted effort to improve the quality of teaching and learning. The effective line management has already had an impact, especially in Spanish.
- The decision to phase out French has been carefully thought out and a new Head of Department with Spanish as a main language has been appointed who will take up post at the end of term.
- Results are very carefully monitored at whole school level so that trends in the performance of different groups are clearly identified but there is less effective tracking at departmental level to show, for example, performance across the different skills.
- There is a clear development plan which focuses well on whole school issues but which does not focus as well on language specific issues, such as the need to improve speaking skills.

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

- In 2008, 22% of the cohort achieved a GCSE qualification at Key Stage 4. In the current Year 11, 24% of students are studying a language in curriculum time or the extended school day and in Year 10 the figure is 13%.
- The school supports small group sizes in curriculum time but a significant proportion of children studies a language beyond the school day.
- The school is committed to increasing the numbers of students who opt for languages in Key Stage 4. It aims to increase the percentage take-up from 24% in 2009 to 56% by 2013. It plans to do this by focussing on improving the quality of teaching and by offering only Spanish from Year 7 onwards. It plans also to increase the curriculum time across Key Stage 3 and will promote the usefulness of languages for careers and further education.

How well is ICT used by teachers and students to improve language learning?

This is satisfactory.

- The school is currently undergoing major renovation and reconstruction work so access to ICT rooms is not always possible for students in Key Stage 3.
- All students in Key Stage 4 have one timetabled lesson a week in the ICT room where they do research on the internet and word processing to draft and redraft work.
- The use of other software, such as programmes to improve students' oral presentations, is less common. Students have access to some websites that help them to practice their vocabulary and grammar and they use these well.
- Students are given sheets to enable them to insert accents accurately but few know about how to check spellings in a foreign language.
- Students do not often use ICT to help them improve their spoken or reading skills.
- Teachers use the interactive whiteboard effectively to present new language clearly and to demonstrate grammatical rules for example, but students do not often use the whiteboard themselves for interactive activities.
- Teachers use ICT to help with sharing resources and especially to share data on students' performance.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to work on improving the quality of teaching and learning, especially with regard to meeting the needs of more able students in French and increasing the opportunities for speaking in class
- working on increasing the use of ICT for speaking and reading tasks
- continuing to work on increasing the take-up of languages at Key Stage 4.

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