An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Dominican College
Griffith Avenue, Dublin 9
Roll number: 60690R

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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 Dominican 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 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 a discussion with the subject co-ordinator. 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 deputy principal. 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

Dominican College is a voluntary secondary school for girls. Currently, its enrolment is 705 students. The school offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate and the established Leaving Certificate. An optional Transition Year (TY) programme is also available and the majority of students choose to take this course.

Whilst the timetable allocation of four periods a week for English to classes in junior cycle is adequate, some issues are noted. Two first-year groups and two third-year groups encounter the subject on only three days in the week. This should be addressed, as absence on a particular day may mean that a student can miss fifty percent of the English lessons taught that week. Good practice is that students should have contact with the language on at least four of the five days available.

Students in TY are timetabled for English three times a week. However, the lessons in English for two of the TY classes take place on two days only. Students in fifth year are timetabled for English five times per week while their counterparts in sixth year have English six times. In reviewing the timetabling of English lessons, it is suggested that consideration should be given to the benefits for students that could accrue from less generous timetabling in sixth year and the allocation of an additional lesson to one of the junior-cycle year groups.

Students are assigned to mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle and are encouraged to attempt the higher-level course. In order to allow students time to develop their skills and knowledge in the subject, decisions in relation to the level at which a student may take the certificate examinations in English are delayed as long as possible. This is very good practice and, as a result, uptake of the subject at higher level in junior cycle is particularly good. In senior cycle, students are taught in mixed-ability class groups until late in fifth year, when separate class groups for higher-level and ordinary-level English are formed. This works to build students’
confident in the subject so that they have realistic expectations regarding their potential certificate examination results. The very good uptake of higher-level English for the Leaving Certificate and the achievements of students at this level suggest that this arrangement is working well.

Resource provision to support the teaching and learning of English is very good. Deployment of teachers for English is very good. Teachers are assigned to class groups on a rotating basis and generally remain with the same group throughout each programme. This allows teachers to develop very good knowledge about the learners in their class groups and facilitates effective planning for their needs. Teachers are generally assigned their own classrooms and this facilitates the storage of resource materials and other learning materials. There is scope to use the space available to better effect, through the display of students’ work, posters, wall charts and other learning aids. Audio-visual and information and communications technology (ICT) is available to support teaching. Teachers of English use these resources well in delivering the programme for English and they make good use of the flexibility which ICT provides to stimulate the interest of students in their courses.

There are excellent library facilities in the school, managed by a full-time librarian. The library, which is open daily, is very well resourced and students are shown how to obtain all relevant information. Access for whole-class groups is available and teachers regularly bring classes to the library, both to read and to research project work. Students may also use the library independently during morning and lunch breaks and during study periods. Students’ work is also ‘published’ in the library as are anthologies of their book reviews.

A very good variety of co-curricular activities in English is facilitated by the teachers. Students are encouraged to engage in creative writing, including an in-house poetry competition for first-year classes. The skills of debating and public speaking are taught in both junior cycle and senior cycle and the participation of TY students as coaches is noted as very good. Examination classes are brought to see professional productions of studied texts and the production of a musical or show is an annual feature of the TY programme. Through the provision of these activities, teachers extend learning beyond the work done in the classroom. This speaks well of the commitment of the English teachers to their subject and to their students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department structures are well established in the school. Formal meetings are facilitated at the beginning of each school year and on staff days. The teachers of English also meet each other regularly, though informally, to plan and evaluate their work. Minutes of these meetings were included in the planning documentation made available for inspection. These indicated that meetings address all aspects of the organisation, planning, delivery and assessment of English in the school. A subject department folder has been developed and the department plan is updated annually.

A structured and collegial approach to the teaching of English was evident in the planning documentation presented. This included a general section outlining the content to be covered with students in each year group. The identification of broad learning outcomes to be achieved by each year group in junior cycle is a strength of this section of the plan. For example, the development of students’ skills in reading and comprehending and in creative and functional writing is
identified as a focus for work with first years. In another section of the department plan, guidance is offered to teachers on planning their own schemes of work within each year group. This is general in tone, for example, it provides more specific advice about when particular aspects of the courses should be tackled. It is clear that this section is informed by teachers’ experiences in delivering the syllabuses in English. This is a very professional approach to planning, ensuring that the department’s ongoing self-evaluation processes inform future practice. As department planning progresses, it is suggested that the current focus on content and teacher contribution should be reviewed. Curriculum plans should be further developed to include a short list of specific learning outcomes for students following study of particular topics or aspects of their courses. These should be linked with planned assessment practices. The draft rebalanced syllabus for the Junior Certificate, available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie, and section four of the Leaving Certificate syllabus provide guidance on the appropriate learning outcomes for each course. It is also suggested that the teachers of English should review the texts chosen for use with junior-cycle class groups in order to expose students to a fuller range of literary genres.

There is a subject-specific plan for TY English and the programme is organised on a modular basis. On completion of each module, students produce a substantial piece of work. For example, following a creative writing module, TY students contributed to an anthology of short stories which was available in the school library. As has been suggested for the subject plan for other year groups, the TY plan could be developed so that it incorporates clear learning goals which students should achieve throughout the year.

Teachers’ individual planning and preparation for the lessons observed was in line with the schedules of work agreed at department level. It is recommended that a copy of their schemes of work should be included in the subject folder.

There are good links between the English department and the learning-support department. Department planning to support students with special educational needs in the English classroom was evident in the subject folder. A key word approach is advocated in the subject plan, as is differentiation of both content and methodology. The effective implementation of these strategies was observed in the classrooms visited.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good learning atmosphere was firmly established in the classrooms visited. Teachers’ expectations of students’ efforts and behaviour are high and the students responded well. In the majority of the lessons observed a very structured approach to teaching and learning was evident. There was clear progression from the introductory phases of the lessons, through logically organised stages to well-managed closing activities. This approach was a good support to students in the predominantly mixed-ability class groups as it ensured that students were aware of the focus for each lesson and were comfortable transitioning from one lesson activity to the next. In two lessons, intended learning outcomes were shared with students at the outset. In one lesson, these were written on the whiteboard; in the second, they were presented orally. It is recommended that all teachers should frame their lessons with a clear statement of purpose then, as the lesson progresses, reference should be made to each outcome in order to check students’ progress. It is also suggested that the learning outcomes should be revisited at the close of the lesson to facilitate recapitulation.
A range of teaching methodologies was observed in the classes visited. Opportunities for students to work independently of the teacher were provided through pair work or group work activities. These are useful strategies for engaging students in collaborative learning. In a senior-cycle lesson on a drama text, for example, students had been set a homework exercise which required them to re-write a scene, transposing it to a modern setting. They worked in pairs, swapping their scripts and preparing a presentation of their work to the rest of the class. During the presentations, the teacher drew attention to particular aspects of each interpretation. Students both entertained each other with their performances and demonstrated a very good understanding of the tension between the two characters portrayed. It is suggested that the learning potential of this exercise could have been further increased had the students been more involved in the critical discussion of the works presented. This can be achieved by discussing and agreeing criteria to be applied with the students prior to the evaluative exercise. Very good management of lesson time ensured that this lively lesson achieved all the learning outcomes intended by the teacher.

In all instances, teaching and learning resources were used very effectively to focus students’ attention and to support learning. In a junior-cycle lesson, a handout directed students’ consideration of how characters in their studied novel are developed. Students responded well to this resource and their contributions to the class discussion were particularly astute. In many of the lessons observed, the teacher recorded students’ contributions on the board. Good use was also made of this resource in lessons to model the organisation of information and ideas and to set homework assignments. It is important that students are always given the opportunity to take a copy of notes on the whiteboard in order to ensure that the learning achieved in class is recorded by them.

Students’ oral work and contributions in class were of a good standard. Teachers used questioning to check students’ understanding of the work being done and their responses were very positively affirmed and used to build the lesson. It is recommended that teachers direct questions to particular students in order to encourage greater student involvement. It is also recommended that when a question is asked, either by a student or the teacher, encouraging them to engage with one another in either finding the answer or discussing it is a better way to promote learning than having the teacher supply the answer. Students should be prompted to develop their answers, for example, by referring to a text in support where appropriate. This was done in some instances and enabled students to learn from one another.

An examination of students’ notebooks and copies indicated that students write across a range of genres and for different purposes. A range of ability was evident in the standards achieved in this work. Generally, students had a very good knowledge of their texts and were able to use that knowledge well to advance their opinions of characters and themes. Their personal and creative writing was well composed and, in the best examples, students demonstrated mastery of a number of complex narrative structures, including flash back and pre-figuring. In the majority of cases, students were supported by pre-writing activities which required them to carefully plan their work. The effectiveness of this was evident in their ability to write in the appropriate register and to hold strong narrative lines. In a minority of the copies examined, answers to questions set are too brief to be of real merit. Students’ work is also marred by poor sentence control and phrasal errors. Continued practise in composing well-developed, coherent work is needed. It is recommended that teachers should work with students to identify the success criteria for writing tasks in advance. This will provide them with guidance during the writing process.

In summary, the quality of teaching and learning in English was very good.
ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is used to assess students’ competence and progress in English. Teachers use questions, short tests on completion of a topic and written exercises to check achievement of understanding. Homework is regularly set to extend classroom learning. The tasks set provide opportunities for students to practice newly acquired skills and to work creatively with language to communicate their ideas. Teachers correct work promptly and very good use is made of comment marking to help students identify both the strengths and difficulties evident in their work. In some copies, there was evidence of the excellent practices of self-review and peer-review, so that students are engaged in monitoring their own progress. A similar benefit derives from portfolio preparation and diary writing in TY in this school. All the teachers of English should consider how more extensive use of such strategies would complement their current efforts to develop students’ learning skills. The recommendation made earlier to work with students to identify the success criteria could advance this good work and direct the reviewing process.

The department’s planning documentation indicated that teachers of English have agreed to keep careful records of student achievement on homework and class assignments. This good practice provides teachers with a clear and objective measure of students’ progress in English. Summative house examinations are held at Christmas and at the end of the last term for first-year, second-year and fifth-year class groups. TY students are required to develop a portfolio of their work and to maintain a diary of their learning experiences through the year. These, together with Christmas examinations, will inform reports sent home on their progress through the programme. Students in third year and in sixth year have summative examinations at Christmas and ‘mock’ certificate examinations in the spring term. School reports are issued to parents twice annually for all class groups. Parents are also informed of how their daughters are progressing through the students’ journal, which they sign on a weekly basis.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The formation of class groups in the school facilitates and encourages achievement in English.
- Resource provision to support the teaching and learning of English is very good. There are excellent library facilities in the school, managed by a full-time librarian.
- A wide variety of co-curricular activities in English provides invaluable learning opportunities for the students.
- Opportunities for students to work independently of the teacher were provided.
- Students had a very good knowledge of their texts and were able to use that knowledge well.
- The excellent practices of self-review and peer-review were evident.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• All teachers should frame their lessons with a clear statement of purpose and the learning outcomes should be revisited at the close of the lesson to facilitate recapitulation.
• Teachers should work with students to identify the success criteria for writing tasks in advance.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal and with the 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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