Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Saint Mary’s Secondary School
Convent of Mercy, Charleville, County Cork
Roll number: 62450H

Date of inspection: 23 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 Saint Mary’s Secondary School 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 the principal and deputy principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

St Mary’s 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 seek ways to expand the number of English lessons provided in first year to five lessons per week, as is recommended in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. The inevitable constraints of the timetabling process are, however, recognised in making this point. Overall the timetabled provision for English is very good.

Classes in junior cycle are of mixed ability. Previous to this year, classes in third year have been set for English. During the evaluation, it was stated that the practice of extending the organisation of mixed-ability classes throughout junior cycle appeared to be working well. In the context of either mixed-ability or set systems of class organisation, the school is encouraged to ensure that students’ choices with regard to level are not influenced at too early a point in their post-primary education. This suggestion is of particular relevance in the context of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) study Pathways through the Junior Cycle: The Experiences of Second-Year Students, which is available on the NCCA web site at www.ncca.ie. Students normally assign themselves to levels in third year, with the benefit of teachers’ advice and they are encouraged to attempt the higher-level Junior Certificate examination paper. A similar situation obtains in senior cycle with regard to the Leaving Certificate examination. Classes are timetabled concurrently in all year groups, apart from first year. This is positive, facilitating ease of movement between class groups for students, should it prove necessary. The department and senior management regularly analyse students’ results in the certificate examinations measured against national norms. This is worthwhile. The analysis of the uptake of levels measured against national norms should be added to this practice.

The school has made a significant investment in developing an impressive library and information centre. This is a bright, well-furnished facility, with access to information and communication
technology (ICT). A post-holder has responsibility for the library and, in addition, the possibility of accessing the services of a part-time librarian is being explored. The post-holder has undertaken significant research with regard to the purchase of texts and equipment to maximise the impact the library can make in the wider school community. In addition, the post-holder has collected material from the School Library Association in the Republic of Ireland (SLARI). The library is not yet operational, but it is anticipated that it will be a major addition to the school’s services for its students. The English department already has a strategy to promote students’ reading in Transition Year (TY), where a reading list is provided to students which they must explore as part of their year’s study. Resources relevant to the teaching and learning of English are also stored in the library. The English department is encouraged to create a reading policy, setting out the manner in which the department promotes reading for pleasure among the student body. The outstanding work already undertaken in developing the library must be recognised and applauded. It is in this context that some further ideas for its development as a tool to promote students’ literacy are offered. A resource which may prove useful can be accessed through the web site www.jcspliteracy.ie, which contains an evaluation report on the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project. This evaluation report includes strategies which were used in the project to promote reading among students through a number of school libraries. Some other ideas which could prove useful include the development of a paired reading programme, of finite duration, between TY students and reluctant readers in first year. Again, the aforementioned web site contains material which could prove useful in this context. The web site www.childrensbooksireland.com may further add to the post-holder’s research with regard to the purchase of texts for young adult readers. Another possibility in this area could be the inclusion of the student council in the book-choice process as a means of accessing students’ views on what should be added to the library’s collection. The organising of library events could also be considered, particularly in conjunction with the Writers in Schools initiative developed by Poetry Ireland, the web site of which can be accessed at www.poetryireland.ie.

English teachers have very good access to audio-visual equipment. There is a mobile audio-visual unit and most English teachers’ base rooms have a television and DVD machine. The provision of base rooms for English teachers is very positive. Data projectors, laptops and a smartboard are available in other areas of the school, although English base rooms are not, as yet, equipped with these facilities. It was stated that the smartboard is sometimes used by a member of the English department. It is recommended that the English department should advance its incorporation of ICT in teaching and learning. A proposal for the purchase of a laptop and data projector should be presented to senior management, to be located in at least one English base room. Senior management has indicated a willingness to support such a proposal. A number of members of the English department could then focus on the development of their own use of ICT as part of their practice. Their experiences could be shared or demonstrated to other members of the department through the vehicle of subject department meetings. Ideas which could prove useful in harnessing ICT to support the teaching and learning of English include the use of images downloaded from the internet for pre-reading discussions or as a means of contextualising aspects of the texts being examined, the use of PowerPoint for teachers’ presentations and the playing of various readings by poets and other authors of their own works. Students could be encouraged to use PowerPoint presentations to develop their own work and to present it to their class through the data projector or to connect images and music to poems they are studying. Beyond this, the use of webquests to support students’ projects could be considered, along with the adoption of word-processing packages to explicitly focus students on the drafting and redrafting process which is essential to all good writing. The creation of a favourites list of web sites related to the teaching of English could also be worthy of consideration.
There is very good informal induction for new teachers and for Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) student teachers. There is good collegiality in the English department and the subject co-ordinator takes responsibility for new colleagues. Senior management is also involved in the induction process. In the case of PGDE student teachers, they may be assigned to a particular teacher who advises them regarding planning and methodologies, as well as available resources. The student teacher may also participate in classroom observation of more experienced colleagues. These arrangements are worthwhile. In particular, possibilities in the area of classroom observation should continue to be explored as a means of maintaining the very good English teaching culture currently in the school, as well as a means of accessing new ideas and methodologies. It is suggested that current practice and policy with regard to subject-specific induction should be set down briefly in the subject plan as a means of formalising and consolidating the good practice which is currently underway.

The school is supportive of the English teachers’ continuing professional development (CPD). A number of whole-school in-service education days have been organised in the recent past. If teachers are participating in a relevant evening course, senior management will seek to facilitate this through teachers’ timetables. As well as this, members of the English department maintain strong links with the relevant subject association. This is commendable and a resource which may be of interest to English teachers is the web site of the Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English (INOTE) at www.inote.ie.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. Formal meetings are held on a monthly basis during the school year. In addition to formal meetings, numerous informal meetings are held between members of the English department. Minutes of formal meetings are taken and these are stored in the subject folder. This is positive and the use of ICT for the storage and recording of minutes in the future is strongly urged. Recent formal subject departmental meetings have focused on English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, the English department’s role in the school’s open night, students’ results in the Leaving Certificate examination, text choice and the development of termly plans.

A subject plan has been developed. This includes material dealing with planning for students with special educational needs, syllabus documents, Departmental circulars relevant to the teaching of English and a presentation on the Department of Education and Science publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. All of this is worthwhile and it is suggested that a copy of the latter document, which is available in the Inspectorate section of the web site of the Department of Education and Science at www.education.ie, should be added to the subject folder.

In addition, handwritten, common plans, which are time-linked, have been developed on an annual basis by the English department. This is positive and it is recommended that the good work already undertaken with regard to the creation of common yearly plans should be further advanced to incorporate termly, skills-based, syllabus-based plans with clear learning goals. The development of these plans should be supported through the use of ICT. This approach should serve to considerably lessen the need for a complete review and reshaping of the department’s common plans every year, although some review of the success of the common plans each year, would, of course, be advisable. The inclusion of learning goals as part of the common plans will aid the department in setting common assessments for different class groups in each year. In
addition, the English department should include a statement, linked to each yearly plan, highlighting the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses as a key strategy in the teaching and learning of the subject. As an aid to this, a ‘genre sheet’ could be developed to help teachers in setting specific language exercises for students when studying literary texts during the school year. A useful model for work to develop skills-based common plans with clear learning goals is the recently published Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus which is available on the web site of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. It is suggested that two further documents could be added to the subject folder. These are the Primary School English Curriculum and the English Teacher Guidelines for primary school teachers. Familiarity with these documents could serve teachers in facilitating primary school pupils in making the transition to the post-primary study of English. Both are available at www.curriculumonline.ie.

Some discussion regarding teaching methodologies is recorded as having occurred as part of formal English departmental meetings. This is positive and this focus should be expanded in the future. It is recommended that the department should develop a teaching-and-learning focus as a key element in the subject-planning process. The school’s anticipated engagement with a co-operative learning in-service education session from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) could serve well as a starting point for this discussion within the department. The opportunity for teachers to exchange ideas, to adapt methodologies and to imaginatively explore possibilities in the context of their own classrooms should then be grasped and shared with colleagues through the subject-planning process. Over time the English department should appreciate which co-operative learning strategies work best in the context of Scoil Mhuire and, ultimately, this could lead to the creation of a comprehensive co-operative learning policy for English which consolidates the good work which has been achieved. A new teaching-and-learning focus could then be chosen for English. In the context of English lessons observed during the evaluation, the possibility of assessment for learning as a subsequent focus could be considered, although this should only be done following an adequate period for embedding co-operative learning strategies in the English department’s practice.

Members of the English department are involved in organising a number of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include visiting poets, drama groups, poetry and writing competitions and visits to the theatre. All of this is commendable.

There was evidence that text-choice is varied in senior cycle and that there is some variation of text choice in junior cycle classes. This is positive as this approach allows teachers to suit texts to students’ interests and experiences, while also providing opportunities for English teachers’ continuing professional development. In addition, a suitable number of novels are studied in junior cycle and this should be maintained. Some further exploration and experimentation with the texts chosen in junior cycle, particularly in second year and third year is encouraged. As well as web sites previously mentioned in this report, further supports in choosing texts suitable for study by young adults in the junior cycle can be found in the English Resources section of the SLSS website at www.slss.ie and at www.literacytrust.org.uk.

There is a subject-specific English programme for TY. This programme approaches the subject in an imaginative and worthwhile manner, while also providing a legitimate bridge to the Leaving Certificate course. A wide variety of assessment modes is used. All of this is most commendable. It is suggested that, as an addition to the very good current practice in TY, students should be provided with a copy of the plan for the year, including learning goals and assessments modes. This would essentially comprise the common plan for TY which is to be developed through the subject-planning process, as outlined in a previous paragraph. A useful resource for the further
development of the English TY plan can be found at www.ncca.ie which contains a number of Transition Units which may be of interest to the English department. Beyond this, an English-specific TY portfolio could be developed. This would be a separate document to the general TY portfolio already in use and should serve as a centre of excellence for students’ writing. The portfolio should form a key part in the assessment of students’ achievement over the year and should comprise a number of major genre exercises linked to texts the students have encountered. Only work which has been drafted and redrafted should be admitted to the portfolio and the use of ICT for the final draft of students’ work would be worthwhile. The use of a portfolio should add to students’ sense of audience and ownership with regard to their written work in English. The use of co-operative teaching in TY is a very positive and worthwhile development.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. Some personnel are shared between the two departments and this facilitates these links. Co-operative teaching is used in some instances to provide support for students and the adoption of this strategy is praiseworthy. A section in the English subject plan deals with methodologies to support students with special educational needs. All of this is positive.

The school has a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). A teacher has attended an in-service education session in the area of EAL provided by the SLSS. This is worthwhile and it is suggested that time should be allocated at a future staff meeting for this teacher to feed information garnered at this session to the whole staff. The school is aware of the NCCA publication Intercultural Education in the Post-Primary School and signs have been displayed around the school in students’ home languages, along with other initiatives to celebrate the intercultural nature of the school community. All of this is praiseworthy and it is suggested that any future school policy dealing with this area should recognise the importance of students’ home languages, as well as useful methodologies such as DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts). Assessment practice and elements of the EAL programme should also be included. A further publication which may be of interest to all teachers dealing with bilingual students is Learning in 2+ Languages which is available at www.ltscotland.org.uk. Additional material on this area may also be accessed at www.ncca.ie in the inclusion section of the web site.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Lessons began in a number of ways. In many cases the roll was taken, which is good practice. A review of areas which the class had already encountered was frequently undertaken, with teachers questioning students and beginning to link this previously acquired knowledge with the new ideas about to be explored. It is suggested that teachers should take a moment at the beginning of lessons to outline the learning intention for the lesson. In the case of EAL students and students with difficulties in literacy development the efficacy of this approach will be further strengthened if it is combined with a keyword strategy, focusing students on the central ideas and terms they will encounter. There was evidence of very good planning on the part of teachers in all classes. This was especially the case in one senior cycle lesson where co-operative teaching was being utilised to good effect. In one instance, the teaching of language and literature was done at separate points during the week. It is suggested that a more integrated approach should be taken to the teaching of these two elements of the syllabus in the future. However, it is recognised that this situation arose due to a specific set of circumstances and that normal practice in this instance was to undertake an integrated approach to the study of the syllabus.
A wide and varied range of resources was used during English lessons. These included the whiteboard, television and DVD, photocopied resources, literary texts and a tabloid newspaper. In addition, the lining of a classroom floor to increase students’ awareness of the constraints and disciplines involved in the performance of a play was notable. As an addition to these resources, it is suggested that a dictionary and thesaurus should be available in English classrooms, either on the part of individual teachers or on the part of the students themselves, as standard equipment to support the study of English. The use of a dictionary and thesaurus serves to focus students on the imaginative potential available through the expansion of their vocabulary, as well as the importance of precision in their use of language. In the case of EAL students, the appropriate use of a bilingual dictionary should be encouraged.

The use of pair work, group work and other strategies to support the engagement of students with different abilities was frequently observed. In one lesson, where co-operative teaching had been organised, group work dealing with different elements of a theatrical production formed a significant part of the lesson. Following this, students participated in a rehearsal of a scene from a forthcoming play with insights on their performance offered by one of their teachers. In addition, a number of students had been assigned responsibilities with regard to the organising of their peers for the scene in question. This latter element of the exercise was worthwhile and it is suggested that this could be extended to incorporate some elements of peer assessment on the part of those students who were observing the performance. This would ensure active participation and learning on the part of all students throughout the lesson. This latter comment is, however, made in the context of what was a very successful lesson overall. In another lesson a scene from a drama was played on DVD and students were asked to work in groups with sheets distributed by their teacher. This was worthwhile. It is suggested that, when organising group work, the English department should consider assigning specific tasks within each group based around the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as snowball, envoy, and jigsaw, as well as placemat would be useful in this regard. Such an approach is of particular relevance with regard to supporting the learning needs of EAL students and students with difficulties in literacy development, but it will be of service to all students. Beyond this, maintaining a line of sight with EAL students when giving instructions is important. The sensitive reshaping of an EAL student’s response was observed in one lesson. This was good practice and, where relevant and appropriate, this could usefully be followed up with the repetition of the relevant phrasing by the student in question. Further material dealing with co-operative learning can be found at www.slss.ie and at www.co-operation.org.

Reading and writing exercises were often featured in English lessons. In one, junior cycle, lesson a guided reading activity was undertaken, with groups of students being assigned responsibility to answer different sets of questions delineated on a photocopied sheet, dealing with an excerpt from a text they were reading. In a senior cycle lesson, students were encouraged to provide personal responses regarding a poem they were encountering for the first time. The teacher provided sufficient time and space for students to engage with this exercise. Subsequently, students were divided into groups to discuss how the poem made them feel. The reading of a self-penned poem by the teacher, linked to the poem in question, emphasised the personal nature and power of poetry for students. This emphasis on the importance of personal response in literary encounters was also evident in another, senior cycle, lesson where the need for students to develop their own ‘response journals’ was enunciated. In a junior cycle lesson, students were asked to read excerpts from their homework which consisted of the television news based on characters and events in the play they were studying. This integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabus was imaginative and worthwhile. This good practice could have been further added to through a requirement that key quotes from moments in the play be included in the version of the news being read in class. The use of a short excerpt of a film version of the play as an aid to
pacing and as a means of emphasising the theatrical nature of the piece was also good practice. As an additional element here, students could be exhorted to note features of the scene such as costume, music, lighting and language as the excerpt progressed and to use these as a basis for discussion later in the lesson. In another lesson, the use of film to contextualise the story in a novel was very good practice. It is suggested that, where students were subsequently asked to write a diary entry for a character in the play, such genre work could usefully be supported through the provision of a writing frame for those students in need of support in English literacy.

The explicit discussion of language techniques and devices was a feature in a number of lessons. This was positive. In one, senior cycle, lesson a discussion developed around a particular image. In another lesson a tabloid newspaper was used to good effect to enhance students’ appreciation and understanding of the use of pun in this genre of writing. This was further developed through the distribution of a photocopy of a newspaper story dealing with the use of puns, which appealed to students’ sense of humour. It is suggested that, at times during group work, the inclusion of a specific task for a member of each group, which is focused on a language element of the piece of writing being analysed, could be considered. This member of the group could then be set the task of explaining what they have found to other group members who could then report back to the class as a whole.

There was very good classroom management and a very good relationship between teachers and students was observed in all cases. Teachers were affirming to students. Student learning was evident, with students answering teachers’ questions well and being willing to offer their thoughts on particular texts when these were sought. In one, senior cycle, lesson the confidence and competence of students in engaging with a new, unseen poem, was impressive.

The development of a print-rich environment was evident in English classrooms. This was most positive. Examples of good practice in this regard included the display of posters connected to texts being studied, keywords, students’ illustrations, character diagrams, key quotes and film posters. A statement regarding the importance of the creation of a print-rich environment in English classrooms should be included in the subject plan.

**ASSessment**

There was an appropriate emphasis on the assigning and monitoring of homework in all lessons observed during the evaluation. Good practice was noted where comment-based, formative assessment was in evidence. In one senior cycle class the rubrics utilised in the certificate examinations were used in marking students’ work and this was worthwhile. The continued expansion of comment-based marking is encouraged across the English department. Beyond this, some movement towards the use of features of self-assessment and peer-assessment was observed in a number of lessons. The department is strongly encouraged to investigate greater incorporation of self-assessment and peer-assessment in its assessment practices. Useful material dealing with the overall area of assessment for learning can be accessed at [www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie) and at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). A strong advantage of both self-assessment and peer-assessment is that these strategies will ensure engagement on the part of all students during the monitoring or marking of students’ homework in class.

There was some evidence of the use of an integrated strategy towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the setting of written homework for students. This approach was particularly successful where a teacher highlighted the features of language associated with a
particular genre with which students were being asked to engage. The English department is encouraged to further expand its use of an integrated strategy in the setting of students’ homework. As previously stated, the use of an integrated strategy should be highlighted in departmental planning. The investigation of a wide range of genres during the study of particular literary texts is strongly encouraged. In this area and with regard to all written tasks, it is recommended that teachers should consider and clearly delineate specific language requirements when setting written work. This will reinforce students’ language skills with greater success than might be the case with less focused activities such as chapter summaries or some examples of staged questioning.

Formal house examinations are organised for students at Christmas in first year, second year, TY and fifth year. Students in third year and in sixth year are regularly assessed leading up to the October midterm break. Their performances in these assessments are used to inform a review of each student’s progress as part of a subsequent meeting of staff. Third-year and sixth-year students also participate in mock examinations in the early spring. Formal house examinations are again organised at the end of the academic year for those year groups which are not participating in the certificate examinations.

There is one parent-teacher meeting per year group each year. If a concern regarding a particular student arises an informal parent-teacher meeting may be organised. Communication between the home and the school is also facilitated through the student journal. Formal written reports on students’ progress are also regularly communicated to parents. These arrangements are worthwhile.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of learning and teaching was observed in all lessons.
- A very good relationship was observed between teachers and students.
- There is very good access to audio-visual equipment for English teachers.
- There is a very good induction practice for PGDE students and new teachers.
- The school has made a significant investment in the development of a school library and information centre.
- There is a subject-specific TY programme for English which approaches the subject in an imaginative and worthwhile manner.
- There are good links between the English department and the SEN department.
- A subject plan has been developed which includes common plans for each year group.
- There was evidence of teachers varying text choice in junior cycle and in senior cycle.
- Some moves towards peer assessment were observed during the evaluation.
- Homework was regularly assigned and monitored.
- A print-rich environment was evident in English classrooms.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The good work already undertaken with regard to common yearly plans should be further developed with a focus on developing termly, skills-based, syllabus-based plans with clear learning goals. This work should be supported through the use of ICT.
• The English department should develop a teaching-and-learning focus as part of the subject-planning process.
• The English department should advance its incorporation of ICT in teaching and learning.
• English teachers should set specific language requirements when setting written work and group work for students.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal and 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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