



Inspection of Modern Languages: *Observations and Issues*



A N ROINN OIDEACHAIS AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND SCIENCE

INSPECTORATE

Foreword



I warmly welcome the publication of this composite report, *Inspection of Modern Languages: Observations and Issues*, based on an analysis and synthesis of forty-five subject inspection reports on the teaching and learning of French, German, Spanish and Italian in Irish second-level schools.

Since September 2001, over 700 subject inspections have been carried out, in which specialist inspectors visit schools and evaluate the teaching and learning of specific subject areas. At the end of each inspection, a report issues to the school. This subject inspection report is intended in the first instance to assist the school in its ongoing work of self-evaluation and continuous development.

However, the inspection process can also serve the wider education community, when the findings and recommendations of inspectors are analysed and made generally available by means of published composite reports. *Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say* was the first such report published by the Inspectorate. It commented on quality and standards in a small number of primary schools. The present report is the first composite report on subject inspection at second level.

The choice of the curricular area of foreign languages is significant and timely. The European Commission has just initiated a three-year action plan to promote language learning and linguistic diversity in the Member States. At home, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is currently undertaking a review of languages at second level, and has published a discussion paper on the subject. As we look to the future, I am confident that this report from the Inspectorate will make a useful contribution to professional dialogue by informing the wider education community of current practice in our schools and by highlighting some of the issues that are relevant to individual teachers, to schools, to students, to parents and to policy-makers.

Eamon Stack
Chief Inspector
Department of Education and Science
March 2004

Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	3
1 The Quality of Language Provision	6
1.1 Access to languages	6
1.2 Resources for teaching and learning	9
1.3 Planning for teaching and learning	12
2 The Quality of Teaching and Learning	14
2.1 The learning environment	14
2.2 Lesson content	15
2.3 Teaching strategies	17
2.4 Learning strategies	20
3 Assessment and Achievement	23
4. Summary of Findings and Issues	26

Introduction

The background to the report

This composite report, *Inspection of Modern Languages: Observations and Issues*, is the product of an analysis and synthesis of 45 individual modern language inspection reports completed between November 2001 and January 2003. The sample, though relatively small, reflects the range of school types and school contexts in which modern languages are taught. They include schools drawn from all sectors: vocational schools and community colleges (8), voluntary secondary schools (35) and community and comprehensive schools (2). The inspections were of the four modern foreign languages most widely taught at second level: French (22 schools), German (11 schools), Italian (6 schools) and Spanish (6 schools). Seven specialist language inspectors were involved in carrying out the inspections in 12 counties. A total of 164 classes, taught by 112 different teachers, were visited.

Subject inspection reports are based on evidence gathered by inspectors and are informed by a variety of activities:

- discussions with the school principal;
- discussions with the teachers, individually and collectively;
- observation of teaching and learning;
- interaction with students;
- examination of samples of student work;
- examination of relevant school documentation;

- review of the Certificate Examinations results in the relevant subjects.

The core of these activities is the observation of learning and teaching in the classroom.

Structure of the report

The structure of this report is based on, and informed by, the format of subject inspection reports as issued to schools. The first section covers general and whole-school issues in relation to language provision, such as access, diversification, resources, timetabling and planning. The second section reports on lesson content, teaching strategies and learning strategies. It also considers the learning environment as created in the classroom, and the quality of the student-teacher relationship. The third section of the report covers assessment and achievement, while the final section summarises the findings and identifies the main issues which emerge from the report.

The review process

This report was compiled by a small team of inspectors supported by the Evaluation Support and Research Unit of the Department of Education and Science (DES) Inspectorate, and involved a detailed analysis of the forty-five subject inspection reports. Following consideration of each report, information was extracted in accordance with a matrix of indicators. The information was then categorised and analysed, facilitating the compilation of composite statements on each aspect reported on in the individual reports.

While this report presents evidence of practice observed in the schools and classrooms inspected, it is not a scientific analysis. Nonetheless, it provides a snapshot of provision and practice in the teaching of modern languages in Irish post-primary schools at a particular point in time. It is hoped that the presentation of this initial overview will serve:

- to raise awareness of issues related to teaching modern languages;
- to inform professional dialogue;
- to promote critical reflection;
- to promote self-evaluation on the part of schools and teachers;
- to contribute to improved learning experiences for students.

The national and international contexts

This report should be read in the broader context of recent developments at national and European level in the area of language policy, provision and support.

1. The European Union considers foreign languages among the basic skills or key competencies required by all its citizens and is concerned to promote excellence in the teaching and learning of languages as well as greater diversity in the range of languages available to learners in the Member States. The European Commission has recently published an action plan, *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*.¹
2. The Council of Europe has developed the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF),² an instrument to support the teaching and learning process and to measure attainment in the main language skills according to internationally-defined criteria.
3. A European Language Portfolio, based on DES syllabi and the levels of the CEF, has been developed specifically for use in Irish post-primary schools.³
4. Significant developments at national level are the Post-Primary Languages Initiative and the Modern Languages in Primary School Initiative.⁴
5. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently embarking on a review of languages at post-primary level, and is also preparing a feasibility report on the teaching of modern languages at primary level.⁵

A report such as this one should also be read in the context of school development planning and school self-evaluation. Some of the themes in this report – such as arrangements for student choice, teaching strategies, and the range of assessment modes – also feature in the recent DES Inspectorate publication, *Looking at Our School: an aid to self-evaluation in second-level schools*.

- 1 See the languages section of the website of the Directorate General for Education and Culture on 'Europa', http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/languages_en.html, for links to official EU documentation regarding languages, including the action plan.
- 2 Council of Europe, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The CEF is also available on the Council of Europe website, www.coe.int.
- 3 This version was developed in the Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Trinity College, Dublin, and is published by Authentik. For further details, see www.tcd.ie/CLCS/portfolio/
- 4 For information on the Post-Primary Languages Initiative, see www.languagesinitiative.ie, and for Modern Languages in Primary School, www.eckildare.ie.
- 5 See the NCCA website www.ncca.ie for the discussion paper, *Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum*, prepared by Professor David Little.

1. The Quality of Language Provision

1.1 Access to languages

“Learning one lingua franca alone is not enough. Every European citizen should have meaningful communicative competence in at least two other languages in addition to his or her mother tongue.”
European Commission: *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006*

The fact that all Irish people speak English, often referred to as the new *lingua franca*, can be a disincentive to the learning of other languages, just as in other European Member States it is often difficult to promote the learning of languages other than English. The experience of learning a second language is a great advantage when students acquire real communicative competence in the language, increase their awareness of how languages work and gain confidence in their own ability to learn further languages. On the other hand, the fact that all our students learn both Irish and English throughout the period of compulsory schooling means that it is not easy to find curriculum time for learning other languages. Notwithstanding this, modern languages have enjoyed a strong position in the traditional, humanistic curriculum in Irish post-primary schools, and this tradition has been carried forward into the present. In reporting on the whole-school aspects of provision and support for modern languages, inspectors refer to the commitment demonstrated by school management to the provision of languages in the curriculum and to facilitating access to, and uptake, of

languages. The majority of Irish students take at least one European language to Leaving Certificate level.⁶ This may in some measure be due to the fact that the National University of Ireland still requires Irish, English and a foreign language for matriculation.

While the ideal is that students at every level should have access to a range of language learning experiences, inspectors recognise the many demands on schools, and indeed students, in terms of curriculum choices. The following extracts from inspection reports illustrate good practice in the provision of an optimal level of access to modern languages, where all students are given the opportunity to experience learning at least one language, enjoy a choice modern languages and, where possible and appropriate, learn more than one:

- “On entry to the school, first year students indicate their modern language preferences from French, German and Spanish. Actual subject provision is determined by these preferences.”
- “Junior and senior cycle students are offered French, German, Spanish and Italian. In addition, a Japanese module is taught in Transition Year. First year students must choose at least one language, and may choose two if they wish.”
- “German is offered at all levels. Spanish and French are also offered throughout the school and it is possible for students to take more than one modern language at both junior and senior level. Students are advised to take at least one modern language.”

- “All first year students study both French and German. At the end of first year, most students opt to continue with their study of one of these languages, although it is also possible to do both.”
- “French, German and Spanish are taught throughout the school and a Japanese language module is available in Transition Year. All students, including those with special needs, are encouraged to study a language in first year.”

In most of the schools inspected, languages are offered to students of all levels of ability. One inspection report commends “the achievement of high standards in mixed ability classes.” Another report praises the school for the “provision of a range of Italian courses at various levels, matched to the interest and ability of students.” In a small number of schools, however, access to modern languages is contingent on students’ general academic ability, sometimes linked to the perceived level of difficulty of a particular language. For example, in one school a document referring to German advises: “Only students with considerable linguistic ability should attempt this.” In another school, “Italian is taught to the classes participating in the JCSP, while the non-JCSP classes take French.” When offering choices to their students, schools should endeavour to correct common misconceptions, for example that German and French are difficult languages, while Spanish and Italian are easy.

Of particular concern is the fact that in some schools students with special educational needs are denied the opportunity to study any language at all. This may be because it is assumed that these

students are unable to learn languages, or that additional learning support in English is more useful to them than learning a new language. In such cases, the school’s practice as regards streaming, setting or withdrawal for learning support prevents these students from taking a modern foreign language:

- “All first years can take German and French. A small number of students with specific learning difficulties do no modern language.”
- “All first year students, excluding those with an identified language learning difficulty, do both French and German.”
- “In first year, there is one class group studying French, while a second class of nine students does not take it at present.”
- “French is the only modern language offered in this school. All first year students study French. Some of these students, however, do not take the language to Junior Certificate level.”

Students who are excluded from the study of languages on these grounds are denied access to an important curricular area, and their future range of academic and career choices may be restricted as a result. This is not to say that all students should be expected to attain the same level of competence, but students may achieve partial competence suited to their abilities, needs and interests.

The manner in which first year students are introduced to modern languages varies from school to school. The following examples illustrate some of the approaches that individual schools adopt in the matter of access to languages in junior cycle:

- “On entry to the school, first year students must take either French or German and continue with the chosen language until the Junior Certificate.”
- “The study of both French and German is compulsory in first year. Students are free to choose which language they wish to continue with at the end of first year.”
- “Spanish is taught to all first year students in the school. They may then opt to study the subject from second year onwards.”
- “Italian is offered to all students entering first year, and is continued in second and third year by all students. In fact, Italian is the only modern language taught in the Junior Cycle.”
- “At the start of the first term, first year students are given a ‘taster’ programme of French and German for a period of six weeks. After this introduction they choose one language to study.”

In contrast to these models of open access, the reality in some schools (five out of the forty-five covered by this report) is that French is the only language on offer:

- “On entry to the school, all first year students must take French.”
- “French is a compulsory subject for all students in the junior cycle.”
- “French is the only modern language offered in this school.”
- “French is the only modern language within the formal curriculum, although Italian is taken by some students as an extra-curricular option, and there are plans to offer Spanish to LCA students.”

While open access and a wide range of choice is desirable, it is recognised that schools must make decisions in light of their own circumstances and resources.

The transition from junior to senior cycle is another point where the question of access and choice arises. In most schools inspected, the study of a language is optional after Junior Certificate. Many schools take advantage of Transition Year to offer students the opportunity of studying a new language, which in some cases may then be continued with to Leaving Certificate:

- “These students began to study the language *ab initio* in Transition Year and continued to study it for the Leaving Certificate examination.”
- “Students who have studied Italian in Junior Cycle may take it as a module in Transition Year. Other Transition Year students have the option of a taster course in Italian.”

Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme are two senior cycle programmes where the learning of a modern language is not only an integral component of the programme, but also a requirement for accreditation. The following extracts from the inspection reports illustrate features of good practice in introducing senior cycle students to the study of a new language:

- “French is offered as a subject throughout the school. A number of students opt for the LCVP module, offering two periods of French per week in an *ab initio* programme.”
- “One sixth year LCVP class is being offered an *ab initio* Italian course based on an NCVA module.”

- “Study of a language is optional at senior cycle. Some students in LCVP take *ab initio* French.”

The European Commission’s action plan reminds us that “Member States agree that pupils should master at least two foreign languages, with the emphasis on effective communicative ability”. Notwithstanding the fact that most of our students study one foreign language,⁷ and many are offered the possibility of taking a second one, *mastery* of two foreign languages seems a very ambitious goal, given that all students must study Irish as well. However, in the context of changing circumstances and ongoing curriculum review, an overarching language policy should articulate the rationale for the study of languages by all students at all levels and identify clear objectives as regards Irish, English and other languages. Ideally, all students should be helped to achieve a good level of competence in one foreign language and some partial competence in a second one.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- Access for all students to at least one modern language
- Students offered a choice of languages
- Students offered the possibility of studying more than one modern language

CONCERNS

- Students with special needs are sometimes denied access to languages
- In many schools, students have little or no choice regarding which languages they study
- Students are often limited to one language only

1.2 Resources for teaching and learning

“Language teachers may often feel isolated, unaware of developments elsewhere with the potential to improve their work; they may not have access to professional support networks; it is therefore important to facilitate contacts and effective networks between them at a regional, national and European level.”

European Commission: Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006

The most important resource for the teaching of any subject is the teacher. In the case of languages, the teacher’s own command of the language and ongoing contact with the target language community are crucial. To maintain and update their own language skills and competence is one of the key challenges for language teachers. Exchange programmes support teacher professional development, as does the presence of a language assistant in a school. Inspection reports refer to the professional development supports for teachers provided by the cultural services and to the many benefits and opportunities available to teachers through membership of a professional subject association.

Schools provide access for students to exchanges and tours to complement the learning and teaching of modern foreign languages. While making high demands on time and energy, tours, exchanges and home stay programmes are important for increasing the learners’ motivation, exposure to the language and cultural

awareness. Where such initiatives are in place, inspectors report positively on their impact: "Access to language exchanges, school tours and cultural events enhance the provision of German in the school." The engagement of a language assistant is also a feature which complements language teaching and learning in schools, and inspectors comment very favourably on the contribution of the language assistant or other native speaker in about one third of the reports.

Inspectors report on the range of resources available to teachers: designated language rooms, language laboratories, information and communication technologies (ICT), textbooks, authentic materials and audiovisual resources. Many schools have a dedicated budget for the acquisition and maintenance of resources. Poor access to and storage of resources is an issue for language teachers in some schools.

Very few teachers have begun to exploit the potential of ICT for language learning and teaching. In many schools a computer or computer room is available to language teachers, but these resources are not utilised on a regular basis:

- "The school's ICT facilities are not generally used by the language teachers."
- "While ICT impinges little on language teaching in the school, the teachers have access to such facilities."
- "Although there are ICT facilities in the school, ICT has not yet been used to support language learning."

In six of the forty-five schools, inspectors report that computers and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) packages are used for language teaching and learning:

- "In Transition Year, students visit the information technology room for at least one French period per week where they use the Internet to research French projects as part of their course."
- "Students have the opportunity to avail of IT facilities during some of their timetabled Spanish classes and one of the teachers is piloting a Spanish language software product (Vektor). This is proving very popular and can be used by all students, enabling them to work at their own pace."
- "ICT support for modern languages in the school is excellent. There is a recently-installed language laboratory equipped with a self-access learning programme and connection to Italian television by satellite. A computer room with Internet connection is also used for language learning and teaching."
- "The school has been involved in the Wired for Learning Project and the French department has its own page on the school website. Information technology is used for language teaching, with junior classes using e-mail and Transition Year classes working on appropriate IT programmes."

Inspectors often note that teachers supplement textbooks with a variety of authentic materials. In many schools, teachers are encouraged to build up their own classroom-based resources such as library books and audio-visual materials. A small number of the

schools inspected are involved in the DES Post-Primary Languages Initiative. This initiative seeks to encourage schools to diversify the range of languages they offer, and provides them with specific supports, e.g. funding for resource materials, additional teaching hours, dedicated in-service and post-graduate diploma courses for teachers. This has led to an increase in the number of schools offering Spanish and Italian, and to the introduction of Japanese and Russian.

Timetabling in the context of meeting the needs of language teaching and learning is often the subject of discussion with inspectors. In one report, the inspector describes the ideal: "Timetabling respects the need in language teaching and learning for frequent and evenly spread out units of time throughout the week." Languages are occasionally allocated double class periods, normally when they are timetabled alongside practical subjects. While the longer class period can allow for a more integrated, thematic approach within the lesson, the allocation of double periods for languages, unless skilfully utilised, is not regarded as good practice, since it means that students may only have contact with the language once or twice in the week.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- Teachers' commitment to continuous professional development, including ongoing contact with the target language community
- Student and teacher exchanges, tours and home-stay programmes
- The exploitation of ICT in language teaching and learning
- The engagement of a language assistant

CONCERNS

- Poor access to resources
- Very few teachers have begun to exploit the potential of ICT for language learning and teaching
- Lack of contact with target language community

1.3 Planning for teaching and learning

“A well-ordered and adaptable scheme of work should be based on precise objectives both within and between lessons. It is important that learners are clear about what they may expect to learn during the year and what the purpose of the current lesson is.”

NCCA: Leaving Certificate Modern Language Guidelines for Teachers

The inspection reports show that documented long-term planning is generally not an established feature of language teaching and learning. The reports, however, contain some examples of good practice such as the following:

“A detailed document outlining the aims, objectives, teaching and learning strategies, course content, student equipment and assessment in the subject is drawn up at the beginning of the school year.”

In the schools inspected, collaborative planning tends to be informal in nature, frequently limited to one departmental meeting per year. These meetings are mainly concerned with practical issues such as choice of textbooks, selection of students for specific class groupings, arrangements for assessment and allocation of resources. One of the recurring recommendations in the inspection reports is the development of a more formalised collaborative planning process at whole-school level, including the creation of a languages department where appropriate. The following example

illustrates the potential of collaborative planning to enrich the delivery of the language curriculum in a school:

“The members of a small but dynamic Italian department work well together to plan and deliver a varied, stimulating and integrated programme which is well tailored to the needs and interests of students, and is in line with syllabus requirements.”

From lessons observed and from discussions with teachers, there is considerable evidence of on-going individual teacher planning in line with syllabus guidelines and examination requirements. Individual teacher planning focuses primarily on lesson content, providing for mixed ability teaching and preparation for examinations:

“Lessons were without exception well planned and purposeful. It was also clear that each lesson was well integrated into an overall plan/scheme of work. Each lesson was well structured and showed a wealth of professional experience.”

Observation of lessons indicates the extent to which cognisance is taken of student ability and interest when planning lesson content. There is also evidence of planning to incorporate the use of appropriate additional resources. However, the inspection reports contain little evidence of written planning by individual teachers.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Documented long- and short-term planning by individual teachers ■ Planning for mixed-ability teaching ■ Regular collaborative planning for languages at whole-school level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of structures for formal collaborative planning ■ Lack of written planning

6 In 2003, for example, 60.9% of all Leaving Certificate candidates (LCA included) took French, 16.3% took German, 3.9% took Spanish, and 1% took Italian.

7 In the school year 2001-2002, for example, 72.1% of all students in junior cycle were studying French, 24.5% German, 5% Spanish, and 0.6% Italian. The corresponding percentages in senior cycle (including LCA) were 62.7%, 16.5%, 3.9% and 0.5%.

2. The Quality of Teaching and Learning

2.1 The learning environment

“Themes for self-evaluation: The quality of classroom atmosphere as it impacts on students’ sense of belonging and security, the nature of classroom interactions and levels of support for learning; the physical environment of the classroom in terms of suitability, attractiveness and stimulation for learning and teaching.”

DES Inspectorate: Looking at our School: an aid to self-evaluation in second-level schools

Inspectors frequently emphasise the advantages of a base classroom or designated language room, where such is available. This facilitates the creation of an authentic learning environment, the display of student work, and immediate access to resources. It also helps teachers to create an attractive and stimulating learning environment and to foster the development of cultural awareness. The layout of the classroom is another factor which influences the learning environment. In their reports, inspectors note some examples of good practice in this area:

- “The language classroom is well equipped with audio-visual equipment, dictionaries, textbooks and a range of other resources which the teacher has built up over the years. The room is an attractive and stimulating learning environment. Its layout, with chairs rather than school desks, encourages communication and allows for flexibility.”
- “There is a language classroom with TV and video recorder. A large number of posters and charts are displayed on the walls, including examples of students’ work and posters illustrating aspects of French culture.”

In most schools, classroom atmosphere is described by inspectors as positive and conducive to learning. In this context, specific reference is consistently made to the good rapport that exists between teachers and students. Observations by inspectors acknowledge the caring attitude of teachers and their awareness of the needs of individual students. This contributes to the creation of an atmosphere that is both work-oriented and learner-friendly:

- “In an atmosphere conducive to learning, there is a clear sense of student security, allowing for an engagement and consequent interaction that respects the contribution of each student. This positive atmosphere is enhanced by the caring attitude of the teachers, their clear instructions and the respect they have earned from their students.”
- “There was an excellent rapport between students and teacher, and a secure work-oriented learning atmosphere was evident.”

This supportive aspect of the teacher’s role contributes to positive classroom management. Inspectors’ reports note that interaction or engagement respects the contribution of each student, and that classroom discipline is sensitively maintained. In almost all schools, inspectors comment on student interaction and participation in the classes observed. The reports indicate that in all schools visited students have a good understanding of classroom rules and procedures.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Provision of a base classroom or designated language room to help create authentic learning environment ■ Planning of classroom layout to facilitate communicative approach ■ Caring attitude of teachers and good teacher-student rapport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of a base classroom or designated language room, making it more difficult for teachers to create an authentic learning environment

2.2 Lesson content

“A general activity or theme could provide the basis for an integrated approach over a number of lessons with clearly projected outcomes in relation to all four skills.”

NCCA: Leaving Certificate Modern Language Guidelines for Teachers

Inspectors report that the content of lessons observed by them is appropriate and in line with Department syllabi. On occasions they make specific reference to the fact that the content is appropriate to students’ interests and abilities.

In the absence of long-term syllabus-informed planning, many of the lessons observed are based on textbooks, past examination papers and listening comprehension tapes. Not surprisingly, examination preparation is an important feature of lesson content in examination classes observed, especially towards the end of the school year. Inspectors note the tendency on the part of some teachers towards over-reliance on textbooks. However, where textbooks are used selectively and supplemented by additional materials – authentic texts or teacher-prepared handouts – inspectors comment favourably:

- “Some excellent use of the textbook as a resource was observed during the visit. Additional, appropriately challenging material in the form of authentic documents is used to supplement the textbooks.”

- “The class textbook, chosen because of a thematic approach, was used to cover a lot of the course material.”
- “The timing of my visit, late in the school year, meant that lessons were particularly focussed on revision and exam preparation. It is to be noted that, in this context, I observed some excellent teaching of examination skills/techniques.”
- “Individual teachers prepare and plan lessons using a chosen textbook. Students are prepared appropriately for public examinations and obviously benefit from the examination expertise of particular teachers.”

The two features of lesson content most frequently referred to in the reports are the teaching of grammar and of vocabulary. Typically, inspectors comment positively on the fact that grammar is systematically taught and that students are encouraged to record new words in notebooks and to revise them regularly. Only a few reports refer to the formal teaching of pronunciation, although many refer to good incidental work on the correction of pronunciation. The theme of cultural awareness, which is one of the three main components of the modern language syllabi, does not seem to feature explicitly in many of the classes observed. In one school, however, the inspector notes that “preparation was skilful in its effort to take cognisance of the inclusion and development of student cultural awareness”. Only a few reports refer to the reading of modern literary texts in the target language, which is one of the general activities suggested in the Leaving Certificate syllabi under

the heading “Cultural Awareness”. One report illustrates the benefit to students of the use of appropriately-chosen literary texts in the classroom:

“A lovely example of the use of a piece of literature was observed in the Leaving Certificate class. This was a short German poem used to support the learning of the theme ‘Non-nationals’. It was clearly enjoyed and appreciated by the students.”

Some of the main recommendations made by inspectors with regard to lesson content are the following:

- Teachers should avoid the tendency towards over-reliance on textbooks.
- Teachers should adopt a thematic approach, as outlined in the syllabi and NCCA teacher guidelines for modern languages. This approach would also favour greater balance and integration of the four language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.
- Greater use of authentic materials – both printed and recorded.
- A more formal approach to the teaching of pronunciation and intonation.
- Greater attention to the development of cultural awareness.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lesson content in line with Department syllabi and with students' interests and abilities ■ Regular, systematic attention to grammar and to the acquisition and revision of vocabulary ■ Teaching which is thematic and syllabus-driven ■ Selective use of textbooks, supplemented by authentic materials, including appropriate literary texts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Tendency towards over-reliance on textbooks and past examination papers ■ Relatively little emphasis on the formal teaching of pronunciation ■ Lack of emphasis on cultural awareness ■ Little use of modern literary texts

2.3 Teaching strategies

"Second language learning in the formal context of the classroom necessitates a judicious mixture of activities aimed at providing learners with knowledge about the target language and activities involving use of the language for communicative purposes."

NCCA: Leaving Certificate Modern Language Guidelines for Teachers

In a number of schools, inspectors comment positively on the structure and pace of lessons observed. Comments such as the following are typical:

- "Lesson purpose was always clear, and lessons were well-structured."
- "Such thorough planning meant that, in general, lesson pace was stimulating."

All inspectors report on the use of the target language for classroom management, for the conduct of lessons and for general classroom communication. In about one third of the schools inspected, the comment is entirely positive:

- "The use of the target language throughout lessons is well developed and students are obviously used to hearing and using Spanish regularly."

- "In all classes observed, Italian was used exclusively for classroom communication and for the conduct of lessons. The students seemed accustomed to and comfortable with this use of the target language."
- "German is being used effectively as the language of classroom management and for teaching and learning, with judicious use of English where necessary... The students' language level is well ahead of that of comparable classes taught using English as the medium of instruction and classroom interaction."

In most schools, inspectors report on some commendable use of the target language and make specific recommendations for extending its use:

- "Given the strength of the teachers' German language skills, time would be well spent in planning and implementing a policy for using more of the target language in class, from first year upwards."
- "In the classes visited, some classroom instructions as well as grammatical terminology that could easily have been understood in German were at times given in English."
- "I observed some commendable use of the target language in the classroom and would encourage more of the same and a conscious effort to avoid the use of translation. It would be highly desirable that use of the target language be promoted for the purposes of all transactional communications within the classroom."

Recurring recommendations in the area of use of the target language are the following:

- more extensive use of the target language for classroom management;
- giving simple explanations in the target language rather than in English;
- the development of strategies to increase the use of the target language by students;
- learning the alphabet in the target language and its regular use for spelling;
- the teaching and use of grammatical terminology in the target language;
- the discussion of reading comprehension texts in the target language.

In half of the schools, inspectors refer specifically to the integration of the four language skills in classroom practice. In all cases, the comment is positive, and teachers are commended for their proficiency in achieving a balance and integration of the skills. For example: "...there is conscious integration of the four language skills and most lessons observed showed ease and professionalism in incorporating a number of these skills." The fact, however, that so many reports recommend a more integrated approach to the teaching of the four skills indicates that this good practice is not as widespread as it might be.

Many reports refer specifically to the range of teaching strategies and the use of active learning methodologies in classes observed. However, in more than half of the reports it is recommended that teachers should adopt a wider range of teaching strategies, and in particular that they should make greater use of pair work, group work, games and role play with a view to promoting greater student involvement in the learning process:

- “Good use was made of pair work and group work in most of the classes visited. This was especially effective for rehearsing short dialogues and for practising question and answer routines... It is recommended that more use be made of this kind of activity, which is less text-based and lends itself readily to the generation of spontaneous oral language.”
- “A greater oral response from the students might be encouraged through the early use of creative teaching strategies and authentic teaching materials.”
- “Classes observed showed good student engagement and solid learning. These would be even further promoted by greater planned use of a variety of methodologies... such as group work, pair work, role play and project work.”

In some schools, inspectors comment on the benefit of the presence of a language assistant or other native speaker in the classroom:

“A very good example of team-teaching between the Austrian language assistant and the German teacher, using only the target language, was observed. The assistance of a native speaker in the modern language classroom added authenticity and contributed greatly to the learning and teaching of German in this case.”

In a small number of reports, inspectors note a tendency to rely on translation as a teaching methodology, and recommend that this tendency should be avoided:

“The tendency to rely on translation to check students’ comprehension should be avoided. Instead, students should be encouraged to ask – in Italian – for clarification or explanation when they need it. Teachers can also check comprehension in other ways, for example by asking for synonyms or simple paraphrases. This would support the use of the target language and encourage the production by the students of simple, authentic language in every class.”

Inspectors comment positively on such features of classroom practice as teachers’ attention to individual learning needs, the use of effective questioning techniques, clarity of explanation of key concepts and new words, the sensitive correction of students’ mistakes, and the regular setting and correction of appropriate homework.

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE	CONCERNS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clear, purposeful, well-structured lessons ■ Use of the target language for classroom management, the conduct of lessons and general classroom communication ■ Use of active learning strategies, such as pair work, group work, songs and drama ■ Attention to individual students' learning needs ■ Effective questioning techniques, clear explanations of key concepts and new words ■ Sensitive correction of students' mistakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Considerable scope for greater use of the target language ■ Tendency to teach the four language skills in isolation, rather than in an integrated manner ■ Narrow range of teaching strategies ■ Over-reliance on translation as a teaching methodology

2.4 Learning strategies

“Students can be more effective language learners if they understand something about language learning and take some responsibility for their own learning. In this way learners can develop positive attitudes towards language learning and become increasingly independent in their work.”

NCCA: Leaving Certificate Modern Language Guidelines for Teachers

A feature of the Leaving Certificate syllabi for modern languages is the importance accorded to teaching students how to learn languages and the highlighting of learner autonomy. In their reports, inspectors commend the opportunities afforded to students to engage in independent learning and emphasise its importance:

“Observation of lessons showed that student learning was supported by the integration of prior learning and by efforts to build learner autonomy. The importance of the latter cannot be overstated in the context of language learning.”

One of the ways in which teachers are seen to promote learner autonomy most frequently in their classes is through teaching good organisational skills. In particular, inspectors refer to the good practice of students being taught to organise their own learning through the careful noting of new vocabulary and grammar points:

“Students have folders, divided into sections for the various aspects of the syllabus, where worksheets, grammar summaries, tests, reading materials and maps, are filed as a record of work covered and for revision purposes. The students also have notebooks in which they record vocabulary, words of songs, grammar, and other items of language and culture covered in class.”

Learning to manage note-taking is an initial stage in independent learning. In some classes, inspectors observe students consulting dictionaries:

“Examples of independent learning by students were evident where students automatically recorded new vocabulary in notebooks and confidently tackled a reading comprehension exercise, using dictionaries, on a challenging text related to the theme being covered.”

There are frequent references in the reports to students working on expanding their knowledge of vocabulary in this way. However, one inspector also commends the practice of using handouts as an effective means of avoiding a situation where students spend valuable class time in transcribing lists of vocabulary into their copies.

In some reports inspectors express their concern about reliance by students on memorisation of material from textbooks:

“Oral examination preparation manuals, while affording an opportunity to focus students on their real core language knowledge, offer an over elaborate model which students mistakenly try to learn by heart, instead of activating the smaller range of ‘active’ language they can call upon from own prior knowledge.”

In their reports, inspectors commend efforts by teachers to encourage active participation by the students in their own learning. One such example is described as follows:

“Inspectors observed students in a Fifth Year class being videoed by a classmate as they reported in the target language on a researched topic of their choice and being subsequently questioned by their classmates. This methodology promotes learner autonomy and is to be commended.”

Other examples of good practice in the encouragement of learner autonomy illustrate effective use of available resources. In one school, students are encouraged to borrow books, tapes and videos from the range of material available in the classrooms to work at in their spare time. Another example mentions how “the books are used in a variety of ways – given on loan to the students, used for project work in Transition Year...”

Inspectors also mention the introduction and use of CALL software as providing students with the opportunity to set individual targets and to engage in self-directed learning:

“This programme is a new resource in the school, and it is recommended that, in time, its potential for autonomous and self-directed learning be formally incorporated into long- and short-term planning for Italian. Students could be encouraged to do some initial self-assessment and then to set personal targets in line with the curriculum and to monitor their own progress with the help of the teacher.”

One of the most valuable instruments for the promotion of learner autonomy is the European Language Portfolio.⁸ In one of the schools visited, the inspector reports the piloting of the portfolio with a group of first year students. In other reports, it is recommended that teachers should consider adopting the portfolio, or the use of “can-do” statements for planning and assessment purposes:⁹

- “The use of “can-do” check-lists or of a language portfolio, which would fit in very well with the folder approach already in use, is also recommended. This would have the advantage of giving the individual students greater responsibility for, and control over, their own language learning.”
- “The use of portfolio assessment might valuably be considered in Transition Year.”

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- Students taught to organise their own learning
- Encouragement of greater learner autonomy by means of the European Language Portfolio or other “can-do” approaches
- Effective use of dictionaries
- Use of computer-assisted language learning packages for self-access and self-directed learning
- Independent access to language resources for home use

CONCERNS

- Reliance on memorised materials in preparation for oral examinations
- Lack of opportunities for oral participation by students
- Imbalance between teacher-directed learning and independent learning
- Insufficient student-student interaction

⁸ See page 4 of this report.

⁹ See www.ecml.at/cando for information and resources for the use of “can-do” statements in lower secondary classrooms.

3. Assessment and Achievement

“Ongoing assessment of pupil performance is a constant feature of good teaching which facilitates improved pupil performance and provides a basis upon which teaching and learning programmes can be planned. Learners should also be encouraged to assess their own progress.”

NCCA: Leaving Certificate Modern Language Guidelines for Teachers

Inspectors report on assessment of student learning, referring to the range of modes and techniques of assessment used in schools. Predictably, most reports mention the traditional end-of-term and end-of-year formal written assessments. Inspectors praise the use, in some schools, of planned common assessments. Evidence recorded in the course of inspections shows that, in some schools, there is also an element of continuous assessment, with the administration of monthly tests and, in a small number of schools, testing on completion of a theme or unit of work. The following examples describe some features of assessment practice:

- “Student progress is monitored carefully and the system put in place is commendable. First and second years are assessed at Christmas and in the summer. Fifth years are assessed quarterly, in November, at Christmas, in March and in the summer. Third years and sixth years are assessed monthly and the results of these assessments are communicated to parents.”

- “Students’ progress is assessed through classroom activities, monitoring of homework, class tests and formal school examinations. A new system of continuous assessment is currently being implemented, where students will have a number of class tests.”

In reviewing the inspection reports, the dominance of the formal written test is striking, as is the relative infrequency of the formal testing of oral skills: “Assessments in the language area have, to date, been written in nature.” Where inspectors record evidence of formal testing of oral competence, it is, with rare exceptions, confined to the Leaving Certificate year group and focuses solely on preparation for the terminal examination:

- “At present formal testing of oral proficiency is restricted to Leaving Certificate students.”
- “Mock orals are held in preparation for the State examinations.”

Some evidence of efforts to extend oral assessment beyond Leaving Certificate is recorded: “First and second year students have oral tests as part of their assessment.”

An analysis of the reports demonstrates the capacity and potential of programmes such as Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme to introduce a wider variety of assessment techniques:

- "Transition Year students, who have access to computers, produce a project which forms part of the assessment for the year."
- "It is commendable that the school has introduced portfolio assessment into Transition Year."
- "Transition Year students, who are assessed in this way, are encouraged to keep samples of their year's work, to engage in a process of reflection on their learning and to participate in a related interview."
- "For those students in the LCVP class who find the traditional Spanish Leaving Certificate too difficult, one of the alternative methods of language module assessment could be considered."

The potential of such varied activities for assessment purposes could be more widely explored.

Almost all reports make reference to the diligence with which individual teachers maintain records of student progress. These records facilitate feedback to students and their parents on individual progress and learning needs. The usefulness of feedback to students is increased when records also include reference to students' efforts, motivation, interest and participation in class:

- "Teachers keep a written record of students' progress in a personal record book to which they refer during parent-teacher meetings."
- "Aural and written modes of assessment are used and results recorded by individual teachers in order to help inform decisions in relation to learning needs."

- "Two staff members hold posts of responsibility for the purposes of assessment liaison with students."

Student achievement is evaluated by inspectors in a number of ways, but primarily on the basis of classroom observation and interaction with students, and by an examination of samples of student work. Inspectors comment favourably on the level of linguistic competence demonstrated by students in classes observed, and in particular on their ability to understand the target language and to interact naturally and with ease:

- "Students interacted very confidently with the inspectors."
- "Students have a high standard of spoken Spanish and clearly enjoy the language."
- "The students' mastery of the verb tenses was impressive."
- "Students also demonstrated good retention of prior learning, particularly in the area of grammatical awareness."
- "The students answer readily and show a good level of knowledge, both of vocabulary and cultural issues."
- "The accuracy of pronunciation and intonation of the language in all classes is noted."

On the other hand, the following extract describes a concern expressed by inspectors in relation to the balance between receptive and productive skills:

“In most lessons observed, there was some use of all of the four language skills, though in general the productive skills were somewhat underdeveloped. It is felt that not enough was expected of the students in this regard. It is recommended that more attention be paid to the production in every lesson of simple yet authentic language, both oral and written, by the students.”

An examination of samples of student written production also provides inspectors with evidence of student achievement. Inspectors acknowledge students’ level of achievement as seen in assigned work and homework:

- “Students are producing very good written material for their year group, indicating that learning of high quality is taking place.”
- “There was a very good range and standard of writing in the students’ workbooks, which are regularly and carefully corrected by the teacher.”
- “While opportunities are provided for written production, pupils have not always been assiduous in completing the tasks set and submitting their work to the teacher for correction.”

Results achieved in the State examinations are one of the indicators of student attainment to which inspectors sometimes refer: “It is clear from State examinations results that the school is performing

very well in the context of national norms.” Inspectors commend the practice – well established in some schools – of analysing students’ results, taking school context factors into account.

The main recommendation in the area of assessment is that student oral competence be systematically assessed at all levels:

“It would be desirable that the inclusion of oral assessment be planned for as soon as possible. The inclusion of such an element of oral assessment as part of standard practice would encourage the purposeful use of the target language in the classroom and support the development of student linguistic competence and confidence.”

FEATURES OF GOOD PRACTICE

- The use of a range of assessment techniques and of continuous assessment
- The assessment of all four language skills
- Regular assessment of oral competence
- Planned common assessment
- The use of portfolio and project work for assessment purposes
- Maintenance of student progress records

CONCERNS

- Narrow range of assessment techniques
- Lack of assessment of oral competence

4. Summary of Findings and Issues

This composite report, *Inspection of Modern Languages: Observations and Issues*, describes provision and practice in a sample of post-primary schools. The following table presents a summary of the main findings of the inspection reports and identifies a number of issues relevant to all schools.

THEME: THE PLACE OF LANGUAGES IN THE SCHOOL'S CURRICULUM

Finding:

Languages continue to occupy a central place in most schools and most students study at least one modern foreign language.

Issue:

In the context of changing circumstances and ongoing curriculum review, an overarching language policy should articulate the rationale for the study of languages by all students at all levels and identify clear objectives as regards Irish, English and other languages.

THEME: STUDENT ACCESS AND CHOICE

Finding:

The inspection reports illustrate some excellent practice, where students are offered a choice of languages, and the possibility of studying more than one language.

Issue:

Some students have little or no choice as regards which language they study, and students with special needs are sometimes denied access to the study of languages.

THEME: TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Finding:

The reports highlight teachers' professionalism and commitment.

Issue:

In order to ensure quality teaching and learning of languages, teachers' professional development must be a matter of high priority, and ongoing contact with the target language community should be emphasised.

THEME: RESOURCES FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

Finding:

Inspectors comment favourably on the range of resources available to language teachers, including designated language rooms, and a dedicated budget for language resources.

Issue:

The relatively low level of utilisation of ICT for language learning and teaching is a matter of some concern.

THEME: PLANNING FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Finding:

The reports contain considerable evidence of on-going planning by individual teachers, and lessons observed were well-planned and purposeful.

Issue:

There is a need to develop structures for formal, collaborative long-term planning for modern languages at whole-school level as part of the school planning process. Individual teachers should also prepare broad written plans of work based on the syllabus.

THEME: LESSON CONTENT

Finding:

The content of lessons observed was appropriate and in line with syllabus objectives. Acquisition of vocabulary, the teaching of grammar, and examination preparation were the aspects of lesson content most frequently observed by inspectors.

Issue:

The absence of long-term syllabus-informed planning can result in over-reliance on textbooks and examination papers and a curriculum which is too narrowly focused on the requirements of the examinations.

THEME: USE OF TARGET LANGUAGE

Finding:

In the reports, there is comment on much commendable use of the target language for classroom management, for the conduct of lessons and for transactional classroom communication.

Issue:

There is considerable scope for development in the use of the target language by teachers and students alike.

THEME: TEACHING STRATEGIES

Finding:

Lessons observed were clear, purposeful and well-structured. Teachers used effective questioning techniques, clear explanations of concepts and vocabulary, with sensitive correction of students' mistakes.

Issue:

There is a need for the use of a wider range of teaching methodologies with a view to greater oral participation by students. In particular, the use of strategies such as pair work, group work, games, songs and role play promotes greater student involvement in the learning process.

THEME: LEARNING STRATEGIES AND STUDENT AUTONOMY**Finding:**

Inspectors commended the opportunities afforded to students to engage in independent and self-directed learning and attempts by teachers to promote active participation by students in their own learning.

Issue:

There is a need to encourage greater learner autonomy and to redress the imbalance between teacher-directed learning and independent learning. Greater oral participation, including opportunities for the generation of spontaneous oral language, is one of the most frequent recommendations in the reports.

THEME: ASSESSMENT OF OUTCOMES**Finding:**

Inspectors found that student progress was assessed through classroom activities, monitoring of homework, class tests and formal school examinations. Formal assessment of oral proficiency was generally confined to Leaving Certificate students.

Issue:

There is a need to employ a wider range of assessment modes, and to test all language skills. Specifically, the formal assessment of oral proficiency at all levels should be prioritised.

The observations and findings of inspectors should help to raise awareness of a range of issues in relation to language provision in schools and the quality of teaching and learning of languages. External evaluation can only be an effective instrument for improvement if it is coupled with a parallel process of self-evaluation within schools. It is hoped that the concerns reported by inspectors and the features of good practice identified will be useful to schools in establishing their own school development priorities.