

9 June 2009

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Modern Languages

Thank you for your welcome and co-operation, and those of your staff and students, during my visit on 13-14 May 2009 to look at work in modern languages (ML).

As outlined in my initial letter, the visit, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, 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, students and the chair of governors, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be outstanding.

Context

Bullers Wood School has been a specialist language college since 1996. It has subsequently received designation in two further specialisms.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good, standards are above average overall and are outstanding in some areas.

- Key Stage 3 results are above average. Fast track opportunities have recently been offered in Year 7, as the school starts to build on Key Stage 2 developments. The school recognises that it needs to set more challenging targets in Key Stage 3 – last year's Level 5+ successes were at 71% - to ensure that students achieve as well in languages as in other areas of the curriculum. A real strength is that almost all students study two languages throughout Key Stage 3 and the most able begin to study a third language in Year 9.
- In 2008 all students achieved accreditation in a language, almost all with one GCSE, 60% with two and some with three. Results in Spanish, French and Italian

were well above national averages, and in German (the main language for that year group) were above average. Students do well in achieving A*-C and A*-A grades, and the school intends to focus on the future on raising overall achievement in terms of average points score (APS).

- Students in the sixth form do well. Group sizes are good and retention over Year 12 and then into Year 13 are good. Above average results at AS and A2 levels are generally gained in a range of languages. In 2008 German and Italian were stronger than French and Spanish. Alongside this specialist study, all students continue with a language in the sixth form: these are continuation of ab initio studies in a range of languages on offer, for example Russian and Japanese.
- Whilst some students in this multilingual school do take exams in their home or heritage language, opportunities to develop minority languages are not identified systematically and more could be done to promote achievement in these languages.
- Students' personal development is supported by many opportunities to work independently, particularly using ICT. Students are highly committed to language-learning, work well together in class, and take every opportunity to get involved in the school's wide programme of foreign trips and exchanges. Some students need more guidance in how to organise their files, in order to draw maximum benefit from the excellent support and reference materials given by teachers.

Quality of teaching and learning in ML

The quality of teaching and learning is good overall with some outstanding features.

- Teachers in the large languages team are highly enthusiastic about their subject, and this commitment is infectious. Their students enjoy lessons and make good progress. Relationships between teachers and students are very good.
- Lesson planning is a real strength and teachers plan in detail to ensure that all students have appropriate learning goals.
- Students' use of mini-whiteboards is very well developed and results in a high level of engagement and challenge in lessons.
- Students particularly appreciate the games and songs which enliven many lessons.
- Whilst teachers generally mark very conscientiously, there is variation in the quality of written feedback to students. Some comments do not give sufficiently detailed information about next steps which younger students should take to improve. Similarly, it is not always clear to older students what they should do next to make learning gains when they receive back heavily corrected extended written work.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- Students learn two languages in Years 7 and 8, and the highest-attaining students then start to learn a third in Year 9.
- French, German, Spanish and Italian are available in Key Stage 4.
- A very small number of students with learning difficulties – around a dozen each year – learn only one language in Key Stage 3, and then gain accreditation in Key Stage 4. If GCSE is deemed to be unsuitable, Asset Languages accreditation is provided.

- Recognising the growing number of students entering Year 7 who have prior experience of language-learning, the school has this year initiated a “fast-track” scheme to cater for those who need to be moving at a faster pace.
- Provision in the sixth form is broad: all four main languages are offered at AS and A2 levels, with a range of other languages provided for non-specialists.
- Extra-curricular and enrichment activities are a strength of the school. A wide range of trips, study visits and exchanges are offered in all four main languages, to enable all students to participate at one or more points in their language-learning. Students are very appreciative of these opportunities and would like even more. Work experience abroad is offered to those who study German in the sixth form.

Leadership and management of ML

Leadership and management are outstanding.

- The language leadership team comprises a blend of very experienced languages teachers and a number of new and innovative, language subject leaders.
- Overall, senior leadership of the team is undertaken by a very experienced head of faculty, who works closely with a knowledgeable advanced skills teacher based in the school. She undertakes a wide range of outreach activity in the local area, working with feeder primary schools and other secondary schools. These links enable the faculty to have an up-to-date understanding of best practice in languages teaching and learning.
- High quality leadership of the different languages ensures that students make continuing progress. Good practice is shared effectively across language teams.
- Faculty leaders throughout the school are developing new self-evaluation procedures and the languages leadership team has an excellent understanding of teaching and learning in their subject.
- Support from senior leaders is strong, and enables the faculty to develop and maintain very effective links with partners, both locally and abroad.
- Accommodation and resources are of excellent quality. All classrooms have interactive whiteboard facilities and there are multi-media specialist rooms in the main-school “Euro-centre” and in the sixth form teaching area. Paper-based resources are also always of high quality.

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

- All students in this specialist language college continue with at least one language into Key Stage 4. Almost all achieve success at GCSE in one language, many in two and some in three. All four main languages attract students into the sixth-form to study advanced courses.

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

The faculty’s use of ICT to support language-learning is outstanding.

- The school provides training for other local schools in the use of the interactive whiteboard (IWB). All languages classrooms are equipped with IWBs.
- In all lessons observed, teachers used IWBs to present new language and in all most all students used the boards interactively. Students talk with enthusiasm about how this new technology has helped them to enhance their learning of

grammar and to enjoy their learning through the challenging language games played in class.

- Both the main school and the sixth-form building have multi-media rooms designated for languages. Lessons with Year 8 and Year 12 groups were observed where students worked confidently and independently through a menu of activities in German to consolidate their learning. In both lessons, expert teachers had authored the lesson content, and then circulated during the lesson to ensure that students derived maximum benefit from the activities. Technicians were on hand to help set up and deal with any subsequent glitches.
- Sixth-formers already email such lesson materials to their home email systems so that they can continue to consolidate work beyond the classroom.
- The school is developing a virtual learning environment and languages will shortly be adding materials to this learning base. Languages exercises and challenges will then be available to all, not only for routine consolidation and revision, but importantly to enable students who have been absent to catch up.

Areas of improvement, which we discussed, included:

- Improving the quality of written feedback to students, to help them plan next steps in learning, particularly at Key Stage 3
- Building more systematically on the knowledge and experience of the school's growing number of bilingual and plurilingual students.

As 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 be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Anne Feltham
Her Majesty's Inspector

9 June 2009