

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Éanna
Ballyroan, Dublin 16
Roll number: 60342R

Date of inspection: 19 October 2010



A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
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REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Éanna, Dublin 16. 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 teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

English is a core subject in the three programmes offered in the school: the Junior Certificate, an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, and the established Leaving Certificate. Eligibility for TY is generally dependent on a good junior cycle record but school management reported that students who were seen as likely to benefit from the year were encouraged to take it. The aims of the programme with regard to assisting student maturation and providing educational support should be borne in mind in the admission process.

Timetabling arrangements for English are generally satisfactory. However, the expansion of the school curriculum to include Physical Education has had some impact on full concurrent timetabling of English in fifth and sixth year. The school management plans to address this and other timetabling difficulties for the next academic year. Since concurrence places demands on timetabling, it should be used to the full to support whole-year activities, a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, and common assessment practices. It is recommended that concurrent timetabling of English in TY also be considered for these reasons, in addition to which it opens the possibility of modular delivery of English in TY.

Optimal timetable provision for English is a lesson per day. The provision of four lessons in each year of the junior cycle is therefore adequate though not generous. There are some instances of unsatisfactory distribution, for example where the four English lessons are on the first three days of the week. As this arrangement creates a significant gap in the students' contact with the subject, it should be avoided in future. As discussed during the evaluation, provision of a fifth lesson in first year could be explored, since this is the year when a firm grounding in the key skills of the post-primary English curriculum can be established. A fifth English lesson in first year would be of particular benefit to students requiring literacy support.

The subject department comprises six teachers; two permanent teachers are currently on leave, and their replacements have the subject to degree level. There have also been some recent retirements and consequent changes in personnel, and some junior cycle class groups have experienced more than one change of teacher. While the present balance between experienced

teachers and those entering the profession allows for the building of capacity, it also requires more effective planning and communication structures to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency of delivery. Most teachers of English teach the subject to three or more class groups and are deployed in both junior and senior cycle, and this pattern of deployment is satisfactory.

The school regularly accommodates student teachers, one of whom is teaching some junior cycle English this year. Some of the English department are members of the subject association, the Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English, INOTE (www.inote.ie). It is suggested that all teachers establish links with the subject association in order to share good practice and extend their repertoire of teaching and learning methods. School management is supportive of teachers' continuing professional development, paying the subject association subvention and facilitating attendance at in-service, as well as organising school-based professional development activities.

Students are placed in mixed-ability groups in first year, and remain in these groups for English throughout the junior cycle. The policy of mixed-ability grouping is working well, as a large majority of students take English at higher level in the Junior Certificate. Rising enrolment has seen a sharp rise in the numbers taking higher level English, a pleasing trend. Mixed-ability setting is maintained in TY, in line with good practice for the programme. A number of higher level classes and an ordinary level group are formed in fifth year, and teachers advise students and their parents with regard to the choice of appropriate level. Uptake of higher level English in Leaving Certificate is high, and results indicate that students are encouraged to take the highest appropriate level. There was some uncertainty within the English teaching team as to the basis of class formation in senior cycle; it would be useful to clarify this and include it in the subject plan.

A system of teacher-based classrooms has been in place for three years and most teachers of English have their own base rooms. This provides an opportunity to develop classrooms as stimulating learning environments for English. However, with one exception, the classrooms visited had little in the way of displays of students' work, posters or other print and visual resources. This should be viewed as an area for development within the subject plan and addressed accordingly. In particular, the benefits of regarding displays of students' work as a form of publication were discussed with teachers. This approach gives a real context to important skills including drafting, editing and presentation of work, and encourages students to take pride in their endeavours.

The school has a very fine library, which is being refurbished and restocked over time. It has been strikingly decorated with murals of famous Irish writers and it is planned to continue this work. The deputy principal is responsible for the library's development and has arranged the purchase of sets of novels for junior cycle. The suggestion of purchasing smaller sets of novels to encourage wider independent reading and a greater range of reading challenges was positively received. In this regard, the English department could consider the development of a book-report template, and completed reports could form a valuable reference within the library. Publications and resources relating to the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project may be helpful in promoting use of the library for research and private reading for pleasure.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Subject planning as part of school development planning is well established. The school began the practice of holding subject department meetings six years ago, and meetings are generally held during the summer examinations and at the end of the first term. Minutes of meetings record decisions taken as well as matters discussed, and indicate a high level of advocacy for the subject among the teaching team. Long-serving teachers of English commented on the shift that has taken

place from individual practitioner to member of a teaching team. The teachers of English should continue to strengthen collaborative practice, especially with regard to the further developments in subject planning that are suggested below. The long-serving teachers of English rotate the role of subject co-ordinator and, while this has merit at a time of change, consideration should be given to extending the role to involve all teachers with substantial English timetables. It would be very useful to agree a broad description of the co-ordinator role that is not restricted to organisational tasks but also entails the promotion and sharing of good practice. This should be included in the subject plan.

The current subject plan follows the School Development Planning Initiative template. In addition to time allocation and class organisation for the subject, it contains details of texts and course materials to be used, and also indicates teaching and assessment methods. The plan includes the recommendations made in a subject inspection in 2005, and the actions taken to address them. One recommendation concerned the inclusion in the plan of learning outcomes for each year, and these have not yet been formalised. It would be helpful if the subject plan contained learning outcomes expressed as statements of what students can do as a result of their learning. These outcomes are most useful if linked in the plan to effective teaching and learning methods, and appropriate forms of assessment. This approach would support the view of subject planning as an ongoing process, and would assist reflective practice and action planning.

The plans for each junior cycle year contain indicative lists of texts and topics from which teachers may select. The suggested material is appropriately challenging and wide-ranging, and supports a staged approach to the skills and knowledge acquisition set out in the syllabus. The teaching team is introducing a common examination for first year and it would be useful to include in the first-year plan an outline of the topics to be covered for this examination. Plans for fifth and sixth year specify the single text chosen and indicate when other areas of the course are to be covered. While it is sensible to leave some room for choice from the list of texts prescribed for the comparative study, an agreed programme for the poetry course would facilitate the shared preparation of resources and the possibility of common assessments where appropriate.

The planned TY programme builds on the junior cycle syllabus and reinforces key skills. An anthology with a wide range of material in a variety of genres is used, and students also read independently and write book reviews, which form part of the year assessment. This practice is commended, as the development of learner autonomy is one of the aims of the programme. The recommendation made above with regard to the linking of learning outcomes and methods of assessment could also be applied to the TY plan for English.

Good practice was noted in individual planning and preparation. An English folder is maintained on the school intranet, and this provides a very useful means of storing and sharing resources and materials.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eight lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes except TY, as TY students were away on work experience. Almost all members of the English teaching team were involved in the evaluation, as was the student teacher. The teaching observed was overall of good quality; some excellent practice was noted, and some areas requiring improvement were also identified. The dominant approach was whole-class discussion led by the teacher. This method, while traditional, was often effective, and was supported by very good questioning. Students generally participated well and were encouraged to voice their views. A

number of very perceptive responses were noted, and students' questions and observations displayed a good level of engagement with the subject.

Almost all the lessons observed were well planned and paced so that a satisfactory amount of material was covered. Texts covered in the junior cycle lessons observed included fiction, drama and the short story, and lessons focused on skills including comprehension and critical reading, supporting and defending an opinion, researching topics, and writing based on creative modelling. Senior cycle lessons covered the single text, aspects of the comparative study, and personal writing in journal and diary form. The integration of work on language and literature and the parallel development of reading and writing skills observed in many lessons are in keeping with the aims of the Leaving Certificate syllabus and were managed effectively.

A limited range of resources was used in the lessons observed but they were generally well chosen and effective. They included photocopied excerpts from the set novel which students annotated and studied as a model for their own writing, a very well-managed task. In another lesson, the library was used as a suitably large space for a walking debate on a novel the students had read. Although requiring careful management and preparation, it was an engaging activity. The board was used in almost all lessons to record and organise points made in class discussion and to note key words and concepts. Its use to reinforce vocabulary is of particular importance to students learning English as an additional language and to visual learners. In lessons on Shakespearean drama, teachers either read all parts themselves or assigned parts to students, with mixed results. The use of good-quality audio recordings is recommended to give students an opportunity to hear a professional performance. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used only to prepare resources. Computers are in place in classrooms, and data projectors are available, and their greater use in teaching and learning is urged.

A good focus on the development of critical reading skills was noted in many junior and senior cycle lessons. Students were encouraged to analyse texts carefully and, in the most effective lessons, to form and justify their personal responses to what they had read. In a junior cycle lesson, prompt questions were written on the board prior to the reading of a challenging short story, and worked well to focus students' attention while reading, and to lead them to consider the story's themes and impact. Good practice was noted in a senior cycle lesson where students discussed the concept of the tragic hero. While displaying a good grasp of the standard definition, they were also able to critique the concept by assessing its applicability to the character of Hamlet. This elicited a range of responses and lively discussion among students, which the teacher facilitated.

While many students were able to produce substantial and very competent written work, teachers were conscious that others who had ability were producing written work that did not reflect it. Very good work was done in class to prepare the content of written assignments. In order to help students to structure and extend their written responses, it is suggested that writing frames with paragraph outlines and topic sentences be used where appropriate. A bank of such resources could be developed collaboratively and placed in the electronic folder.

In almost all lessons, it was evident that students were engaged in their learning, enjoying their work and making good progress. Students volunteered responses and teachers generally gave sufficient time for students to ponder their responses to questions that required more considered thought. Where tasks were set, students showed an ability to work diligently on their own or in pairs, and to maintain focus on the work in hand. Since many students are able to participate meaningfully in class discussion and debate, it would be useful for the teaching team to consider ways of enhancing classroom interaction among students, so that it remains purposeful and

productive. Students were observed to enjoy and benefit from well-managed activities. Further development of co-operative and active learning strategies would be useful.

Very good classroom management was noted in almost all lessons observed. In one or two cases, students required some checking but responded co-operatively. A good balance was struck between encouraging participation and response, and ensuring that activities were well managed.

ASSESSMENT

Many lessons began with an oral review of homework or with feedback to the whole class on completed assignments. Teachers reminded students of the need for care and accuracy in their writing. They gave clear advice to students on layout and presentation, and the mechanics of good language use. All students should be encouraged to proofread work carefully before submitting it. A department-wide policy requiring students to indicate that they have re-read and corrected their writing assignments before handing them in might help to reduce careless mistakes and reinforce students' responsibility for their own work. Encouraging students to take an active part in improving their work is a key principle of assessment for learning, an approach that is commended to the teaching team and may be further investigated through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment web site.

Students' copybooks, folders and journals were reviewed during the evaluation, and reflected substantial volumes of work. Good standards of presentation and organisation of work were noted in many cases. Teachers gave helpful developmental feedback to students in the form of spoken and written comments. Where students are preparing for the Leaving Certificate, the relevant assessment criteria should be used so that students can apply them for themselves and develop an understanding of areas of their work which might require improvement.

The introduction of common assessment in school examinations is a positive development. It is important that common marking schemes are agreed and applied by all the teachers concerned. Again, the criteria should be shared as fully as possible with students.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The policy of mixed-ability grouping in junior cycle is working well.
- Subject planning as part of school development planning is well established.
- The teaching observed was overall of good quality; some excellent practice was noted.
- An integrated approach was taken to the study of language and literature.
- Teachers gave helpful developmental feedback to students in the form of spoken and written comments.

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

- The co-ordinator role should be agreed and developed to include the promotion and sharing of good practice.
- Statements of learning outcomes, linked to appropriate teaching and assessment methods, should be developed and included in the subject plan.
- A greater range of resources, including ICT resources, should be used in the English classroom.

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

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