Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School
Clonakilty, County Cork
Roll number: 62170B

Date of inspection: 5 May 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Sacred Heart Secondary School, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. 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 school management.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Sacred Heart Secondary School is an all-girls school. Classes in first year are provided with four English lessons per week. This is adequate provision. The school is encouraged to investigate the possibility of increasing the number of English lessons in first year to ensure one contact point with the subject on each day of the week. The inevitable limitations of the timetabling process must, however, be acknowledged in making this suggestion. Classes in second year and classes in third year have five English lessons per week. This is good provision. There are four English lessons per week in Transition Year (TY). This is good provision. In the case of TY, these lessons have been divided between two teachers in a number of instances. School management acknowledges that this arrangement is not ideal and has plans to adjust it next year, when a modular approach will be adopted around the study of film, public speaking and debating. This re-evaluation of the manner in which the subject is provided in TY is endorsed. Classes in fifth year and in sixth year have six English lessons per week. This is very good provision. Overall there is good provision for English on the school timetable.

Classes in first year are of mixed ability. In second year students are divided into higher and ordinary level class groups. Since the uptake levels of higher level English in the school are very good, the number of students in the ordinary level class is lower than in other class groups. In essence, the ordinary level class group operates as a literacy support group. This is positive. The English department has developed a reflective approach to organising class groups in junior cycle in order to remain sensitive towards the needs of different year groups. Consequently, the manner in which higher level classes are organised varies from year to year. This includes an arrangement in the current third-year group where higher-level classes are of mixed ability. This is positive and it is suggested that the English department consider adopting this approach in second year as well. It is positive to note that the English department has developed a policy detailing the manner in which students are to be assigned to class groups in junior cycle. Students are assigned to levels in fifth year on the basis of their performance in the Junior Certificate examination and their performance in TY. English lessons are timetabled concurrently in second year, third year,
fifth year and sixth year. This is worthwhile as it facilitates student movement between levels and classes where this proves to be necessary.

There is an impressive school library. A librarian is employed on a part-time basis and a post-holder also has responsibility for the library. There is a large selection of books, including numerous titles aimed at young adult readers. Students have access to the library during lunchtime and morning breaks. First-year and second-year class groups are timetabled for visits to the library and students also use the facility for study and research. All of this is positive. It is suggested that the English department further develop the current section in the subject plan which deals with the library to include a reading policy for the department. A useful initiative to consider in this context is wordmillionaire. Details of this and other strategies to engage young adult readers can be found in an evaluation report on the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project at www.jespliteracy.ie.

There is adequate availability of audio-visual equipment for English teachers. Temporary accommodation constraints have made this situation more difficult to address. It is expected that a room which had been assigned to act as an audio-visual theatre will be reassigned for this purpose once current building work is completed. Access to audio-visual resources is an important element in English teachers’ practice both in junior cycle and in senior cycle. School management is aware of this need and anticipates being able to address it through the increased provision of audio-visual equipment in classrooms in the near future. This is very positive. There is an English resources press. School management also indicated a willingness to consider the provision of base rooms for English teachers, if resources allow. Again, this is worthwhile. Should base rooms be provided, it is of vital importance that English teachers view them as a key resource in promoting literacy and enthusiasm for the subject among their students. This would necessitate the creation of stimulating, print-rich environments in English base rooms.

Currently the number of teachers assigned to the English teaching team is very large. Such an arrangement can make communication and cohesion within the department difficult to achieve. A smaller English teaching team would aid communication and concentrate expertise in the subject among a core group of teachers.

The school has begun to increase the provision of information and communication technology (ICT) equipment throughout the building and in mainstream classrooms. This is very worthwhile. The English department should seek to harness ICT in support of teaching and learning in the subject. Such an adoption of ‘e-learning’ strategies would be most beneficial for teachers’ professional practice. It is recommended that the English department submit a plan to school management which outlines the manner in which ICT will be used to support teaching and learning in the subject. Potential areas for exploration include: the display of films and film excerpts; PowerPoint presentations developed by students or by teachers; PowerPoint presentations which operate as focus points for note-making by students; resources garnered from the worldwide web and YouTube; visual resources to support pre-reading and sequencing exercises as well as aural and musical resources. The department should seek to incorporate presentations by members of the English team regarding their use of ICT in English classrooms as an element in subject departmental meetings. School management should seek to further support such moves through the organisation of professional development exchanges between different subject departments in the modern languages faculty and, potentially, other faculties in the school. Ultimately, the English department should seek to collate its practice with regard to the use of ICT in the form of a subject-specific policy which could then be used in discussions with school management regarding the acquisition of further resources in this area to support teaching and learning in English.
An induction day is organised for new teachers and for student teachers who are participating in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE). Mentoring arrangements are in place to assist these teachers and subject department meetings are also used as a support for English teachers who are new to the school. These arrangements are positive and it is suggested that the formal noting of induction processes should also be included in the subject plan, a document which should itself form a key element in the induction process for English teachers.

The school is supportive of teachers’ professional development. English teachers have availed of opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD). This is positive. It is also of vital importance that members of the English department view each other and school management, along with support services available, as further sources for professional advice and support. In particular, consultation regarding the material which should be covered at each stage of the school year is of great import, in order to ensure that all necessary material is studied in each year group. Adherence to a comprehensive time-linked subject plan can be a key element in this regard.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject co-ordinator is appointed on a rotational basis. Regular meetings of members of the subject department are organised and minutes are taken of these meetings. The recent focus of departmental meetings has been on the attainment of an English base room, audio-visual facilities and the mock examinations. The department is provided with analysis of students’ performance in the certificate examinations in comparison with national norms each year. This is worthwhile. It is recommended that the English department adopt a teaching-and-learning focus in departmental meetings over the medium term. As outlined in the previous section, e-learning presents as one possible area which could suitably be adopted in this context.

A comprehensive subject plan has been developed. Included in the subject folder is a range of documents relevant to teaching and learning in English as well as comprehensive records of English departmental policies. These include the school’s homework policy, assessment practices in the department and a list of departmental resources. This is worthwhile. Beyond this, common plans have been developed for each year group. A number of these plans are time-linked and some incorporate a limited number of learning goals. This is positive and the further development of the department’s common plans is recommended. In particular, all plans should be time-linked and incorporate clear learning goals set within these specified timeframes. The recent Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus for junior cycle which is published on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website at www.ncca.ie could provide some useful insights for this work. It is further recommended that the use of an integrated strategy towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses be highlighted in the common plans. This should be reflected in individual teachers’ planning with a particular focus on the manner in which texts are to be used as ‘springboards’ to the language element of the syllabuses. Thus, particular language techniques or genres encountered in texts could form a basis for students’ own engagement with writing on a regular and planned basis. The development of students’ macro-language awareness and micro-language awareness (NCCA Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English, p.15) should be a key focus for this work. Finally, it is of particular import that the common plans for all year groups include clear requirements regarding the content to be covered, in order to ensure that all classes cover an adequate amount of material.
English teachers are involved in organising a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include theatre trips, creative writing, the appointment of school journalists and students’ participation in public speaking, debating, poetry and media studies competitions. Teachers’ efforts in these areas are applauded.

A particularly positive element of the English department’s current practice is the manner in which teachers seek to vary the texts studied in both junior cycle and in senior cycle. This suggests a clear enthusiasm for the subject as the department seeks to suit text choice to particular class groups’ interests and experiences. In the case of one class group, ‘An Tearmann Feasa’, significant work has been undertaken in writing to and meeting with the poet, Seamus Heaney. The success of this approach was evinced through the joy in poetry displayed by students in this class during the evaluation. The work of the class in this area has been captured through literary and photographic displays and projects which can be viewed in the hallway leading to their classroom and in the classroom itself.

There is a subject-specific TY English programme. This is positive. The English TY programme, as in the case of other common plans, should be revised. A proposed move to a modular element in the programme, as previously outlined in this report, is endorsed. Alongside this, there should be a focus on developing clear, skills-based, learning goals for the programme. As a focus for students’ written work in TY it is suggested that the creation of an English-specific portfolio could be advanced. This could comprise a set number of major genre exercises undertaken by students in English classes which would go through a drafting and re-drafting process prior to ‘publication’ in the portfolio. The portfolio could then be included as a key element in students’ overall assessment in English for TY.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. Information regarding students with special educational needs is provided for class teachers at the first staff meeting of the school year and updates are provided at other meetings during the year. Teachers can use a formal referral form which they communicate to the special educational needs department to help identify students in need of support. Support for students with difficulties in literacy development is provided through additional English lessons in first year and through one-to-one and group withdrawal. A further addition to these modes of support could be the use of team-teaching, where practicable and appropriate. To further facilitate the communication and planning process, education plans are currently in the process of being developed.

There are a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). Two teachers have participated in in-service education provided by the Second Level Support Service (SLSS). In this context, it is suggested that a number of important areas be addressed in a policy document regarding EAL students. These could include the important place of students’ home languages in supporting their learning of and through English as well as the usefulness of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) as a means of supporting EAL students accessing the curriculum in mainstream classes. The publication Learning in 2(+) Languages is a useful resource in the area of bilingual education and can be accessed at www.ltscotland.org.uk. A further resource is the website of the English Language Support Programme at www.elsp.ie.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, a good standard of teaching and learning was observed. Classes began, variously, with the taking of the roll and recapitulation of previous learning through question-and-answer sessions and, in one instance, a very effective student presentation. The use of recapitulation to provide a bridge to new learning was good practice. Overall, lessons were structured well. Objectives were clear in most cases and this was most effectively accomplished where the learning intention was explicitly outlined for students at the beginning of the lesson. Questioning was used frequently in lessons to evaluate and support learning. Particularly effective use of questioning was observed where higher-order questions were incorporated in teachers’ practice.

A range of resources was used during lessons. These included the whiteboard, textbooks, examination papers, newspapers, photocopied resources and the photograph of a character in a novel. This is positive. The wider adoption of visual resources is advocated for the future across the department.

There was regular use of group work and pair work in lessons. This was worthwhile. As a means of further increasing the impact of group work and pair work, a stronger focus should be maintained on the assigning of particular roles to students in each group. In particular, specific methodologies should be developed which will focus such work on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as placemat, envoy and jigsaw could be useful in this context. Further resources relevant to this area can be accessed through the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) at www.slss.ie or the website www.co-operation.org. In some cases, it was evident that there was scope for teachers to move towards a greater development of semi-independent and independent student work as part of their classroom practice.

Reading and writing activities were frequent elements of lessons. In one, senior cycle, class the different interpretations of the title of a poem were explored, prior to a wider discussion regarding the poem in question. In another lesson, students read excerpts from a play in character, thus emphasising the dramatic nature of the text. The use of a prediction exercise in one senior cycle lesson was worthwhile. The adoption of DARTS activities of this type in order to support students’ engagement with texts is to be strongly encouraged.

Overall, classroom management was good and there was a good relationship between teachers and students. Teacher expertise with regard to the subject was very frequently in evidence. There were numerous examples of teachers affirming their students. In almost all cases student learning was in evidence. Students variously displayed considerable engagement with texts being studied, offered opinions, answered questions and displayed ability in dealing with ideas and literary techniques where these were discussed.

In the context of one class group, concern was expressed with regard to the quality of teaching and learning. Coverage of the syllabus was inadequate. Homework was very limited. Students displayed a poor understanding of the very limited work which had been undertaken during the year. In this instance, very significant recommendations were proffered to the teacher in question. It is of vital importance that this advice be followed by the teacher concerned.

A print-rich environment was being developed in some classrooms. The creation of such an environment is somewhat hampered at present due to a lack of teacher base rooms, in the context
of the current refurbishment of the school building. As mentioned previously, school management is open to the provision of base rooms, or possibly an English room, where practicable. In this context the English department is urged to set out the creation of a print-rich environment in English rooms as policy and practice in the English subject plan. The display of keywords, graphic organisers and visual resources will aid students with special educational needs, EAL students and, indeed, all students, in accessing the curriculum. Beyond this, the display of students’ genre exercises will serve to increase their awareness of the drafting and re-drafting process and of the importance of audience. The school’s corridors encompass a print-rich environment, including an English notice board. These efforts are to be praised.

**ASSESSMENT**

In almost all cases there was evidence of homework being regularly assigned and this was regularly monitored. It is suggested that the dating of correction and monitoring of homework be incorporated into the policy and practice of the department. The use of comment-based, formative assessment was a very strong and positive feature of practice in the English department. The adoption of the rubrics utilised in the certificate examinations in the correction of one class group’s work was very beneficial. As a means of building on the good practice already present in the subject department it is suggested that the department could usefully develop its practice to incorporate different types of peer-assessment and self-assessment on the part of students.

There was some evidence of an integrated approach towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in students’ homework. Beyond this, homework frequently consisted of questions on the texts studied or summary exercises. While recognising the value of these strategies, the English department is advised to expand its use of integrated exercises when setting homework for students. This should be done through individual teachers’ planning which anticipates points in each text where opportunities for such an approach may arise, both through the modelling of specific genres through the text being studied, the possibility of genre transfer activities being applied to other parts of the text and the modelling of language techniques which students might then adopt in their own writing. The exploration of a wide range of genres is encouraged when considering this area.

Students in first year, second year and fifth year participate in house examinations at Christmas and summer. In each of these year groups common examinations are organised. This is good practice. Mock examinations are organised for students in third year and in sixth year in the spring. In the case of third-year and sixth-year students, in-class assessments and continuous assessment are used to monitor progress. Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE) are provided in house examinations where practicable. This is worthwhile.

There is a parent-teacher meeting once per year per year group. In addition, reports of students’ progress are sent home at regular intervals. There is an open-door policy for parents who wish to communicate with the school regarding students’ progress. The student journal and the school website are also used to facilitate clear communication between the school and students’ homes.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall, there is good provision for English on the school timetable.
- There is a large library with a large selection of texts.
- The school is supportive of teachers’ professional development. Teachers have availed of CPD opportunities.
- A particularly praiseworthy element of the English department’s approach is the variation of texts in both senior cycle and in junior cycle.
- A comprehensive subject plan has been created.
- There are good links between the English department and the SEN department.
- There was regular use of group work and pair work in lessons.
- In almost all cases, students were engaged by and enthusiastic about the texts they were studying.
- In almost all cases student learning was in evidence.
- A very positive feature of the English department’s practice is a strong focus on comment-based assessment.

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

- The English department should submit a plan to senior management which sets out the manner in which ICT will be used to support teaching and learning in the subject. The department should actively seek to adopt ICT as a key tool to support teaching and learning.
- The current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, syllabus-based and time-linked learning goals. Common plans should also clearly set out the minimum content to be covered in each year group.
- Planning should explicitly set out the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses as a key strategy in the English department.
- A specific teaching-and-learning focus should be developed as part of the departmental-planning process.

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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