Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

The Teresian School
Stillorgan Road, Dublin 4
Roll number: 60892G

Date of inspection: 9 November 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in The Teresian School. 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

The Teresian School is a lay Catholic establishment in the trusteeship of the Teresian Association. It comprises a pre-school, a junior school and a secondary school. The secondary school has an enrolment of 195 girls. It offers English as a core subject in three programmes: the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) and the established Leaving Certificate.

One base class group is formed in most years. However, the school has increased its intake since it extended its classroom capacity in 2009, and there are two base class groups in first and second year. These provide a mixed-ability context for English in these years. The base class in third year is divided into two mixed-ability groups for English. All junior cycle classes follow a programme to prepare them for Junior Certificate English at higher level. Mixed ability is maintained in the senior cycle, and almost all students take higher level English in the Leaving Certificate. The school is mindful of the high expectations of students and their parents and supports them successfully, while also seeking to ensure that students develop as independent and responsible learners. Its homework and assessment policies admirably express this balanced approach.

The timetable makes satisfactory provision for English, with four lessons of forty-five minutes allocated to all years with the exception of TY, which has a double and a single lesson. In general, lesson distribution is also satisfactory; however, it would be preferable to minimise the gap between English lessons by ensuring that English is timetabled on Mondays and Fridays for all junior cycle class groups in particular. Arising from a timetabling difficulty in provision for another subject, the present sixth-year cohort of twenty-four students has been divided into two class groups for English, based on the level at which they are taking the other subject. The same teacher takes both groups and follows the same programme with both. However, as the school acknowledges, a larger and more diverse class group would create a more dynamic environment for the delivery of the English syllabus. It is therefore recommended that, in future, a year group be divided for English only where it is too large for one class group.
Three teachers form the school’s English department and all have the subject to degree level. Two have significant timetable commitments to other subjects and one has senior management responsibilities. No teacher teaches English to more than three year groups, and two are deployed in one cycle only, either junior or senior. In the interests of building capacity in the English department and underpinning the view of English as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth year, it is recommended that teachers be deployed in both junior and senior cycles as far as possible.

Class groups are based in their own classrooms for English, and these are well resourced with a data projector, computer and whiteboard. An annual budget is allocated to the subject, and teachers apply individually for resources they wish to use, to be purchased from within this budget. Teachers have made good use of the information and communication technology (ICT) available to enrich students’ experience of the subject. The school has a library but it is largely used as a study room rather than as a resource for private reading or pleasure. While teachers have made considerable efforts to foster a love of reading through class libraries and ‘bring and swap’ initiatives, it would be good to see the development of a dedicated reading and browsing space in the school. Liaison with other schools with good libraries, and with the Irish branch of the Schools Library Association (www.slari.ie), would be useful.

A number of whole-school professional development activities have been held in the last two school years, including sessions on assessment for learning and the development of subject department planning. To complement these, it is recommended that teachers of English investigate and participate in the activities of the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE at www.inote.ie) in order to share and extend their repertoire of teaching skills. A newly qualified teacher of English has been facilitated to avail of the Department’s induction programme and is being appropriately mentored by a senior colleague.

In summary, English is generally well supported in the school, and school management displayed a willingness to address the areas for development identified.

**Planning and Preparation**

Comprehensive individual year plans for English were made available during the inspection. Teachers are asked to submit these plans to the principal early in each school year. Each year plan is in grid format and clearly sets out the topics and texts to be covered; the related learning outcomes; the methods and materials planned including some strategies for differentiation; and an indicative timeframe. The template is admirably clear and practical, and the inclusion of learning outcomes is especially helpful. The addition of information on modes of assessment would complement the present plans and is recommended for future consideration.

The year plans set out a challenging and stimulating programme for each year, and fulfil the objectives of the relevant English syllabuses. The junior cycle plans are commendably broad and take full advantage of the openness of the syllabus to offer a wide variety of novels, poetry and drama, and ample opportunities to practise writing skills in a range of genres. The TY English programme includes film studies, the development of speaking and listening skills, and imaginative co-curricular activities. The texts selected for study in the Leaving Certificate balance the challenging and the accessible.

Although a concise document giving an overview of the aims, objectives and some learning outcomes for English was prepared in advance of the inspection, no overarching English plan has
been drawn up to date. School management readily acknowledged that this arises from the emphasis it places on the production of individual plans by each teacher. For most years, a single year plan has been devised, since the same teacher teaches both class groups in the year. However, where separate teachers take class groups within a year, two separate year plans have been drawn up. Since the plans reflect a level of consultation, collaborative work to produce a common plan would be a logical approach.

In the post-evaluation meeting, the usefulness of a collaboratively developed plan was recognised by management and teachers, as was the importance of viewing such a plan as an aid to reflective practice and thus as open to amendment and development throughout the year. It is recommended that the existing individual plans be incorporated in a single document, which would also include an inventory of resources and details of modes of assessment. Collaborative planning would support the continuum view of English mentioned earlier and would assist the sharing and further development of the good teaching and learning practices observed. Furthermore, it would support teachers joining the department and assist the building of capacity.

There is at present no co-ordinator for the subject, although the deputy principal, who is a member of the department, has taken on certain co-ordinating tasks. It would be useful for the teachers of English to discuss and agree the co-ordinator role, along with a rota that would allow all teachers of English to experience the role over time. Co-ordination is best seen as involving the sharing and developing of good teaching and learning practices, and not only as having an organisational function. However, as a means of supporting reflective practice, it would be helpful for the co-ordinator to maintain records of meetings. In addition, for the same reason, an English department meeting should be scheduled each term.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Five single lessons and a double lesson were observed during the evaluation, covering all years and programmes offered, and involving all members of the English department. The quality of teaching in the lessons observed was good and, while some areas for development were identified and discussed, instances of very accomplished practice were also noted and commended. Teachers showed an enthusiasm for the subject and a commitment to their students, and were generally receptive to suggestions made in the course of individual feedback from the inspector. Students were articulate and confident, and showed a sense of purpose and engagement in their work.

All lessons observed were well planned and prepared. Lesson objectives were communicated at the outset in most cases, and were sometimes noted on the board, a helpful practice. Lesson pacing varied and was most appropriate where it was brisk enough to maintain a forward momentum, especially where the lesson involved the unfolding of a narrative. Teachers should guard against excessive commentary at this key stage of the students’ encounter with the text, and should allow the drama or fiction to ‘tell itself’ to the greatest extent possible. Where lessons involved a sequence of activities, transitions were well managed; however, the sequencing of tasks from simple to challenging should always be given careful thought.

Resources, including ICT, were effectively used. These included recordings of poets reading their work, which were played with striking effect in some of the lessons observed. Audio recordings of Shakespearean drama were also played; students listened attentively and were well able to discuss issues of characterisation and motive, referring to the dramatised readings and their texts. This approach helps to develop an awareness of how drama works and should be exploited to the
full through the posing of genre-specific questions. A TY group engaged in a discovery-learning approach to the sonnet form, which was aided by a download from a poetry web site that allowed students to highlight key phrases of their choosing and thus engage with sonnet structure. Hard-copy resources were also well used, and a commendable emphasis was placed on reading notes and commentaries with a critical eye, and on note-making rather than note-taking.

The methods used in the lessons observed were frequently stimulating and imaginative, and encouraged active learning and the development of informed personal response. Examples noted included the dramatised reading of a crucial scene in a novel with students speaking the parts; group work requiring students to gather and support views on a novel’s main themes; and a group task involving a close analytical reading of a poem, followed by feedback to the whole class. In addition to the level of engagement created by these activities, a noteworthy emphasis was placed on the development of critical reading skills. This was aided by questioning that invited students to probe the text and to consider a range of interpretations. To give students sufficient time to formulate considered responses, it is suggested that a hands-down policy be adopted and that quiet thinking time of several seconds be encouraged.

Teachers were generally very open to students’ views elicited through group activities and whole-class discussion. However, in one or two instances, there was perhaps an over-insistence on a specific interpretation being correct. While teachers should at all times encourage students to read closely and carefully, they should equally welcome any interpretation that the text will support. Where this practice was followed, students enjoyed discussing possible interpretations and realised the importance of forming and defending their own views. Teachers should remain confident of the value of this open approach, as it supports the aims of the English syllabuses, and helps students to think about how they respond to what they read.

Good practices are in place to help students develop and maintain an organised and responsible approach to their own learning. Students have a number of copybooks and designated places in folders for different areas of the course. Students presented for lessons well organised for work, with the required books and materials. Commendably, students brought dictionaries to class and use of the dictionary was integrated in a number of lessons. A constructive approach to the development of writing skills was noted, in which the strategy of students’ planning and drafting written work as part of the writing process was adopted. In most cases, students demonstrated a pleasing level of engagement and enjoyment, and their positive attitudes reflected well on them and on their teachers. Less confident students who may be hesitant to volunteer responses could be encouraged through the adoption of a ‘think, pair, share’ strategy, that allows them time to think on their own, then discuss with a neighbour before sharing their ideas with the class group.

**ASSESSMENT**

Teachers were vigilant in monitoring students’ levels of understanding and engagement in class activities in the lessons observed. Oral feedback on homework assignments was given in some lessons, in which teachers identified common errors or shortcomings. A pleasing emphasis was placed on the responsibility of students to improve their own work. There was evidence in the students’ copybooks and folders that they were addressing earlier errors that had been pointed out, especially in relation to accuracy in language mechanics.

The school’s homework and assessment policies are adhered to in the practice followed by the English department. Assignments are set regularly, and students receive helpful developmental feedback on all substantial pieces of work. The principles of assessment for learning have been
incorporated into practice, and teachers are commended on their diligence in this area. Teachers displayed very good knowledge of their students and keep careful records of attendance and attainment.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision and whole-school support for English is good.
- Teachers’ individual subject plans are admirably detailed. The planned programmes for English are challenging and stimulating.
- Teaching of good quality, including some very accomplished practice, was observed.
- Very good assessment practices were noted.

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

- Teachers of English should be deployed in both junior and senior cycles wherever possible.
- The existing individual subject plans should be incorporated in a single document, with details of assessment modes, teaching and learning methods, and resources.
- Practices to strengthen collaborative planning, including the development of a co-ordinator role, should be undertaken.

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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