An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Ailigh
Letterkenny, County Donegal
Roll number: 76081F

Date of inspection: 03 March 2011
REPORT ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Ailigh. 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 one day 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; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Ailigh is a co-educational post-primary school under the management of County Donegal Vocational Education Committee (VEC). Education is provided through the medium of Irish to the 167 students currently enrolled. Programmes offered in the school include the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme and the established Leaving Certificate.

Good practice in relation to the formation of class groups for English was noted. One mixed-ability class group has been formed in first year and in TY. In each of the other years there are two class groups and this allows separate class groupings for the ordinary and higher-level courses to be formed. Procedures in place to advise students regarding the level at which they should study English are very thorough. Students’ progress is carefully monitored and the school reported that changes to class placement, and consequently the level at which English is studied, are regularly made. Lessons in English are timetabled concurrently to facilitate this arrangement. Whilst this flexibility is good, it is suggested that movement between class groups after the end of fifth year should be curtailed. The course requirements in relation to Leaving Certificate English for higher-level and ordinary-level vary and it is important that students are not disadvantaged by a move from one class group to another. Students can continue, where appropriate, to change course whilst remaining in the same class group.

General resource provision for English is good. The timetabled allocation to English is in keeping with syllabus guidelines. However, the distribution of lessons across the week in first year is less than optimum provision. Given that students’ contact with the language is limited in this Irish-medium school, it is recommended that lessons in English should be timetabled for four of the five days available each week. The English classrooms are very well equipped and very good audio-visual resources are available to the teachers. Currently, access to information and communications technology (ICT) is limited but it is anticipated in the school that this will improve as new school accommodation is to be provided in the near future.

There is a very good range of co-curricular activities pertaining to English available in the school. Students are given opportunities to participate in Letterkenny’s ‘Culture Night’, links with An Grianán have been established and students have benefited from a range of creative workshops.
which deepen their understanding of the language and literature skills taught in the classroom. It is good to note that students are also given the opportunity to attend professional productions of texts being studied.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning for teaching and learning in English of a very high standard was noted in this school. A subject plan for English has been developed and this outlines the organisational structures underpinning the delivery of the programme and includes detailed notes on the content to be taught in each year. It was evident from annotations on the plan and from records of subject department meetings that the teachers of English engage in ongoing review of the department plan and in self-evaluation. It was also noted that changes made to the schemes of work planned for each year group are directly informed by that review process. This reflects a high level of professionalism in the English department.

The English department has developed its own mission statement and it includes the development of students’ independent learning skills as a key aim. A number of strategies designed to achieve this have been planned and implemented. These include clear directions for students regarding the management of notes and other learning resources and the implementation of a ‘sign-in’ system for senior-cycle students. This latter requires students to sign in homework assignments once they are handed up and encourages them to take responsibility for monitoring their own work. This approach is particularly commended as it focuses on learning as well as on teaching and places the students at the heart of the planning process.

Currently, the department is reviewing the fiction and drama texts studied in junior cycle. It is suggested that the teachers of English take advantage of the close links the college enjoys with its feeder primary schools to determine what students have been reading in primary school. In this way, the department can facilitate encounters with a wider variety of genre and texts.

There is ample evidence in the plan of close liaison between the English teachers and the learning support function in the school. The administration of standardised assessment texts twice a year in junior cycle provides the department with good information regarding the progress being made by individual students and results are used to plan support and remediation strategies.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching and learning of a very high quality was evident in the four lessons observed during this evaluation. Excellent advance planning and preparation resulted in high quality teaching and learning. Teachers had prepared materials to stimulate discussion and they used completed homework as the starting point for lessons. All lessons were well structured and pacing of activities allowed sufficient time for students to assimilate new concepts. The intended learning objectives were clear and good use was made of the whiteboard to record students’ contributions to class and to summarise key learning points.

A variety of teaching and learning strategies was observed. It was clear that teachers were cognisant of the range of abilities of their students and these strategies were appropriate to the students’ needs and interests. There was a strong emphasis in the lessons on learning by doing and evidence of very good practice in terms of guidance for students and appropriate teacher input. Students were encouraged to create tableau of scenes suggested by a poem, they were
challenged to identify relevant key moments from texts and to construct notes for tackling questions from past certificate examination papers, for example. In each of the lessons observed, teachers used carefully chosen resources and or peer support to assist students as they tackled lesson activities. As a result, the learning achieved in these lessons was of a good standard.

The teachers’ commitment to the development of students’ independent learning skills was evident throughout the evaluation, both during lessons and in the observation of students’ completed coursework. Students were encouraged to participate and contribute to lessons and they were supported in this by working in pairs or in small groups. In a senior-cycle poetry lesson, students were encouraged to formulate their own responses to the text which they were reading for the first time. Working in small groups, they discussed each section of the poem before completing a personal ‘response log’. During the plenary session, students were encouraged to listen carefully to one another. In this way, students learned from their peers and the teacher intervened only to make suggestions or give information where it was needed. In a junior-cycle lesson, the class was divided into two teams. Each team was asked to compose questions on a text they had read, which were then posed to the opposing team in the quiz which ended the lesson. This playful approach engaged all the students in the class and helped sustain momentum in their learning.

Observation of a selection of students’ copies, notebooks and folders provided evidence that students are given frequent opportunities to express, explain and defend their own opinions in their written work. It was noted that writing frames and models or templates are used well in many instances to support students in this work. Students have a good knowledge and understanding of the texts they are studying and are making good progress through their courses. There was evidence of some weaknesses in expression and in mastery of syntax in the written work of students on the ordinary-level courses. In some instances, students were overly reliant on the specific wording of question forms to compose the opening lines of their responses. It was also clear that, in senior cycle, students at this level are less confident in attempting personal composition tasks than they are when addressing questions on studied texts. However, the schemes of work planned for senior cycle indicate that sufficient experience in tackling writing tasks across genres is provided to address this issue. Very high quality work was produced by some students on the higher-level course for the Leaving Certificate. This work was notable for the seamless integration of references to studied texts and the student’s discussion of that text and for the accurate use of a rich vocabulary.

**ASSESSMENT**

A range of assessment strategies is employed by teachers. Within class, this included questions, short written assignments and observation of students’ engagement in learning activities. The department has developed its own homework policy and this was consistently implemented across each of the lessons observed. Frequent tests and graded assignments are set, particularly for certificate examination classes, and teachers maintain very good records of students’ work. This ensures that progress reports, which are sent home in November and at Christmas, accurately reflect students’ efforts and achievements in the subject. Summative assessment tests are set in February and at the end of the summer term. Good moderation of the marking of these examinations was noted as indicative of the collaborative practices of the English department. Reports also issue top parents following these examinations.

Homework has the potential to make an important contribution to the development of independent learning, particularly where it requires students to carry out research or to pre-read.
This was evidently the practice in some of the lessons observed and it is suggested that it should be further developed. Good use is made of the marking schemes for certificate examinations to provide clear feedback and direction to students in third and sixth years. Teachers mark written work promptly, with good feedback which provides students with information about their strengths and identified areas for attention.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main findings of the evaluation:

- Procedures in place to advise students regarding the level at which they should study English are very thorough.
- There is very good support for the teaching and learning of English in this school. Teachers have access to a range of resources to support their work.
- There is a range of co-curricular activities pertaining to English available in the college.
- A high level of professionalism was evident in the English department. The teachers engage in ongoing review of the department plan and in self-evaluation and these inform planning for teaching and learning in English.
- A number of strategies designed to achieve the development of students’ independent learning skills have been planned and implemented.
- Excellent advance planning and preparation resulted in high quality teaching and learning.
- Students were encouraged to participate and contribute to lessons. They have a good knowledge and understanding of the texts they are studying and are making good progress through their courses.

As a means of building on the identified strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendation is made:

- The current timetabling arrangements for the first-year class should be reviewed so that students have lessons in English on four of the five available days.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

*Published October 2011*