Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Ráithín
Bray, County Wicklow
Roll number: 70821M

Date of inspection: 24 September 2009
Date of issue of report: 23 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

THIS SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT
This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Ráithín, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. 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, deputy principal and subject co-ordinator.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT
The timetable makes good provision for English in the senior cycle. Students in the compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme have four lessons of English per week, and five lessons are allocated in fifth and sixth year. Lessons are well distributed over the week in TY. Fifth and sixth year have English on four days of the week rather than the optimal five, but the timetabling of a double lesson in fifth year gives scope for a range of activities and is commended. Provision in the junior cycle is adequate though not generous, with four lessons per week in first and second year. The present third year group has five lessons but the planned future provision throughout the junior cycle is four lessons. The desirability of an English lesson every day in first year was pointed out during the evaluation, as it is the foundation year of the three-year Junior Certificate syllabus. An English lesson every day would enhance first-year students’ opportunities to learn and practise the skills that are central to the syllabus, and therefore the possibility of introducing a fifth lesson should be investigated.

There are two base class groups in each year in Coláiste Ráithín. Junior cycle and TY classes are formed on the basis of mixed ability, and senior management described this as carefully managed so as to ensure that both classes have a similar ability profile. English is taught in the base class setting, and almost all students in both class groups take higher level English in the Junior Certificate. In fifth year, students are placed in either an upper or lower group for English and Irish, and the subjects are timetabled so as to allow students to move from one English class group to the other. However, both groups follow the higher-level course and almost all students take English at higher level in the Leaving Certificate. Classes are formed in this way in order to provide appropriate levels of challenge and support to students of different abilities. The school deserves credit for managing this flexible approach within the constraints of its relatively small size. Nonetheless, care should be taken to ensure that the system of class grouping and the level for which work is planned continue to meet the needs of each student cohort, which will inevitably vary from year to year.

The current English teaching team has three members, two of whom take the subject throughout the school, while the third has taken one class group from first year to third year. The school management is commended for supporting cohesion and continuity in the delivery of the subject.
The team includes both long-established and recently qualified teachers. Teachers rotate the teaching of the upper and lower groups in fifth and sixth year, and this practice is commended as it broadens and deepens the pool of expertise and experience within the team.

Classrooms are allocated to class groups and could be further developed as resources for the teaching of English through the display of relevant illustrative material, including students’ work that has been brought to a finished form. A good repository of print resources including textbooks and reference works for teachers has been built up and is held accessibly in one or other of the staff-rooms and in the library. It is recommended that all resources be inventoried and that the building up of good audio resources, including recordings of Shakespearian drama in particular, be accorded priority. Information and communication technology (ICT) is little used in English, and the layout of the school raises some difficulties in this regard. However, management is encouraged to be supportive of the teaching team in developing a greater awareness of the potential benefits of increased use of ICT both for sourcing suitable materials and for teaching and learning activities.

The school library is accessible to students twice weekly for borrowing. Teachers also encourage reading for pleasure through class book boxes, and the distribution of regularly updated recommended reading lists to all years is especially commended.

Co-curricular activities that extend the students’ experience of English are well supported by senior management and the English teaching team, and include drama and musicals, theatre and cinema visits, participation in literary events and readings, and debating and public speaking.

The school management is supportive of teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD) and teachers of English have been facilitated in attending in-service courses. Whole-staff CPD in areas including assessment for learning has also been organised, and this is commended. It is suggested that subject-specific CPD be assisted through contact with INOTE, the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (www.inote.ie).

**Planning and Preparation**

The English planning documents reviewed reflect a very good level of subject planning. The English folder given to the inspector during the evaluation was up to date and contained comprehensive schemes of work, minutes of team meetings, and other relevant documents, including an advisory sheet on assessment for learning practices and a series of recommended reading lists for students. The planning folder provided evidence of revision of schemes of work where changes had been considered necessary, and this was commended during the evaluation as a sign of good reflective practice and flexibility in meeting contingencies that had arisen. A good level of collaboration was also indicated in the minutes of meetings and the apportionment of tasks recorded.

Regular meetings facilitate subject planning. These focus on matters such as text choices, topics to be covered in each term and methods of assessment. While the meetings deal mainly with practical decisions, it was clear from the minutes that issues are discussed collaboratively before collective decisions are taken. It is suggested that, in further developing the good planning practices noted, the team place an emphasis not only on the work to be covered but also on the skills to be developed throughout the six years, and the methods and approaches best suited to the development of these skills.
Schemes of work have been drawn up for each year. These set out clear timeframes for texts and topics and deserve praise for the way in which they integrate the teaching and learning of language and literature in the manner advocated in the English syllabuses. The yearly schemes of work are substantial, the breadth and depth of the planned Junior Certificate course being especially commendable. Care has been taken to ensure that junior cycle students encounter a wide range of fiction, poetry and drama, as well as practice in writing within the variety of genres referred to in the syllabus. The inclusion of Shakespearean drama in the planned programme was noted and is commended. It is recommended that the English teaching team place a particular emphasis in their planning on devising strategies and approaches to support all students to engage successfully with this demanding but rewarding area.

The planned TY programme is broad and contains a variety of topics and texts that are likely to assist students as they progress through the senior cycle but which are separate from the Leaving Certificate programme. This is good practice. It is suggested that ways of encouraging students to engage in more independent and autonomous learning during TY, and to develop a greater sense of responsibility for their own work and progress, could be built into the TY English programme. For example, a schedule of assignments to be submitted throughout the year for continuous assessment could be given to students in September. English is concurrently timetabled for the two TY groups and this should be factored into TY planning, perhaps in the shape of some modular delivery of areas of the course.

The programmes of work planned for fifth and sixth year are in line with syllabus requirements and continue the good practice of integrating language and literature. The two class groups follow a common programme of work based on the syllabus and prescribed texts for higher level, with some small variations in response to particular circumstances. During the evaluation, members of the teaching team raised the issue of selecting texts for the comparative study where the ability range within a group was very wide. The existing policy of choosing a play, a film and a novel is helpful and should continue. Particular attention should be paid to the selection of the novel so that students can read it independently and meaningfully. Where a substantial number of students in a class group are likely to take English at ordinary level, the planned programme should reflect this, and appropriate text choices should be made to meet the needs of both higher and ordinary level students.

**Teaching and Learning**

Five lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years and programmes except TY, and involving all members of the English teaching team. Four lessons focused on drama of various kinds, and one on poetry. The teaching observed reflected a high level of interest in the subject and the students, and was of a good standard, with instances of very proficient practice. Lessons were well prepared, and achieved the desired learning outcomes most completely where students were challenged and engaged. There was good evidence of learning and in most cases students displayed an active involvement in and sense of responsibility for their own work.

Pacing was effective, and a satisfactory amount of work was covered in the lessons observed. Good links with prior learning were established while a sense of progression was maintained. Where the learning outcome was stated explicitly, it gave focus and purpose to the lesson and this practice should be extended. Many of the tasks set were completed in good time for the students to correct and clarify their work, and to engage in directed discussion of issues arising from the task. This is good practice as it supports focused class discussion. A good range of resources had been prepared and they were used effectively in many instances. Especially commendable were
worksheets which facilitated group work and which encouraged students to investigate and arrive at their own conclusions. It is important to ensure that students understand that prompts given in worksheets, such as lists of descriptive words, are there to assist them and not to constrain their own ideas or choices.

Many of the methods employed in the lessons on drama placed an emphasis on active engagement. They included assigning parts in a modern play to students in a junior cycle lesson, and encouraging them to adopt the points of view of the various characters. Good techniques to support thoughtful reading were also observed in this lesson. The group was invited to make suggestions about the world that the characters inhabited. They showed a very good grasp of the concepts of culture and society, and the questioning approach taken prompted students to read inferentially. This was an instance of very good practice. A senior cycle class reading *Hamlet* also took individual parts and read them, with some hesitancy but with a reasonable grasp of meaning. They showed a good understanding of the theatrical power of soliloquy, and were clearly engaged by the play. However, greater use of audio recordings to support the teaching of Shakespearean drama would further support the good practices in place. Their use would help students especially to explore aspects of performance and interpretation, and would also give them an opportunity to hear the lines spoken with the correct rhythm and emphasis.

Instances of group work were also observed. This method was productive where the task assigned was clearly explained beforehand and where the concluding feedback session held the class’s attention and underlined the importance of peer learning. Good use of this approach was observed with both junior and senior cycle classes. The practice of assigning different work to each group, as a co-operative learning strategy, was used to good effect and this approach could fruitfully be further developed by the subject department.

In a few instances, students were less inclined to become involved in their own learning, perhaps as a result of feeling that the topic was beyond their grasp. Senior cycle students taking higher level English should have a clear sense that they are required to engage actively with the texts and topics, even those of a challenging nature. It was suggested that student passivity be discouraged through a task-based approach where possible, for example requiring students to identify patterns of contrast in a poem in order to avoid a reliance on teacher paraphrase.

Some very good strategies to encourage in students an organised approach to their work were observed. These included recapping of main points so that students could create their own notes, and very good procedures in relation to maintaining and organising the folders which are used by students in all English classes.

Classroom management was good in all cases, and was noteworthy especially where it encouraged a disciplined and ordered approach to the subject and to learning, without suppressing students’ participation and response. The prevailing atmosphere was friendly, supportive and affirming, and students’ efforts were acknowledged.

**ASSESSMENT**

Good practices were observed in relation to assessment. Work is set regularly and students record it in their journals. While the evaluation took place relatively early in the year, a satisfactory amount of work had been completed, and it was pleasing to note that this included a number of substantial assignments.
Practices supporting assessment for learning were used in many instances. For example, teachers gave written feedback that affirmed progress and made targeted and clear suggestions for improvement. To develop assessment for learning strategies further, teachers should share them with students to emphasise the students’ role in improving their own work. In particular, the criteria of assessment for Leaving Certificate English should be used in marking the work of Leaving Certificate students and should be thoroughly discussed with them.

The in-house English examinations contained in the English folder were of a good standard. The practice of setting common assessments is commended, as is the practice of setting a class test early in fifth year to concentrate students’ minds on the challenges ahead. Student progress is carefully recorded by teachers.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- The English planning documents reviewed reflect a very good level of subject planning.
- The yearly schemes of work are substantial, the breadth and depth of the planned Junior Certificate course being especially commendable.
- The teaching observed reflected a high level of interest in the subject and the students, and was of a good standard, with instances of very proficient practice.
- The in-house English examinations contained in the English folder were of a good standard. The practice of setting common assessments is commended.
- Teachers encourage reading for pleasure through class book-boxes, and the distribution of regularly updated recommended reading lists to all years.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
- An English lesson every day would enhance first-year students’ opportunities to learn and practise the skills that are central to the syllabus.
- The school management is encouraged to support the English teaching team in developing a greater awareness of the potential benefits of increased use of ICT both for sourcing suitable materials and for teaching and learning activities.
- Where a substantial number of students in a class group are likely to take English at ordinary level, the planned programme should reflect this, and appropriate text choices should be made to meet the needs of both higher and ordinary level students.
- The criteria of assessment for Leaving Certificate English should be used in marking the work of Leaving Certificate students and should be thoroughly discussed with them.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal, deputy principal and subject co-ordinator at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

*Published February 2011.*