Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Listowel Community College
County Kerry
Roll number: 70500P

Date of inspection: 13 April 2010
SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Listowel Community College. 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 examined students’ work. 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 school management. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Listowel Community College is a co-educational school and is part of the DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) programme. Overall, there is good provision on the school timetable for English lessons. There is a particular emphasis on providing very good class contact time for English in first year, and this is appropriate. Classes are of mixed ability. All students in junior cycle participate in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP).

Students are assigned to levels for the certificate examinations on the basis of teacher observation and performance in class and school examinations. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified through an assessment test administered in first year. English class groups are assigned to teachers on the basis of achieving continuity of student experience from year to year within cycles. This is good practice.

A library has been established in one English teacher’s room. This is worthwhile. Funding for the library has been accessed through the JCSP. A number of reading initiatives have been organised including Readalong, Wordmillionaire, Make-a-Book and Reading Challenge. Students’ literacy achievement is retested following these initiatives and this is then linked to the school’s DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools) baseline data on literacy. This is positive. Additional ideas for the development of the library may be accessed at www.jcspliteracy.ie which includes an evaluation report on the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project. Some ideas which may prove useful in encouraging student reading include the appropriation of furniture to create a ‘different space’ in the library, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time for first-year students and the purchase of journals and graphic novels which appeal to students’ interests.

Access to audio-visual equipment is adequate and is provided through the use of a trolley system which transports the equipment to particular classrooms. Access to information and communication technology (ICT) is good. A mobile projector and laptop have been used to support students’ learning in English. There are also two ICT rooms and a laptop computer...
trolley. The English department is encouraged to remain cognizant of the impact the use of ICT can have on students’ literacy development. With this in mind, the laptop trolley may be particularly useful in providing ICT access for junior cycle classes. The use of word-processing packages can heighten students’ awareness of the structures of written language, along with the importance of the drafting and redrafting process. Presently, one of the English teachers is involved in cross-curricular work with the ICT department, supported through the school’s involvement in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Flexible Learning Profiles in senior cycle. This work is laudable.

Kerry Education Service (KES) provides a formal induction process for new teachers each year. Some informal induction processes are also undertaken in the school. This is positive. It is suggested that a brief, formal subject induction process could usefully be set out in the English subject plan. This induction should include an introduction to the subject plan as a key document for English teachers once the plan has been more fully developed, as is outlined later in this report.

The English department has engaged in continuing professional development (CPD) and the school is supportive of teachers’ professional development. Whole-staff in-service education has been provided in the areas of whole-school literacy, assessment for learning and the JCSP. In addition, the English department is involved in a community of practice for English teachers, organised around the theme of ‘Developing Schools, Enriching learning’, which has been coordinated by KES. In some instances, teachers have fed back their CPD experiences to staff and this is a very positive development. In addition, some classroom observation of colleagues has been undertaken and this is very worthwhile. Opportunities for teachers to share professional experiences and CPD with colleagues are strongly encouraged.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Co-ordination of the English department is undertaken by both members of the English team, an arrangement which is sensible in the context of the department’s size. Meetings of members of the subject department are generally on an informal basis. Some formalisation through the maintenance of brief minutes of meetings would be worthwhile in the future. Planning in the areas of assessment for learning and whole-school literacy has been a recent focus and this emphasis on teaching-and-learning is appropriate.

The subject-planning process is in the early stages of development. Both members of the English department are new to the school and commendable work has been done to date in commencing the plan. It is suggested that, in the future, ICT should be adopted in developing the plan for ease of storage and adaptability. Baseline data regarding the school’s involvement in DEIS and relevant literacy targets is maintained in the English plan. This is positive. The development of the plan should continue to be advanced. It is recommended that an initial focus should be on the creation of time-linked, skills-based, common plans for each year group, with clear learning goals. Such an approach will aid new teachers in appreciating the work students should already have encountered, as well as the transfer of students from one teacher to another where this occurs. It will also support English teachers in their assessment of students’ learning while allowing teachers to retain flexibility when choosing texts to suit their own students’ interests and experiences. A useful model for the creation of such plans may be accessed on the website of the NCCA at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), which contains the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle. The opportunity such plans will offer for English teachers to discuss, share and, consequently, develop their work should not be discounted. It is suggested that the whole-school literacy
element of the subject plan should include reference to the use of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) and, in particular, writing frames, as a key resource to support students in completing extended writing activities.

Texts used in junior cycle and in senior cycle classes suggest an imaginative approach is adopted by members of the English department with regard to text choice. There is also a consciousness of matching text choice to students’ experiences, interests and abilities. This is good practice. However, care should be taken that students experience a full range of genres and literary experiences in all year groups, within syllabus guidelines. With this in mind, it is recommended that the study of a play and a novel in each junior cycle year group should be set down as policy and practice in the English subject plan.

Education plans have been developed for students with special educational needs and these are organised effectively. They are distributed to relevant teaching personnel. A member of staff is currently undertaking a postgraduate course in the area of special educational needs. This is positive and the sharing of this expertise with other teachers through staff meetings and other means will be an important element in the school’s support for students in the future. Other members of staff have also accessed in-service education in special educational needs. Currently support for students is organised through group and individual support. It is suggested that a move towards a fully flexible model of support could include the adoption of team teaching. However, this suggestion is made only with reference to points where such support would be practicable and appropriate.

There are a very small number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). A teacher with a TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) qualification provides language support lessons for these students. The school is encouraged to access the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) training in the area of EAL for this teacher, as well as adopting the English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit to assess EAL students’ English language competence and progress in the future.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, a very good standard of teaching and learning was observed. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the class roll and a recapitulation of material previously encountered. This latter element took the form of a question and answer session and a review of keywords connected to the text being studied. It was positive to note that the results of both of these exercises were consolidated through the effective use of the blackboard or the whiteboard. In another instance, the lesson began with a discussion of the possible meanings of the title of a particular poem. Best practice was observed in a number of lessons where the learning intention was clearly outlined for students at the start of the lesson. This good practice should be extended across the department as it will increase students’ focus on the work in hand and their understanding of the ultimate purpose towards which they are striving.

A range of resources was used in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, a photograph, a compact disk, the blackboard, photocopied sheets and a keyword poster. In one instance, contemporary photographs from the Great Depression were used to elicit responses from students regarding a novel they were studying. This was good practice and worked well. The English department is encouraged to maintain a cognizance of the usefulness of a dictionary and thesaurus when referenced appropriately during lessons. In particular, the latter text can serve to enhance
students’ vocabulary while also increasing their awareness of the importance of precision and imagination in their use of language.

The use of pair work, group work and other active methodologies was included in all lessons. In one instance, students were asked to identify the key sounds and colours in a poem. This work was effectively consolidated through the use of a graphic organiser. This approach was worthwhile, particularly for those students who may be less motivated by purely verbal presentations. In other lessons, students were set exercises which they were to complete in pairs or in small groups. In one instance students worked at linking a photograph to a character in a novel and then swapped written work with other students to compare their thoughts. In another lesson students were encouraged to co-operate in developing their thoughts around a particular character in a novel. To further build on the good work already being undertaken in the area of pair and group work, it is recommended that English teachers should ensure that groups are structured carefully, with specific roles being assigned to all students, in order to maximise the impact of these methodologies. In particular, the capacity for these methodologies to be used to enhance the skills of students in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing should not be neglected. Strategies such as *placemat, envoy* and *jigsaw*, among many others, are relevant in this area. Useful resources on this topic may be accessed at the website of the PDST at [www.pdst.ie](http://www.pdst.ie).

In a number of lessons there was an emphasis placed on the analysis of writers’ use of language. In one lesson students’ attention was drawn to the shape of a poem as well as the author’s use of alliteration. A move to higher-order questioning as the lesson progressed was particularly positive, suggesting high expectations on the part of the teacher with regard to students’ capacity to achieve. In another lesson the playing of a compact disk of ‘Woody’ Guthrie songs served to focus students on language relevant to the characters and the social setting of the text being studied. This was worthwhile.

There was a good relationship between teachers and students in lessons observed. Good classroom management was evident and teachers were affirming to students. Students responded well to questioning and displayed an awareness of key language terminology. Students engaged with the work being undertaken in the lessons observed.

There was some evidence of the development of a print-rich environment. This incorporated motivational posters and some media posters. The English department should consider the development of a print-rich environment as a key element to be included in departmental policy and practice. This is an important consideration, not least because such an approach will support students’ literacy development, particularly those students who are in most need of such support. Strategies which may be useful in this regard include the display of graphic organisers, students’ genre writing, character diagrams and keyword displays.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is a school homework policy. Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in those classes which were observed during the evaluation. In one lesson, the assigning of two diary entries based around a grid that students had been working on was very worthwhile. With very little adaptation, this approach could have encompassed the development of a writing frame to further support students’ engagement with the text. It is suggested that English teachers should explore the use of writing frames and other DARTS, as an aid to students with difficulties in
literacy development. In particular, writing frames will serve well as a scaffold around which students can build extended writing activities.

There was some evidence of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the assigning of students’ homework. Occasionally, the assigning of staged questions predominated in students’ homework. While recognising the legitimacy of this latter approach, it is suggested that there should be a greater focus in teachers’ planning on opportunities for texts to be used as ‘springboards’ to the exploration of language and different genres. This should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students’ macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the NCCA Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus. Where an integrated approach was used, the expansion of the range of genres being explored using this strategy should be considered.

Formal house examinations are held at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Mock examinations are also organised for students participating in the certificate examinations. Some revision of these arrangements is currently being considered. Formal in-class examinations are organised at the October and February midterm breaks. The results of these examinations are included when calculating students’ overall results in the Christmas and summer examinations. A very good initiative has been undertaken in first-year class groups this year. Students are given regular in-class assessments in order to accustom them to the experience of formal examinations. The length of these assessments is gradually increased over the year so that by the time they are participating in the summer examinations students are well-prepared for the demands of more lengthy assessments. This is worthwhile, as it ensures students begin their post-primary education with positive experiences of the assessment process which increases their sense of self-esteem in this context. Moves have begun towards the analysis of students’ performance and uptake levels in the certificate examinations. This is worthwhile, particularly where such analysis is linked to the DEIS achievement targets for the subject. However, given the small number of students in each year group, some care should be taken and the analysis of achievement over a number of years may be the most useful approach to adopt in this area.

A commendable emphasis is placed on increasing home-school links. Reports regarding student achievement are sent to parents at Christmas, following their mock examinations and at the end of the academic year. It is very positive to note that the reports include information regarding students’ academic, personal and social development. One parent-teacher meeting is held per year group each year. Teachers seek to highlight aspects of students’ performance which are positive wherever possible. There is an open policy with regard to parents visiting the school. Courses for parents have been organised and the home-school-community-liaison co-ordinator and the guidance counsellor also undertake work to enhance home-school links.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed overall.
- Access to ICT equipment is good.
- There is an English library and reading initiatives have been undertaken, followed by retesting.
- The involvement of the English department in a community of practice organised by KES is very worthwhile.
• KES has a formal induction process in which new teachers participate. Some informal induction processes have also been undertaken in the school.
• Moves have begun towards the analysis of students’ performance and uptake of levels in the certificate examinations. This is worthwhile, particularly in the context of DEIS achievement targets for the subject.
• There was good classroom management and a good relationship was evident between teachers and students.
• A range of resources was used to support student learning.
• Reports regarding student progress include references to their personal and social development as well as their academic achievement.

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

• Work on the subject plan should be further advanced to include a focus on the creation of time-linked, skills-based, common plans for each year group, with clear learning goals.
• Specific roles should be assigned to students during group work with a view to enhancing the skills of students in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing.
• The study of a play and a novel in each junior cycle year group should be set down as policy and practice in the English subject plan.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with school management at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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