Subject Inspection of English REPORT

St Michael’s Community College
Kilmihil, County Clare
Roll number: 70860W

Date of inspection: 10 December 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 Michael’s Community College, Kilmihil, Co. Clare. 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

St Michael’s Community College offers the Junior Certificate (JC), Transition Year (TY), Leaving Certificate (LC) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).

The timetabling of English is good at senior cycle. In first, second, and third year, students are allocated four classes of English per week. While this is adequate provision, it is less than is generally allocated to the subject in other schools.

Due to a number of factors, none of the school’s three teachers of English is permanent. To ensure continuity of subject planning and delivery, the employment of at least one permanent teacher of the subject should be prioritised by senior management.

At present, most higher-level classes of English are assigned to one teacher. As the core team of English teachers stabilises, it is advised that suitably qualified teachers be rotated across subject levels and programmes, where possible, to develop capacity within the department.

It is good practice that students are placed in mixed-ability classes in first year and TY and that students are encouraged to study English at the highest level at senior cycle. In second, third, fifth and sixth year, English is concurrently timetabled. This facility commendably provides students with the possibility of moving between classes as necessary and provides teachers with the facility to establish inter-class activities.

There is a good range of audio-visual (AV) and information and communication technology (ICT) resources available to support the teaching and learning of English. 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 recommended that an inventory of the teaching
resources available to support the subject, including those located in the resource room, be compiled and added to the subject department plan.

Students with learning support and resource support needs benefit from good liaison between their mainstream teachers of English and their support teachers. The learning-support co-ordinator models good practice in the development of students’ literacy skills and in the use of ICT to facilitate student-directed learning. In the past, team teaching was engaged in by two teachers of English. The pairing of the learning support co-ordinator and a mainstream teacher of English to teach certain class groups should also be considered. Senior management is encouraged to continue facilitating flexible team-teaching arrangements, in conjunction with the school’s established withdrawal model of support.

One class per week is assigned to personal reading in first and second year. It is appropriate that some planning for these classes is included in the subject department plan and that students are encouraged to engage in the M.S. Readathon to focus their personal reading. It is recommended that the English department agree how it will further motivate students’ personal reading in a collective manner. Starting points might include weaving the teaching of dictionary skills and skimming and scanning comprehension techniques into the first-year programme of work and developing students’ interests and skills in using the adjacent village library. The English department is also encouraged to trial other reading initiatives such as those described on the Junior Certificate School Programme (JSCP) website, and possibly establish a paired reading programme between TY students and local primary pupils.

English teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities. There is a wealth of individual expertise among a number of the teachers of English, including involvement with regional groups of teachers of English, service in other schools or in other jurisdictions, and expertise in modern language teaching. It is recommended that the department continue to develop its pedagogical base, by researching English-related resources and strategies promoted by the JCSP and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, and by reviewing materials available on http://www.literacytrust.org.uk and compiled in Resources for Developing a School-Wide Literacy Plan on the website www.jcspliteracy.ie. The department is also advised to deepen its understanding of the prior knowledge and skills students should have developed by the end of their primary schooling, to aid planning for first-year English.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities, such as trips to theatrical productions, debating activities, participation in public speaking and film-making competitions, and visits by guest authors and poets, support the teaching and learning of the subject. The commitment and enthusiasm of teachers of English, evident in these activities, is highly commended.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A supportive, collaborative culture was evident among the teachers of English and some good progress has been made in subject department planning. To date, teachers of English have met formally once per term and informally on numerous occasions. Due to a number of factors, the same teacher has co-ordinated the English department for four years. The rotation of the role of subject department co-ordinator is advised to help develop leadership across the department.
At the beginning of each subject department meeting, time should be specifically allocated for a “show and tell” input, where individuals would be asked to present an effective resource or strategy they use in their practice or to share insights they have gained from a professional development course or from further study. To help strengthen the department’s skills-focused resources and strategies and to support differentiation within mainstream classes of English, it is recommended that the learning-support co-ordinator be invited to attend English department meetings on a regular basis.

Strengths of the subject department plan include evidence of productive action planning, of cross-curricular planning, and of assessment for learning agreements in relation to the provision of rubrics and to the use of Leaving Certificate criteria for assessment to promote greater student self-evaluation and improvement. To help develop the English department’s planning even further, three recommendations are outlined below.

First, the department should develop learning-outcomes focused termly programmes of work for all year groups. Those programmes should incrementally develop students’ language skills from first to sixth year, engaging in thematic planning where possible. See the draft rebalanced Junior Certificate English syllabus in developing that programme, available at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/English/English.html. As part of that work, the department is encouraged to renew its text choices, by taking students’ interests and experiences into account when selecting its three comparative texts for senior cycle study and by teaching some texts at junior cycle that deepen students’ appreciation of, and capacity to write about, contemporary events and their locality.

Second, separate schemes of work for higher and ordinary-level cohorts should be prepared. Third, the layout and contents of the existing subject department plan should be reshaped. A contents page with chapter headings should be prepared. An archive chapter should be created to record matters such as past action-planning initiatives, co-curricular activities, and professional development courses attended. A separate chapter to highlight targets for the current academic year should be created. In addition, supplementary draft handbooks and documents should be integrated into the body of the subject department plan or attached as appendices. The entire document should then be saved electronically, issued to all members, and saved on a shared drive of the school’s intranet to aid updating.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was evidence of planning and continuity with prior learning in all lessons observed. Learning outcomes were communicated to students at the outset of almost all lessons.

Whiteboards, screened clips from films, writing frames, and downloaded reviews were used to enhance learning in classes visited. Vibrant subject-specific learning environments had also been created by most teachers. It is recommended that more audio recordings and more mindmap and storyboard graphic organisers be incorporated into the teaching of English. Learning aids customised to the texts and skills being taught should also feature more prominently on walls, including timelines, relationship trees, spider diagrams of character traits, and maps of key locations. Moreover, the compilation of booklets to support students’ study of lengthy texts is also encouraged, to provide unitary revision aids and to help students who may have been absent
catch up with work. Sourcing Readalong CDs or graphic novels to complement these study booklets would also support students needing multi-sensory approaches to learning.

Generally, the quality of teaching and learning observed was very good. Among the teaching strategies observed were question and answer, the activation of students’ relevant prior knowledge and experience before teaching new material, prediction, setting tasks to guide listening and viewing, pair and group work, the use of ICT to provide relevant cultural context and to teach factual information, and the use of some assessment for learning strategies. Evidence was also gathered that one teacher explicitly develops students’ skills in crafting and performing speeches before linking those skills to specific writing tasks. This integrated skills approach is highly commended. The teachers of English should now formally share these methodologies to ensure that all students benefit from them.

One recommendation for pedagogical development is offered: teachers should focus on incrementally developing students’ writing skills from first to sixth year. A consistent departmental approach should be taken to the teaching of spelling strategies, to equipping students with banks of keywords to draw on for specific writing purposes, to the recording of keywords in specific notebooks, and to the use of spelling challenges based on those keywords. The department should agree a minimum number of substantial writing tasks to be set for each year group and should consider introducing substantial writing challenges for junior year groups such as a Make-A-Book project. Also, there should be greater use of ICT to support the process approach to writing. Given that a number of these suggestions were also made in a document previously supplied to the department by the learning-support co-ordinator, her assistance should be sought in implementing these strategies.

Very good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all lessons. Most students were engaged in their learning in the lessons observed. In one lesson, a greater balance between student activity and teacher talk would have achieved better learning outcomes. Some very good quality responses from students indicated that higher-order thinking and personal response was being fostered in a number of classes. Students’ capacities to use persuasive techniques to craft speeches and to use textual evidence to support arguments in a class debate were particularly impressive.

An examination of a sample of students’ copies revealed that the homework tasks were generally limited to comprehension questions and a limited number of creative interventions. Tasks requiring students to write for different audiences, purposes and in different genres should also be assigned. In some class groups, it was evident that students were frequently asked to transcribe substantial sample answers and paraphrase notes on texts. It is recommended that the purpose of these activities and the amount of teaching time being lost to facilitate such transcription be reviewed. Also, 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 in relation to how students should present and store their written work, and consistently expect and communicate such routines to students.
ASSESSMENT

Improving teacher feedback on student work has been a focus of English department planning since 2009 and evidence of its impact was found during the evaluation. Very good practice observed in copies included the provision of specific formative feedback on student work, including references to targets for future writing. The sharing of criteria for assessment to support student self-evaluation and teacher marking was also commendable. So too was one teacher’s practice of using written student evaluation feedback to guide certain teaching decisions.

The English department is commended for its work in preparing and administering common end-of-year examinations to first years and for moderating the marking of those scripts across the department. Also, it is good practice that individual teachers of English analyse achievement in certificate examinations for the subject. Looking towards the future, it is advised that the school analyse certificate examination results in English in the context of national norms for the uptake of levels and for the spread of grades and that this analysis be formally discussed at subject department meetings, as an aid to collective self-evaluation and planning.

Two 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. Tasks could include 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 would give teachers a good benchmark for planning for the development of the various skills.

Students in first, second, and fifth year sit house examinations at Christmas and summer. Students in third and sixth year sit mini-mock house examinations in November and mock examinations in the early spring.

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 facilitating flexible support of students with additional educational needs, and for providing resources on request.
- High aspirations are promoted by placing first and TY students in mixed-ability classes and by encouraging senior-cycle students to study English at the highest level.
- There is good liaison between the subject department and teachers supporting students with additional educational needs.
- The wealth of individual expertise among a number of teachers of English strongly supports subject delivery.
- English-related co-curricular and extracurricular activities are commendably organised for students.
- A supportive, collaborative culture was evident among the teachers of English and some good progress has been made in subject department planning.
- Evidence of the use of a number of varied teaching strategies was gathered during the evaluation.
- Generally, the quality of teaching and learning observed was very good.
- Very good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all lessons.
- Most students were engaged in their learning in the lessons observed.
- Evidence of good action planning to improve teacher feedback on student work and to promote student self-evaluation 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:

- The employment of at least one permanent teacher of the subject should be prioritised by senior management.
- Termly programmes of work that focus on learning-outcomes should be developed for all year groups.
- Over the coming years, the English department should formally pool its teaching strategies and resources, with the incremental development of students’ writing skills as a specific focus.
- Higher student achievement should be promoted by consistently communicating departmental expectations to students about how they should organise and store their work, by developing closer contact with the learning-support co-ordinator in implementing differentiation strategies, by reviewing text choices, and by utilising a wider range of resources in classes to support students’ learning.

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.

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