An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Pobail Osraí
Cill Chainnigh
Roll number: 70641K

Date of inspection: 10 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Pobail Osraí. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Pobail Osraí began as a ‘coláiste lán-ghae lach’ of the City Vocational School in Kilkenny and became a separate Gaelscoláiste maintained by Kilkenny Vocational Education Committee (VEC) in 2007. There is one class group in each year, including a Transition Year (TY) programme which almost all students take. Enrolment is rising, with numbers in the junior cycle roughly double those in the senior cycle. The provision of additional accommodation is in train. English is a core subject in all programmes, and is well supported in the school.

Two teachers form the English department in the school. Both teach English to junior and senior cycle classes, and this supports continuity in the delivery of the curriculum. In addition, teachers generally take the same class group from first to third year, and from fifth to sixth. This system also supports continuity of delivery and maintaining it should be a priority. The possibility of involving both teachers each year in the delivery of the TY programme could be investigated, as it would offer teachers and students variety in teaching and learning approaches, and allow more wide-ranging areas of interest to be explored.

The timetabling arrangements for senior cycle English are generally very good, and the lesson per day in fifth and sixth year represents optimal provision. While the five lessons provided in TY is a very generous number, the distribution is less satisfactory. The timetabling of a mid-week treble period was requested by the English department and allows teachers and students a block of time each week for the practical learning activities appropriate to a TY programme. Senior management is commended for accommodating this request. However, the two remaining single lessons should be at the beginning and end of the week so that regular contact with the subject can be maintained.

Four lessons per week are allocated to English in each year of the junior cycle. This is adequate but not generous provision, although the timetabling of lessons for each year on Monday and
Friday is commended as it minimises the gap between lessons. The desirability of providing a fifth lesson in first year was communicated to senior management during the evaluation. First year is the year in which a firm foundation in the skills and knowledge central to the English curriculum should be established, and a lesson every day would best deliver this outcome. However, the school’s practice of offering the fullest possible range of subjects to junior cycle students has merit, although it limits the time that can be allocated to English. School management and staff should continue to review timetabling arrangements in seeking to best meet the needs of the whole cohort of students.

Since class groups are of mixed ability, examination classes may have a mix of levels. The school’s policy is to encourage all students to take English at the highest level possible, and it is successful in that almost all take higher level English in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate. Students with identified special educational needs are assisted through close liaison between the resource and mainstream teachers.

English is generally well resourced. Fixed and portable audiovisual equipment is readily available. A library is planned in the extended accommodation and, in the meantime, a system of book boxes to promote reading for pleasure is managed by the English teachers. Local theatre groups have donated copies of plays to the school, and the county library has made block loans available. The school has the benefit of contact with a librarian involved in the Demonstration Library Project (an initiative attached to the Junior Certificate School Programme). It is suggested that contact be made with the School Library Association through its Irish web site at www.slari.ie, for further information and advice. Each class group has a base classroom, and these are spacious and attractive. Students’ work is displayed in classrooms and corridors, and there is an emphasis on publication in various forms, including class magazines and involvement in local Arts events. The teaching team and school management are commended for assisting students to engage in activities that extend their experience of English as a creative medium.

The teachers of English have engaged consistently in relevant continuing professional development (CPD), and the school has been involved in the TL21 initiative (Teaching and Learning for the 21st century). As indicated above, the teaching team is also concerned to extend students’ experience of English, and there was evidence of substantial involvement in a commendable range of co-curricular activities including theatre visits, poetry celebrations – including some hosted in the school – and writer-in-residence schemes.

**Planning and Preparation**

School development planning is facilitated through a weekly pre-lunchtime meeting for all staff. Responsibility for co-ordination of English is rotated, and commendably this encompasses both organisational and developmental work. There was a clear description of the role in the subject information form given to the inspector, and this should be included in the subject plan. Formal minuted meetings are held once a term. In addition to routine decisions concerning text choices and assessment, meetings also include planning for co-curricular activities, and for the promotion of the subject in the school.

The plan for English presented during the evaluation included schemes of work for each year, identifying content and timeframe. Under ‘classwork’, a range of activities and approaches was indicated, but these were not linked to particular aspects of the course. It is recommended that planning be considered as a vehicle for assisting teachers to bring together the topics to be studied and the most appropriate means of engaging students with these topics. This approach leads to
consideration of specific teaching and learning strategies to achieve the desired learning objective or outcome. In addition, means of assessment should also be considered in the same outcome-specific way. Thus planning is linked to teaching and learning methods and to assessment in a coherent way, ensuring that planning is of practical benefit to teachers and students. Notwithstanding this overarching recommendation relating to planning, good reflective practice was observed within the English teaching team, and teachers were prepared to be innovative and flexible with regard to classroom practice.

The texts chosen for the programmes planned were appropriate. A substantial programme of work was outlined for the junior cycle, enabling students to encounter a variety of genres and texts in each year. It is suggested that a mix of accessible and more challenging novels be considered in first and second year, so that students can develop a capacity to read independently and an awareness of the kind of stories they find appealing. Teachers should also ensure that third year does not become a purely revision year, through including for example a number of substantial short stories in the programme of study for the year. The practice of including a Shakespearean drama in the junior cycle programme is commended, and the use of audio recordings and of approaches that emphasise performance and interpretation should be included in planning this area of the course. An admirable balance between accessible material and texts likely to challenge students was noted in the choices made for the Leaving Certificate comparative study. The suggestions above regarding Shakespearean drama could equally be applied in Leaving Certificate classes.

The TY plan submitted outlined appropriate aims and objectives, and placed a pleasing emphasis on experiential and active learning. This was borne out in the practices observed. The materials and resources indicated in the plan were also generally appropriate. However, care should be taken when engaging with material relevant to the Leaving Certificate that it is approached in a way that fulfils the aims of the TY programme and that any unnecessary overlap with Leaving Certificate material be avoided. For example, the study of a poet not on the ‘long list’ for the Leaving Certificate is advised.

**Teaching and Learning**

Five lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all programmes and all years except fifth year, and involving all members of the teaching team. The teaching observed reflected the dedication of the teaching team and their enthusiastic advocacy of the subject. In many instances, students also demonstrated a willingness to engage and a very good level of responsiveness and insight. In some lessons, however, students were more passive, although capable of perceptive responses when questioned directly. Given the small size of the senior cycle groups, it is recommended that teachers adopt more co-operative learning strategies with these classes. Such approaches require and promote greater student interaction and emphasise the need for active input from students.

Lesson topics included poetry, drama, the comparative study, media studies, and creative writing. Lessons were well planned and generally well structured, with clear links from one learning activity to the next. A substantial amount of work was covered in each of the lessons observed, and there was an expectation that students would work purposefully and would remain on task. Classroom activities were well managed in a friendly and supportive learning atmosphere. The good practice of explicitly sharing the lesson plan, including activities and objectives, at the beginning of the lesson was noted in a number of instances. This is especially desirable practice
where students are inclined to be passive, as it creates a sense of forward movement from the outset.

Resources used included the board, textbooks, photocopies, and DVDs. The board was used effectively to gather points arising in class discussion; to reinforce new vocabulary; and, more unusually, to show a plan of a stage set, with suggestions on placing and lighting coming from the students. No over-dependence on junior cycle anthology textbooks was observed. However, teachers should be mindful to devise homework assignments based on classwork, and should be selective with regard to assignments given in textbooks. Material chosen was used imaginatively. In one lesson, the opening of a short story by Joyce was used in a creative modelling exercise. When students said that they did not find it an engaging opening, the opportunity to use the story as a negative model was taken, and students were asked to rewrite the opening. This flexibility in the use of material is commended, reinforcing as it does an integrated approach to the development of reading and writing skills. The classroom space was well used for active and participative learning, including a radio ‘programme’ in a TY lesson, and a drama workshop with a junior cycle group. The audio-recording of students’ radio work could be investigated, as this would assist them in self-evaluation and the further development of the skills required.

Lessons were generally teacher-led, but with a clear focus on student participation and production that created a positive dynamic and an often high level of interaction. Very good opening strategies were employed in a number of lessons to focus students’ attention on the learning targets. In a pre-reading exercise for Auden’s ‘Funeral Blues’ with a junior cycle class, the teacher issued a series of orders and then asked the students to describe the mood and tone created. This alerted them to the use of the imperative in the poem, and successive readings elicited very perceptive responses to what is often a challenging aspect of poetry appreciation. Warm-up exercises were used prior to a drama ‘workshop’ to direct students’ attention to the significance of movement in conveying character. In a senior cycle lesson, tasks were assigned to each student before they viewed a film sequence so that each focused on a specific aural or visual element of the text and then reported their observations. To enhance the co-operative possibilities of this approach, it is suggested that the students discuss their findings and collate them before reporting back. This should also encourage more analysis and interpretation from the students.

Teachers used a range of questioning strategies from basic factual questions to check recall and understanding to more probing questions that elicited a variety of views and encouraged students towards more thoughtful responses. It is important that students be given adequate time to formulate responses to more complex questions and it would be appropriate in the case of such questions to observe a hands-down policy so that the emphasis for students is on thinking through a substantial response rather than on being the first with an answer. Prompt questions were used effectively to help students to make connections and to read texts more closely.

The level of engagement of students in their learning, particularly in the junior cycle, was generally very good. In all the classrooms visited, there were students who were working well and, in interactions with both their teachers and the inspector, many students made perceptive and interesting observations and demonstrated a confident grasp of the material.

**ASSESSMENT**

Teachers were observant in the classroom with regard to the participation and attentiveness of students. They circulated to check on students’ work where necessary and encouraged students to stay on task. Teachers showed a good awareness of students’ potential and of individual strengths.
and areas of difficulty. Students’ efforts were affirmed, particularly where creative endeavour was concerned, and this is commended as it builds confidence in students and encourages the development of individual responses and styles of writing.

A review of students’ copybooks and folders showed that a good volume of work has been assigned and completed so far this year. Students receive helpful feedback both orally and in writing. With regard to marking the written work of Leaving Certificate students, teachers are encouraged to share with students the criteria of assessment used in marking the English papers, and to use them so that students can work constructively to address areas requiring improvement.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s policy is to encourage all students to take English at the highest level possible, and it is successful in that almost all take higher level English in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate.
- The teaching team and school management are commended for assisting students to engage in activities that extend their experience of English as a creative medium.
- Good reflective practice was observed within the English teaching team, and teachers were prepared to be innovative and flexible with regard to classroom practice.
- The teaching observed reflected the dedication of the teaching team and their enthusiastic advocacy of the subject.
- The level of engagement of students in their learning, particularly in the junior cycle, was good.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

- Planning should link teaching and learning methods and assessment in a coherent way, ensuring that planning is of practical benefit to teachers and students.
- Given the small size of the senior cycle groups, it is recommended that teachers adopt more co-operative learning strategies with these classes.
- Teachers are encouraged to share with Leaving Certificate students the criteria of assessment used in marking the English papers, and to use them so that students can work constructively to address areas requiring improvement.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

- The teachers of English and the Management of the school were happy with the inspection report. English continues to thrive in the school with one hundred percent of students at junior cert and leaving cert doing higher level at present. Trips to the theatre, poetry recitals and entry into poetry and essay competitions continue. We had a writer in residence once again this year. Professional development is on-going and planning meetings continue to be held regularly.

- In conclusion, teachers and management were pleased with the report and felt that it gave a fair overview of English in the school

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

- Cooperative learning strategies are being implemented as a means to encourage higher level of participation particularly at senior level.

- Management are looking at including a 5th lesson plan in first year.

- Team teaching in transition year was looked into and it is hoped that this recommendation be looked at for 2011/2012.

- All senior level students have been made aware of the criteria of assessment for the leaving cert.

- Planning meetings are continuing with emphasis on learning outcomes after implementing learning strategies.