

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil Ghaoth Dobhair
Doirí Beaga, County Donegal
Roll number: 91409A**

Date of inspection: 02 March 2011



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Pobalscoil Ghaoth Dobhair. 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, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Pobalscoil Ghaoth Dobhair is a co-educational, post-primary school situated within the Donegal Gaeltacht. Education is delivered through the medium of Irish. Currently, 300 students are enrolled. Programmes available in the school include the Junior Certificate, Transition Year (TY), the established Leaving Certificate, the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

Class formation arrangements in junior cycle encourage participation in the higher-level English course. Two mixed-ability class groups and a third, higher-level, class group are formed in each of the three years. Concurrency on the timetable allows for students to move class groups quite easily if they wish to change levels for English lessons. The school and the English department are commended for their encouragement of students to achieve to their potential in English. A review of certificate examinations results indicates that students achieve to a good standard and do particularly well in achieving high grades on ordinary-level courses. This suggests that there is further scope to raise uptake of the higher-level courses, particularly for the Leaving Certificate.

Timetabling provision for the teaching and learning of English is good. Of particular note is the allocation of four lessons per week to deliver the English and Communications course to LCA students. This level of provision reflects the concern in the school that students are given every support to achieve to their potential on this programme. The allocation of six periods per week in fifth and sixth years for Leaving Certificate students is very good. It was noted however, that distribution of lessons for first-year students is unsatisfactory, as the subject is being taught on just three days per week. It is recommended that this should be addressed. Best practice is that students should have contact with the subject on at least four of the five days available.

Four teachers are responsible for the delivery of the English programme in the school. These teachers are suitably qualified to teach the subject to the highest level. There was evidence that

teachers are generally allocated to a class group for the duration of a course and of fair rotation of teachers across programmes and levels.

General resource provision for the subject is very good, particularly access to information and communications technology (ICT). A data projector is in place in all classrooms, which are networked for access to the internet. Teachers have been allocated their own laptop computers and a visualiser is also available in the school. During this inspection, very good use was made of these resources to support teaching and learning. A small library is available in the school but the book stock is outdated and students' access to a range of good quality reading material is therefore limited. The plans in place in the school to renew the library contents are commended. Helpful advice on this matter is available on the School Library Association website (www.slari.ie). The teachers of English do much to promote the pleasures of reading, including encouraging personal reading. Students participate in a paired-reading project with a local primary school and curriculum planning documents indicate that students engage in writing book reviews quite regularly through junior cycle.

The school is commended for the variety of co-curricular activities available to students and these provide them with opportunities to practise the skills learned in class. Students are encouraged to enter creative writing competitions, for example. Trips to the theatre to see professional productions of the plays being studied for examinations are also facilitated. The efforts made by teachers to develop the competence and confidence of their students are commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Management currently supports subject planning and development through the allocation of time for department meetings each term. This facility has been used very well by the teachers and the planning documentation presented evidenced curriculum planning of a very high quality. It was clear that a structured, collaborative, approach to the teaching of English has been adopted.

Good use has been made of the planning template provided by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) to describe the organisational and curricular aspects of English in the school. The documents clearly indicate how progression from first year onwards in the development of students' writing, reading and oral communication skills has been planned. The early introduction in junior cycle of the study of film is a particular strength and the specification of a list of poems to be explored in second year is also very positively noted. The plans for senior cycle specifically reference the encouragement of students to voice their opinions as a key aim. This is very good and it was evident in the lessons observed that this approach is implemented across the school.

A written plan for TY English was provided. This outlined a lively, activity-focussed programme in English. TY students are engaged in a shared reading project with the local primary school, mentioned above, and they study modules in Film Studies and Drama, both of which have a very practical orientation. The plans for English and Communications in the LCA class ensured that students were provided with opportunities to study language use in a variety of real communicative contexts. There is a good focus on fostering students' interest in literature and, to support that aim, it is suggested that teachers should be more ambitious in their choice of texts for reading in LCA.

There is close liaison between the learning support department and the teachers of English and this was reflected in the department plan. The teachers of English are aware of and plan for the

learning needs of the students in their classes. Observation of lessons indicated good differentiation so that all students could participate to their potential.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

As the pre-certificate examinations were in progress at the time of the evaluation, lessons in English in non-certificate examination classes only were observed. The quality of planning for the individual lessons observed was of a very high standard. In all cases, teachers introduced students to the theme of the lesson and, in some instances, outlined specific learning outcomes. In one lesson, very good practice was noted where the aim, lesson outline and homework had been clearly written on the board before the students came into class. In all lessons, students' were made aware of the purpose and direction of their learning. Opening routines helped establish a good working atmosphere so that no instruction time was lost. The pace and content of each lesson was generally appropriate to the class group with time being efficiently used.

Teachers used a variety of strategies very well to support students' engagement with the texts being studied. In a lesson on poetry, very good use of mind-mapping to capture what students' already knew about the poet was observed. In another, a new concept, 'masquerade' was pre-taught to support the students' encounter with a drama text. The resources available in classrooms were also used to good effect. In a drama lesson, the teacher had provided a set of masks which sparked discussion about the characters in the text and their behaviours in the scene being studied. The data projector was used in a lesson on film posters to provide students with authentic texts for discussion. These methods allowed the students to arrive at, and shape, their own interpretations of studied texts in a very effective manner. As a result, they were well supported in their preparation for writing and the particularly challenging area of structuring and developing a substantial piece of work.

There was a very positive emphasis on providing good models for students' oral and written work in all lessons. Teachers' language was clear and key concepts and vocabulary were clearly explained to the students and repeated adequately. Students practising letter writing, for example, were supported by a model letter. In all of the lessons observed, there was no presumption on the part of the teachers that the students were familiar with topic-specific vocabulary and each lesson provided examples of very good concept teaching.

Questions were posed in all lessons observed to check that students were on task and learning. It was good to note that teachers asked challenging questions, matching them to students' ability. For example, in some lessons, students were provided with opportunities to both demonstrate their knowledge and to give their personal views, supported by reasons and examples. This is in keeping with the English department's aim to encourage students to express themselves. It was successful in the lessons observed in part because teachers allowed sufficient 'wait time' for students to think through their answers before replying. The very good quality of students' oral contributions to class discussions was noted.

The notebooks and copies examined during the evaluation were well organised and a good resource for students' revision. Their written work reflected the range of student ability in the school. The quality of the work indicated teachers' successful integration of language teaching into the study of literature, so that grammar and syntax had been taught in context. Students'

demonstrated very good knowledge of their texts and a keen ability to use that knowledge well to advance an argument. The balance struck between formal writing, exercises in literary criticism and personal writing was a noteworthy feature of the majority of the copybooks examined. Students across each of the class groups visited have had the opportunity to write in a variety of forms and for a range of purposes. A tight focus on questions asked, together with effective use of quotation and reference, is notable in students' written work across the ability range.

In summary, there was evidence of very high quality teaching and learning throughout the lessons.

ASSESSMENT

There is a range of assessment modes used to assess student competence and progress. These include in-class questioning and the setting of homework exercises in order to check achievement of understanding and provide students with opportunities to practice newly acquired skills. In some instances, completion of homework tasks is acknowledged by 'tick' marking. In others, the opportunity to provide developmental feedback is taken and brief written comments are made. While all the teachers provide more detailed feedback to students when homework is corrected in class, this is, by its nature, quite general in its nature and cannot address the work of an individual student. It is suggested that more frequent use could be made of comment marking, as it allows the teacher to identify areas for development and to affirm the work done by the student. As a means of building on the very good work evident in the school, consideration could also be given to extending opportunities to students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their work, prior to the writing phase, and to self-evaluate, using those criteria. This can help students to shape their work, practise targeted skills and monitor their own progress.

In-house examinations are held at Christmas and the end of the summer term for non-examination classes. While a common paper is set for students in most of the mixed-ability classes in junior cycle, it is suggested that this should be extended to include all first years, to support the monitoring of student placement. The academic progress of third-year and fifth-year students is assessed at Christmas and by pre-certificate examinations in February/March.

Teachers maintain very good records of students' achievements and these inform the reports to parents which issue twice annually. Parents are also kept informed of their child's progress through a variety of means, including the homework journal, which is used as a regular means of communication between home and school. Annual parent-teacher meetings are held for each year group and parents may meet the relevant teacher by appointment to discuss their child's progress.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is good whole-school support for English in this school. Timetabling provision for the subject is good and teachers have access to ICT in their classrooms.
- The English teaching team is very collegial and reflective and this has resulted in subject planning of a very high quality.

- Advance planning for lessons was of a very high quality and strategies used by teachers in the lessons observed were noted as particularly effective in facilitating students' learning.
- The activity-based focus of the work planned for English in the TY programme creates opportunities for self-directed and independent learning.
- There was evidence of very high quality teaching and learning throughout the lessons.
- Students have achieved a very good standard of learning across all ability levels.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are 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 principal and the teachers of English at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

This is a translation of the school response which was written in Irish.

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The school is very satisfied with the report.

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

We fully accept the one recommendation which is made at the end of the report.