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Mr A Davies  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Davies

Ofsted survey inspection programme – modern languages (ML).

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 5-6 March 2009 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- In French and German standards are above average at the end of both key stages but are declining and have been doing so for the past three years.
- Although achievement is satisfactory overall there is underachievement amongst the more able linguists in French and German.

- Lower attaining students entered for GCSE achieve above expectations in relation to their starting points, with more than 70 per cent attaining the higher grades. The proportion of the cohort entered for examination is very high at almost 99 per cent over the last three years, so that comparison with national figures is difficult. However the proportion achieving the highest grades is below average in French and German and has declined significantly in the same period.
- In Spanish standards are well above average with all candidates gaining the higher grades in GCSE examinations and almost 40 percent achieving the highest grades. This represents satisfactory achievement in relation to students' starting points.
- Girls achieve better than boys in French and German. There is no significant difference between the performance of boys and girls in Spanish.
- In French, German and Spanish students are competent in reading, writing and listening skills. However the skills of speaking and responding are significantly weaker. Although they are able to communicate information successfully, too often students rely on written notes and set phrases to communicate in the language being learned. As a result, their ability to manipulate the languages to suit their own needs, or to respond spontaneously, is severely restricted. Their pronunciation and intonation are also adversely affected. They have a satisfactory understanding of grammar and use an adequate range of vocabulary and structures.
- They write at length for a variety of purposes and are able to access information from a variety of texts. Their use of the language to write creatively is far more limited. Again, they are too dependent upon set phrases and written prompts to be adventurous with the languages they are learning.
- Students have a clear understanding of the importance of learning languages. Their behaviour is exemplary, they are very willing learners and are very keen to do well. However, despite their enthusiasm for learning languages, they display little enthusiasm or enjoyment in their lessons. Students say they would like more information about next steps in language learning.

### Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory with some weaknesses.

- Teachers' subject knowledge is satisfactory. Although teachers' knowledge of the languages they teach is generally good, their understanding of how students learn languages effectively is less secure.
- In the majority of lessons teachers use the languages being learned effectively so that listening skills are generally well developed and higher attaining students are challenged to interpret more complex or unfamiliar language for others.

- Although activities are sequenced so that students build on previous learning, activities are frequently dominated by the teacher and require little input from the students themselves. Activities lack variety and are often dull so that, although students are keen to learn, they are not excited by their learning nor are they encouraged to use the languages creatively.
- Students increase in confidence and competence in using the languages when they are given the opportunity to practise informally in pairs but these opportunities are often restricted to rehearsal, and opportunities for students to use the languages for real purposes are missed.
- Games and competition motivate and encourage the use of the languages in some lessons and students respond well.
- The emphasis upon reading, writing and listening in lessons results in students being competent in these skills. Nevertheless, opportunities to develop listening and reading techniques, especially at higher levels, are missed so that activities are little more than tests.
- Teachers do not always use assessment information effectively in lesson planning to meet the needs of groups of differing ability, too often placing too much reliance upon setting. As a result some lower attaining students have difficulty completing tasks successfully in the time allocated, whilst higher attaining students are not always adequately challenged.
- In the more effective lessons teachers use questioning well to assess understanding. Students are aware of assessment criteria and are able to track their own progress.
- Marking is regular and encouraging but does not always give detailed guidance about how to improve.

## Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- All students have access to French and German in both key stages.
- Some students also have access to Spanish but at present this is not available to all and the rationale for this is not clear. Plans are in place to address this.
- There is good provision for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and additional activities are provided for gifted and talented students. There is no evidence of disaffection.
- Students benefit from their contact with native speakers in both French and German to practise speaking and listening skills and to extend their knowledge of different cultures. Students themselves say they enjoy this and would like more.
- The college provides a variety of extra-curricular activities, including language clubs and visits abroad. A good proportion of students from all years participate in these.

- Curriculum planning to cater for students with differing language learning experience in their primary schools is at a very early stage of development, although the department is working with feeder primary schools to develop ML provision.
- The taught curriculum is too restricted in scope, however, and does not always effectively prepare able linguists for the next stage in their learning.
- The department has identified weaknesses in speaking and in the performance of the more able students. However the emphasis in lessons remains on reading, writing and listening. Expectations of the more able students remain too low and they are ill prepared for the next stage in learning.

### Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are inadequate.

- The head teacher and the college's senior management team provide very strong support for ML and have a very clear commitment to enabling as many students as possible to continue their study of a language through Key Stage 4 and beyond, and for them to achieve as highly as possible. There is a very clear rationale for learning ML which students understand and share.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the department's performance by the senior leadership team are accurate.
- The college is playing an important role in language learning development across the local area in its capacity as a specialist college, for example through its work with primary feeder schools, partner institutions, the local colleges and university.
- Nevertheless, day to day leadership and management of languages are inadequate. Monitoring and evaluation of teaching fail to make an effective link between teaching and learning and do not identify clearly enough how standards can be raised or progress improved.
- As a result training needs are not effectively identified and improvement planning is not prioritised effectively.
- The department does not analyse the impact of its strategies to raise standards effectively and, as a result, standards are declining.

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

- Take up in Key Stage 4 is compulsory for all students, and two languages are compulsory for more than half of the cohort.
- Approximately 20 per cent of students continue their study of a language post-16 to AS and A2 levels.
- There are no differences in take up between boys and girls at Key Stage 4 or between different groups of students.

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

This is good.

- ICT is used effectively, for example, to present new language clearly on the interactive white boards, to engage students, and to enable them to demonstrate their ideas and understanding.
- Students use different applications to improve their language learning, for instance, to develop reading skills through a wider range of materials available on Internet.
- Students use ICT to present their own ideas, to practise using new language and to explore the culture of the countries and communities whose language they are studying.
- A department website to provide materials for teachers and students is being set up, but this is at the very early stages of development.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving standards and achievement in modern languages
- increasing opportunities for students to use the languages creatively, especially in speaking
- ensuring that the needs and aspirations of all students are met, especially those of the more able which are not well met
- improving the leadership and management of the languages department.

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

Yours sincerely

Judith Tolley  
Additional Inspector