An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

St Fintan’s Christian Brothers’ School
Doon, County Limerick
Roll number: 64040V

Date of inspection: 11 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 St. Fintan’s CBS, Doon, Co. Limerick. 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 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

English is concurrently timetabled in first, second, third, fifth and sixth year, thus commendably enabling students to move between classes as necessary and providing teachers with the facility to establish inter-class activities. It is also good practice that students are placed in mixed-ability classes in first year and that students are encouraged to study English at the highest level at senior cycle.

While the timetabling of English is satisfactory in most years and programmes, there is a deficiency in the timetabling of English and Communications for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students in 2010/11. The provision of three class periods per week would be appropriate for standalone year one or two class groups. This level of provision for a combination of year one and two cohorts is not satisfactory. It is acknowledged that class cohorts in years one and two are small this school year and needed to be combined to keep the programme running. However, the two cohorts need to progress through different modules of work, designed to be completed in a specific order, to enable students to complete required key assignments and to support their learning in other subjects. It is suggested that if an extra period could be provided for English and Communications in 2010/11, the teacher of these students could then work with year one and two students on their specific modules for two classes a week, while setting focused personal reading tasks, research projects or key assignment typing work for the other students. If the LCA cohort promises to be small again next year, then other arrangements should also be considered including co-operation with the neighbouring girls’ secondary school, which also offers LCA, and with which St. Fintan’s already operates a shared timetable for some senior cycle options.

Six teachers are currently involved in the delivery of English in the school. In all cases, teachers have more class contact with another subject or subjects than with English. Also, due to teachers’ subject specialisms and staff turnover issues, it is not possible to rotate teachers across all subject levels and programmes for English. Looking towards the future amalgamation arrangement for St. Fintan’s and two other local schools, it is recommended that strong efforts be made to form a core team of teachers qualified to teach English to the highest level, to ensure the availability of an appropriate level of English teaching expertise in the new school.
There is a good range of resources available to support the teaching and learning of English. A number of teachers benefit from the school’s policy of teacher-based classrooms. School management makes funds for the purchase of resources available on request. It is good practice that a subject department cabinet has been established for storing relevant audio-visual (AV) resources. It was reported that information and communication technology (ICT) facilities will be extended throughout the school and its prefabs in the coming weeks. Finally, the school’s homework club is also an important student support.

The current school library consists of stock on shelves in a locked annex off a school corridor. One teacher of English has taken on the work of maintaining this library. School management has made a commitment to increasing the stock of personal reading material for students, and this is commended. To promote the habit of personal reading, the subject department agreed in 2008 that one class of first-year English per week should be dedicated to personal reading and the use of a response journal. To further motivate students’ personal reading, two recommendations are offered. First, library stock should be organised into book boxes, catering for ranges of interest and ability for different year groups, for in-class usage. Second, the English department should interweave the promotion of personal reading into its schemes of work for junior cycle students in particular. For instance, the teachers of English could decide to celebrate “World Book Day,” or other similar landmark days, and could include the explicit teaching of dictionary skills and skimming and scanning techniques in its first-year programme for English. Additional strategies for strengthening personal reading across the school can be accessed through the School Library Association of Ireland, the UK School Library Association, and the publication Room for Reading: The Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project (http://www.jcspliteracy.ie/library_demo_project.htm).

English teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Some members of the English department were able to avail of the Teaching English Support Service (TESS) in-service provided with the introduction of the new Leaving Certificate English syllabus a few years ago. To help those members who were not in a position to avail of that in-service, it is suggested that in-house discussions on the main methodological and assessment innovations contained in that syllabus be organised by the department. In addition, the department is encouraged to regularly consult the websites of TESS and of the teacher professional network for English (www.inote.ie).

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities, such as trips to theatrical productions for examination classes, support students’ learning. Transition Year (TY) students are also involved in producing an annual magazine, in working with visiting poets and writers, in producing a film, and in entering in spoken word competitions such as “Poetry Aloud.” The commitment and enthusiasm of teachers of English, evident in these activities, is highly commended.

**Planning and Preparation**

Progress has been made in subject department planning for English in the school. The role of subject department co-ordinator is rotated, and teachers of the same year group meet informally from time to time to discuss issues of common concern. However, an insufficient number of formal subject department meetings of the teachers of English has taken place in recent years. It is acknowledged that a number of factors have impinged on the subject department planning process. It is also acknowledged that whole-school planning needs for the school’s amalgamation may need to take precedence over subject department planning processes at particular times over the coming years. Yet, it is still recommended that the English department meet formally “at least
three times in the academic year” (recommended in *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*). Time should be specifically allocated for a “show and tell” input at the beginning of each subject department meeting, where individuals would be asked to present an effective resource or strategy they use in their practice or to share insights they gained from a professional development course, from further study, and so on.

By the time of the evaluation, the headings of the relevant School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) subject-planning template had been used to describe the teaching and learning context for English in the school. Also, termly planning focused on the topics to be covered had been developed for all year groups. To help develop the English department’s planning even further, three recommendations are offered. First, the department should identify learning outcomes for each junior cycle year group, in the light of the draft rebalanced Junior Certificate English syllabus. (See [http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/English/English.html](http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/English/English.html)). Having conducted that review, the department should agree an incrementally-sequenced list of listening, speaking, reading, and writing outcomes, stretching from first to third year, as the framework for programme planning for those year groups. Second, in planning for junior cycle English, the department is encouraged to re-visit the concept of planning thematic units of work, to broaden students’ study of lengthy texts beyond one play and one novel over the course of the three-year cycle, and to consider introducing some local and contemporary texts into the programme, to help connect English more closely with students’ experience and environment. Third, through consensus, the number of templates currently being filled in as part of subject department planning should be adapted or condensed, leading to the production of concise yearly programmes of work for each year group. Those programmes should include planning for different levels, for differentiation, for assessment modes, and space for reflection to inform future planning.

The mode for delivering learning support in the school relies heavily on students following a reduced curriculum, having either an exemption from Irish, or having dropped a European language or other subject option. Learning support teachers liaise with class teachers to identify students needing support and topics on which to concentrate. The fact that one of the school’s qualified learning support teachers also teaches mainstream English classes is strength for the department. Information on the methods and approaches used in the delivery of learning and resource support is included in the subject department plan for English and this is good practice.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

In all lessons observed, there was evidence of planning and continuity with prior learning, and teachers acted as oral language role models for students. Learning outcomes were communicated to students at the outset of all lessons. Where teachers wrote these outcomes on the whiteboard, discussed them with students at the beginning of lessons, and returned to them at the end of lessons to check students’ learning and to identify areas for consolidation, this was good practice.

Audio recordings, radio broadcasts, and handouts were used to enhance learning in classes visited. Furthermore, whiteboards were used to record student feedback, to set learning outcomes, to record homework and in-class tasks, and to provide written reinforcement of new information and vocabulary. This was good practice. It was reported that other resources used in the teaching of English include newspapers, AV equipment to screen films, and orchestral music CDs to set an appropriate mood for in-class writing. Building on this foundation, and given the variety of learning styles and of student ability in the school, it is recommended that concrete artefacts (such as relevant props and models), more audio recordings for teaching drama, and greater use of ICT
be incorporated into the teaching of English. The compilation of booklets for students to support their study of lengthy texts is also encouraged, to provide unitary revision aids and to help absent students catch up with work missed. Finally, the teachers of English are also encouraged to further increase their students’ enthusiasm for the subject by creating print-rich environments in classrooms or on a central wall of the school. Such environments should feature syllabus-related samples of students’ work and also learning aids customised to the texts and skills being taught. Learning aids of this type could include timelines, spider diagrams of character traits, maps of key locations, and family trees illustrating relationships between characters.

Among the teaching strategies observed were teacher exposition, question and answer, teacher and student reading, connecting new material to students’ prior knowledge, pair and group work, prediction exercises, and short in-class writing tasks. Evidence was also gathered that some teachers use creative interventions (asking students to compose a diary entry, letter, or dialogue about featured characters in studied texts), use popular song to introduce poetic techniques, and use activities requiring students to match quotations with relevant paraphrases. The teachers of English now need to formally share these methodologies to ensure that all students get the benefit of them. One recommendation for pedagogical development is offered: strengthen the department’s capacity to incrementally develop students’ language and literacy skills from first to sixth year in a consistent manner. Some examples of good practice already taking place in individual classrooms include the use of grids to model the organisation of answers requiring the comparison and contrast of two or more texts, equipping students with banks of keywords to draw on for specific writing purposes, and setting writing tasks that are relevant to students’ interests and experiences. Areas for development include greater use of creative interventions as writing assignments to reinforce the teaching of texts; the identification of keywords in lessons and their subsequent reinforcement through spelling tests; departmental agreement on a minimum number of substantial writing tasks to be set for each year group; and greater use of student exemplars, writing frames, and ICT to support the redrafting of substantial assignments (the process approach to writing).

Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all classes. While school management ensures that the impact of sixth-year students’ absence from school due to match involvement is minimised through careful timetabling, it is reported that this facility cannot be extended to fifth years because of timetabling constraints. It is acknowledged that promoting students’ involvement in extracurricular activities is important for the development of their self-esteem and physical well-being. However, it was noted during the evaluation that fifth-year absences from school due to match involvement had a direct impact on the management of learning and teaching.

Most students were engaged in their learning in the classes observed. Where graphic organisers, active learning methods and writing scaffolds (mindmaps, grids or writing frames) were in use, students’ levels of engagement were particularly raised. In contrast, where teacher-talk predominated, casting students in the roles of listeners and responders only, some student disengagement was noted. Oral questioning by teachers and by the inspector demonstrated that students were familiar with the plot details, characters and relationships in studied texts. However, with regard to the teaching of poetry, students in a number of junior classes would have benefitted from teachers introducing poetic techniques to them in a staged manner over the three-year cycle. Those students also needed to be directed to move beyond mere identification of poetic techniques to debating their purpose and effect. An examination of a sample of students’ copies revealed that a greater variety of composing tasks for different audiences and purposes needs to be assigned, and that the process approach to writing needs to be promoted and practised more consistently across the department. Finally, in a number of instances, students were not
segregating different sections of their written work, leading to the recording of disorganised notes that were unlikely to serve as effective revision aids, and were not storing handouts supplied to them in an easily-retrievable manner. It is recommended that the department continue to develop common practices on how students should present and store their written work, and consistently expect and communicate such routines to students.

**ASSESSMENT**

Considerable variation in the type and depth of monitoring, and in the feedback being given to students’ homework, was noted. Where good practice was observed, specific formative feedback had been provided, criteria for assessment had been shared with students, and those criteria were being used to mark substantial pieces of writing. Where weaknesses were observed, written teacher feedback did not address issues such as the need to carefully attend to the audience and type of language specified in assignments and to move beyond colloquial language choices.

Three other aspects of assessment need to be developed by the department. First, it is suggested that the department agree a common position on awarding some marks towards end-of-term results for tasks linked to the agreed learning outcomes for different year groups. (A few teachers already engage in this practice to a limited degree). Tasks could include spelling and vocabulary tests, a cumulative average for composition work, folder maintenance, quotation tests, oral presentations, and project work. Second, it is recommended that teachers further develop their diagnostic use of assessments. For instance, teachers are advised to assign class time early in the first term of every year for students to produce a substantial personal writing sample. Analysing and recording the recurring errors in each student’s work will give teachers a good benchmark for skill-development programme planning. Third, it is recommended that an examination of State Examination Commission information on the assessment of English be reviewed annually at subject department meetings, including marking schemes, Chief Examiners’ reports, and national statistics on the uptake of levels and the spread of grades for English examinations. This practice will ensure a consistent level of understanding of criteria for assessment and of marking standards across the department.

In-house examinations are administered to first years at half-termlly intervals. Commendably, a common end-of-year examination is set for first years to facilitate comparison of achievement across the year group. Second and fifth years sit house examinations at Christmas and in summer, while third and sixth years sit house examinations in November and February. It is good practice that the school arranges for students granted reasonable accommodations for state examinations to sit their house examinations using special centres with tape-recorders or readers. Parents are kept informed of students’ progress through reports sent out after all house examinations and through annual parent-teacher meetings.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management is commended for its concurrent timetabling of English, for its commitment to keeping the LCA programme running, and for making funds available for the purchase of resources on request.
- High aspirations are promoted through the placement of first-year students in mixed-ability classes and through the encouragement of senior-cycle students to study English at the highest level.
• English-related co-curricular and extracurricular activities are commendably organised for students in support of their learning.
• A subject department co-ordinator is in place and a subject department plan, including programmes of work for all year groups, has been produced.
• There is good liaison between the subject department and teachers supporting students with additional educational needs.
• Evidence of planning and continuity with prior learning was noted during the evaluation.
• Evidence of a number of varied teaching strategies was noted during the evaluation.
• Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all classes.
• Most students were engaged in their learning in the classes observed.
• Evidence of good assessment practices being used by individual teachers was gathered during the evaluation.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• Timetable provision for English and Communications in LCA, where year one and two cohorts are combined, needs to be reviewed.
• Subject department planning should be further developed in line with the advice in this report.
• Over the coming years, the English department should formally pool its teaching strategies and resources. Topics to be discussed should include the incremental development of students’ language and literacy skills from first to sixth year in a consistent manner.
• The English department should further develop its common approach to assessment, as advised in this report.

Post-evaluation meetings were 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 May 2011