Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Christian Brothers College
Monkstown, County Dublin
Roll number: 60180R

Date of inspection: 7 October 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT
This report has been written following a subject inspection in Christian Brothers College, Monkstown. 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 the English teaching team. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT
Christian Brothers College, Monkstown, is a fee-charging school for boys with an enrolment of 511 students, and is under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust. It was established on its present site in 1950. A building programme to provide additional accommodation is in progress.

English is a core subject in the three programmes offered in the school: the Junior Certificate, the Transition Year (TY) programme, and the established Leaving Certificate. The school’s English department has seven teachers in the current year. Most teach English to at least two class groups, but only two of the seven teachers teach English in all three programmes. It is good practice in deploying teachers of English to view the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth, and to develop the pool of expertise and experience available within the teaching team. All teachers of English should therefore be deployed in both the junior and senior cycle wherever possible. Only two teachers are taking English in the TY programme this year, each taking two of the four class groups. Opportunities for a range of different approaches and areas of interest can be built into the TY English programme, so it is good practice to involve a number of teachers in its delivery. These recommendations should inform decisions on deployment for the next academic year.

It was noted that the timetables of some permanent wholetime teachers of English were below the minimum eighteen hours of teaching time in the present year. Senior management reported that additional resource-teaching hours had been added to these timetables. These hours should be shown on the teachers’ timetables so that the total class contact time recorded meets teachers’ contractual obligations. Similarly, the timetables of job-sharing teachers should record no fewer than eleven hours per week (see the Department’s circular letter 18/98, *Job-sharing scheme for second level teachers*). School management should ensure that the school’s teaching resource is used optimally.
English has a very generous allocation of time in fifth and sixth year, with four single periods and a double period provided in each year. Lessons are well distributed throughout the week. Four lessons per week in TY is also a generous allocation, although the distribution of lessons is not satisfactory in one case. The timetabling of film studies in TY supports the development of students’ visual and critical literacy, and this provision is also commended. Provision for English in the junior cycle is adequate though not generous, with four lessons per week in all years. One class group has English on only three days, an instance of poor distribution. As discussed during the evaluation, provision of a fifth lesson in first year should be explored, since this is the year when a firm grounding in key skills can be established. The provision of a fifth English lesson in first year would be of particular benefit to students requiring literacy support.

Class formation arrangements for English in the junior cycle are satisfactory. First-year students are placed in mixed-ability base class groups, and English is taught in this class setting throughout the junior cycle. All class groups follow the higher-level syllabus and almost all students sit higher-level English in the Junior Certificate. Students taking the ordinary level remain in the base class group and are given additional support where appropriate. The mixed-ability setting is retained for English in TY, an optional programme in the school taken by almost all students. Consideration could be given to changing the base class groups in TY as a means of varying the group dynamic and signalling a new stage in students’ school experience.

In fifth and sixth year, students are set for English into graded ability groups, with those who have performed very well in the Junior Certificate and in TY being placed in a top set. As well as this top set, two other higher-level class groups, a middle and lower, are formed. A smaller class group accommodates students who are taking English at ordinary level, or are likely to. Teachers advise students and their parents with regard to the most appropriate level, and a degree of flexibility in relation to initial placement was reported. Most students take English at higher level, and levels of attainment are high. The present arrangements for class formation in senior cycle appear to work well, but it is prudent to review them from time to time to ensure that the underlying rationale remains sound, and that they are encouraging appropriately high expectations across the whole student cohort. Assignment of teachers to higher-level and ordinary-level groups in fifth and sixth year is generally done by rotation and is agreed with senior management, although some departure from the pattern of rotation occurred this year. Given the present arrangements for class formation, the rotation system is appropriate and should be carefully maintained to avoid narrowing the range of teachers’ experience.

English is timetabled concurrently in fifth and sixth year. This allows students to change level, and clear procedures are in place for managing such changes. 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, and to support the possibility of modular delivery of the TY programme in English. Teachers said that they would value concurrent timetabling in TY.

English is generally well resourced in the school. Most teachers of English have their own base classrooms and, while these vary in size, they are well equipped with audiovisual resources, and many are visually stimulating, with displays of posters, charts and up-to-date work by students. This last is particularly commendable, and teachers and students should regard such displays as a form of publication, and a means of affirming students’ efforts. The school’s information and communications technology (ICT) systems and equipment are undergoing expansion in tandem with the building project, and should provide a rich resource for the English classroom. The
school library is an attractive room, and the school employs a librarian who liaises with teachers of English with regard to book purchases and library-based activities.

Teachers of English are members of the national subject association and school management pays the membership charge. Teachers regularly attend courses in the local education centre, and are increasingly using ICT for professional development. School management also supports initial teacher education and experienced teachers on the staff work with student teachers.

**Planning and Preparation**

The English teaching team holds three formal meetings in the year, and also meets informally. The team is commended for agreeing a voluntary and rotating co-ordinator role with a two-year term. From references in the subject plan, it is evident that the role of co-ordinator is moving beyond chairing and communication functions, to a developmental role in promoting the subject and increasing students’ opportunities to engage with it. Initiatives encouraging creative writing, public speaking and performance have been embarked on and students’ participation is actively promoted. The inclusion of these initiatives as work in progress in the subject plan is commended. It would be timely for the teaching team to discuss the co-ordinator role and to agree a job description to be included in the subject plan.

A folder for English containing a subject plan for the current year, minutes of English department meetings, and relevant circulars and other official documents was made available to the inspector. The subject plan, described as an outline plan, gives an overview of aims, targets, resources, methods and modes of assessment. Plans for each year follow. Junior cycle plans are arranged under separate headings for language, literature, reading and writing. It is recommended that the plans more clearly reflect the integration of these domains that was observed in teaching and learning practices. Senior cycle plans essentially contain course content and an indicative timeframe, and would benefit from a clearer expression of the skills that students should master.

It is recommended that the teaching team approach subject planning as an activity that assists reflective and collaborative practice, so that the emphasis falls on the process of planning as a team, rather than on the production of the plan itself. For example, a record of the rationale for the text choices made in both junior and senior cycle would be useful. Planning should clearly reflect and assist the emphasis on skills development that was noted in classroom practice, and the teaching team should bear this in mind in further developing planning practice.

The planned programmes and the texts chosen take advantage of the range of choice offered within the syllabuses, and are commended as substantial and appropriate. The inclusion of a Shakespearean drama in the planned junior cycle programme is admirable. In planning for resources to support this aspect of the course, it is suggested that good recently-recorded audio productions of the plays be sourced, and that a range of plays appropriate to the student cohort be considered for study.

**Teaching and Learning**

Nine lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes, and involving six of the seven teachers in the English department. Lesson topics included writing skills in a variety of genres, text comprehension and response, poetry, and drama. The teaching observed was of a good quality overall and a number of the approaches taken were highly effective in engaging students and eliciting thoughtful responses from them. In most of the
lessons observed students were engaged and responsive, and a good level of learning was evident, with a very impressive level of knowledge and perception noted in a number of instances. As a general recommendation, the English department should investigate and implement co-operative learning strategies as a means of developing the good practices observed and of improving the learning dynamic in the small number of class groups where students tended to be less engaged.

Most lessons observed were well planned and structured, and a substantial amount of work was covered in all cases. In one instance, the task planned for the lesson was not well chosen, and this points up the importance of lesson planning when a task-based approach is taken. Teachers suited lesson pacing to the group, creating a brisk and challenging tempo for example in a senior cycle top set, and a more relaxed yet still purposeful pace where students required more time to interact and respond. However, it is recommended that teachers allow sufficient time for students to form developed and extended responses, even in the case of very able students. Good time management was noted. Very effective practice was observed in some junior cycle lessons, where five-minute writing tasks were given as part of a creative modelling exercise and the short timeframe meant that students could experiment and redraft a number of times in the course of one lesson. Very good links were made between prior learning and the work in hand.

The teaching and learning methods observed reflected the range of styles and approaches within the English teaching team. Individual teachers also varied their approach to suit the needs of the class group, thus showing a good knowledge of their students. Teacher exposition and whole class teaching were observed, but the balance between teacher and student talk was generally good. Teachers used questioning effectively to ensure participation, to check understanding and recall, and to reinforce key points. It was encouraging to note that a range of responses from students was accepted and affirmed. While teachers reminded students of the importance of careful reading and attention to the words or images on the page, the issue of interpretation was emphasised and was well understood by students, as exemplified in a junior cycle lesson dealing with subjective and objective description, and a senior cycle lesson on the poetry of Frost.

In many lessons specific tasks were set, to be done individually or in pairs or groups. This approach underpinned the focus on the development of students’ skills, and this aspect is discussed further below. When it involved pairs or groups, it also provided students with an opportunity to learn co-operatively. An excellent example of this was observed in a senior cycle lesson, where each group of students prepared a presentation on a poem by Walcott. A member of each group shared its work with the class in the form of mini-lectures, which were very well delivered and listened to attentively. This approach provided the whole class with a rich resource for the ensuing extended writing task, and demonstrated the benefits of co-operative learning.

The active development of reading and writing skills observed in many lessons is highly commended. Resources prepared for lessons included photocopies of poems and extracts from longer texts, some downloaded from web sites. The texts were well chosen for a variety of purposes: to assist students in developing reading skills; to engage their interest and stimulate a thoughtful response; and to serve as models for students’ own writing. A junior cycle group engaged productively in creative modelling, following a close reading of a suspenseful extract from Tolkien in which a number of effective techniques were identified. TY students were reading a range of poems with a unifying theme over a number of lessons, a beneficial approach whereby each lesson was self-contained yet linked meaningfully with other lessons. Students were often able to engage directly with the text with minimal mediation by the teacher. However, some students misinterpreted the poem because they did not note lineation and punctuation. It is very helpful in poetry lessons to draw attention to aspects of layout, syntax and punctuation that affect meaning and assist understanding.
Levels of student participation and engagement were generally high. Where tasks were set, most students got down to work readily and ensured that they understood what was required. In many instances, students were observed to listen and respond to each other. Teachers commended this and emphasised listening and speaking as key skills to be developed. Opportunities to extend student interactions should be identified, and these are especially important where students lack confidence or are inclined to disengage. Most class groups interacted readily with the inspector, and their responses were varied and interesting, reflecting a good level of learning and an ability to express their views articulately.

Classroom management was very good in all instances, and teachers were firm yet friendly in their interactions with students. A positive classroom atmosphere prevailed and most students appeared to enjoy their work in English. Teachers also demonstrated their enthusiasm for the subject and their sense of its significance. While teachers affirmed students’ responses and efforts, an appropriate level of challenge was evident, particularly in the senior cycle. Motivated students are well served, and their efforts and the work of their teachers deserve praise.

**ASSESSMENT**

Monitoring of students’ work and participation in class activities was effective. Teachers circulated to oversee individual and group tasks, and gave assistance and direction where required. In a number of lessons, students volunteered or were requested to read out what they had written, and teachers were affirming in their comments. Students also commented on each other’s work in positive terms, and this led to a sharing of ideas about what was good or worked well. This workshop approach was well handled so that informal assessment contributed to the learning process.

The linking of assessment to learning was also evident in the homework practice observed. Homework assignments were set in each lesson observed, usually in good time to allow for discussion and clarification. This is good practice. Work set related closely to classwork, sometimes involving a redrafting or continuation of work begun. Very good preparation for extended written work was observed in both junior and senior cycle lessons, and this is highly commended. For example, a sophisticated writing frame for an essay on poetry was prepared and discussed with a senior cycle group. This ensured that students had a clear sense of what was entailed in successfully completing the task. The stated policy is to assign homework every day. Teachers should remind junior cycle students that a substantial writing assignment may well require work over a number of days, especially if drafting and proofing are to be done thoroughly.

An extensive range of student work was reviewed during the evaluation. It revealed that students had completed a substantial amount of work, which was regularly monitored. The practice of commenting on students’ work both to affirm effort and to suggest areas to be further developed was noted in most instances, and much of the written comment was very detailed and helpful. The criteria of assessment applied to Leaving Certificate papers were used when grading the work of Leaving Certificate students, and this is a beneficial practice. Teachers should, however, be vigilant with regard to accuracy and clarity in their own writing, whether on the blackboard or in commenting on students’ work.

The school does not hold ‘mock’ examinations, although teachers of third-year and sixth-year classes may set similar examinations if they wish. Formal examinations are set at Christmas and at the end of the year. Some degree of common assessment is in place, although the general
practice is that teachers set their own examinations. Preparation of common papers and agreed marking schemes is recommended to support collaborative planning and a more standardised system of assessment.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for English in the senior cycle is very generous.
- Most students take English at higher level, and levels of attainment are high.
- The planned programmes and the texts chosen take advantage of the range of choice offered within the syllabuses, and are commended as substantial and appropriate.
- The teaching observed was of a good quality overall and a number of the approaches taken were highly effective in engaging students and eliciting thoughtful responses from them.
- The active development of reading and writing skills observed in many lessons is highly commended.
- Very good preparation for extended written work was observed in both junior and senior cycle lessons, and this is highly commended.

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

- Full-time teachers must be timetabled for no fewer than eighteen hours per week and job-sharers for no fewer than eleven hours per week.
- All teachers of English should be deployed in both the junior and senior cycle wherever possible.
- It is recommended that the teaching team approach subject planning as an activity that assists reflective and collaborative practice.
- The English department should investigate and implement co-operative learning strategies as a means of developing the good practices observed.
- Preparation of common papers and agreed marking schemes is recommended to support collaborative planning and a more standardised system of assessment.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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.

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Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1: Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management and Principal of the school would like to commend the inspector on the professional appraisal that was carried out while in the school. The report reflects fairly and appropriately on the teaching and learning of English in the school.

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

Many of the recommendations have been implemented following the report.