Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire agus Íde
Newcastle West, County Limerick
Roll number: 64170L

Date of inspection: 26 March 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire agus Íde. 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 three 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

English classes in first year, third year and fifth year are provided with five English lessons per week. This is good provision. Students in second year have four English lessons per week and students in Transition Year (TY) have three English lessons per week. This is adequate provision. Classes in sixth year are provided with six English lessons per week. This is very good provision. The school is encouraged to investigate the possibility of expanding English provision in junior cycle to ensure that all classes have five lessons of English each week, as is recommended in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. Best practice is to ensure that students have at least one contact point with the subject on each day of the school week. In those few instances where the number of daily contact points with the subject is not maximised on the current school timetable, management is encouraged to adjust these arrangements for future years. Overall, provision for English on the school timetable is good.

Classes in junior cycle and in TY are of mixed ability. Students are assigned to levels for their Junior Certificate examination in third year or, occasionally, in second year. The practice of delaying choice of levels until third year is positive, ensuring that students’ opportunities to complete the higher-level course content and to participate in the higher-level examination are maximised. Students are divided between ordinary-level and higher-level class groups in fifth year and in sixth year. These classes are timetabled concurrently. This is good practice, as it facilitates ease of movement between levels and classes for students, where this becomes necessary. Teachers are assigned to different levels and cycles on a rotational basis, thus ensuring the development of a wide skills base across the subject department.

A number of English teachers have developed class libraries. First-year students are facilitated in joining the local library each year and the English department has been involved in organising students’ participation in the MS Readathon. The English department also plans to experiment with DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) in the future. The participation in such initiatives is praiseworthy. Beyond these efforts, the school is planning to develop a library facility in the near
future and significant planning has already been undertaken towards accomplishing this aim. This is highly commended. The English department is encouraged to seize the opportunity afforded by a new library facility to support students’ literacy development and love of reading. A useful resource to inform the development of library services and reading initiatives in the future is an evaluation report regarding the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project which can be located on the web site [www.jcspliteracy.ie](http://www.jcspliteracy.ie). Among the worthwhile reading initiatives undertaken as part of this project are *Reading Challenge* and *Wordmillionaire*.

A trolley system and a number of televisions are available to support English teachers’ access to audio-visual equipment. This is worthwhile and the school is encouraged to expand the availability of audio-visual equipment for the English department. This is particularly important, given the centrality of film in the Leaving Certificate syllabus, alongside the potential impact of well-chosen audio-visual resources in junior cycle classes. The expansion of the availability of audio-visual equipment should be undertaken on an incremental basis, as resources become available.

There is a computer room which can be booked, although access for English classes can be somewhat limited due to considerable demand for its use. Beyond this, English teachers have used their own information and communication technology (ICT) equipment to support teaching and learning. The use of ICT to support teaching and learning in English was observed during the evaluation. Teachers are encouraged to continue to expand the use of ICT in their practice and to share ideas regarding the adoption of e-learning strategies with colleagues.

There are good informal induction procedures in English. New teachers are introduced to the English department and are given a copy of the subject plan, along with a list of relevant resources that are available in the department. It is suggested that the inclusion of a brief induction policy in the English subject file should be considered. Beyond this, given the numerous examples of very good practice in the teaching of English which were observed during the evaluation, the inclusion of some classroom observation of established colleagues as part of the induction of new teachers of English should be considered.

The school is supportive of English teachers’ engagement in continuing professional development (CPD). A number of English teachers have undertaken courses in the use of ICT which have been of benefit in their teaching of the subject, and clearly of benefit to their students.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Two subject co-ordinators for the English department have been appointed. Formal meetings of the English department are organised on a termly basis, along with a number of informal meetings each year. There is a good collaborative relationship between English teachers. A comprehensive subject plan has been developed which is testament to significant commitment on the part of the English department. The plan addresses a wide range of areas including planning for students with special educational needs, assessment procedures, student placement and teachers’ professional development. Common yearly plans have been created which include learning outcomes and which are based on the relevant syllabuses. Beyond this, two of the yearly plans are time-linked, which is a good idea. As a further extension of this good work, it is recommended that the English department should develop common plans for all year groups which have clearly identified learning goals to be achieved in specific time frames. Material relevant to students’ experience of English in their primary education may also be worth
including in the subject folder, as reference documents for English teachers. Such material can be accessed at www.curriculumonline.ie.

Given the very good work already undertaken in establishing a effective English department, it is recommended that the department should now begin to explore the adoption of an explicit teaching-and-learning focus as part of its medium-term subject-planning process. The department has already included references to good practice in the area of assessment for learning in the subject plan. During the evaluation, it was evident that a number of assessment-for-learning strategies had begun to be adopted in teachers’ practice. Consequently, it is suggested that assessment for learning could prove to be worthy of investigation on a departmental basis.

The English department is involved in organising a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include trips to dramatic productions, visits to the local library and a recent cultural trip to London which incorporated a visit to the Globe Theatre and drama workshops in the theatre itself. Beyond this, inter-class and inter-school debating has been developed and students have performed extracts from a Shakespearean play as part of the school’s open night. Teachers are to be praised for their efforts in these areas.

Text choice is varied in senior cycle. This is appropriate and welcome. There has been more limited variation of texts in junior cycle and the department has begun to examine the possibility of introducing new texts. This is worthwhile and teachers are particularly encouraged to investigate the wide range of excellent young adult novels which is available. The current practice of students studying three novels during the course of their junior cycle studies is commended. The English subject plan notes that three comparative texts are studied in the ordinary-level Leaving Certificate course. The maintenance of this approach as the policy and practice of the English department should be explicitly stated in the subject plan in the future, as the study of three comparative texts in the ordinary-level course is a requirement of the syllabus.

A subject-specific English TY programme has been developed. During the evaluation, it was evident that the programme incorporated an imaginative and effective approach to the development of students’ literacy skills. In this context, there is scope for further development of some aspects of the English programme. It is suggested that the current programme could usefully be revised, particularly with a view towards developing clear, skills-based, learning goals. Beyond this, it is suggested that the study of a short novel during the year would be of benefit for students, especially if this were to be utilised as a vehicle through which their use and manipulation of language can be advanced. As a means of focusing students’ efforts during the year, a portfolio of their work in English should be created. This would serve as a ‘centre of excellence’ for drafted and redrafted written work, as well as examples of oral presentations and exercises they have undertaken during the course of the year. The portfolio could then form an important element in their end-of-year examination.

There are good informal links between the English department and the special educational needs department. The role of English teachers in supporting students with special educational needs is acknowledged in the English subject plan. English teachers are made aware of the learning needs of students in their classes by the special educational needs teacher. Whole-staff training in the area of special educational needs has been provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). While team-teaching is used in TY, it is suggested that the English department, in co-operation with the special educational needs department, could investigate the feasibility of such an approach being adopted to support students with special educational needs in other English classes in the future, where appropriate.
The English subject plan includes a section dealing with ‘Multicultural Education and Awareness’. This is worthwhile. The department should consider expanding this section of the plan to include recognition of the place of students’ home languages in supporting their learning in the subject, English, along with some features of good practice when teaching students with English as an Additional Language (EAL). In addition, the use of Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS), particularly writing frames, to aid EAL students in accessing the English syllabuses should be highlighted in the subject plan. Further information on supporting EAL students can be accessed on the website of the Professional Development Service for Teachers at www.pdst.ie.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was a very good standard of teaching and learning in the English lessons observed. Individual teacher planning was evident in all cases. Lessons were universally well planned. Teacher records were maintained diligently. Lessons began in a number of ways, with teachers recapitulating work which had previously been encountered and making links with students’ previous knowledge in order to introduce a new topic. The learning intention was clear in all lessons and the clear setting out of learning intentions at the outset was a particularly feature of teachers’ work.

A very good element in English lessons was the highly imaginative use of a wide range of resources to support student learning. These included ICT, the overhead projector, large print versions of poems, keywords, compact disks, DVD, peer assessment sheets, embroidered pictures and real objects such as egg timers and a rattle. Teachers are to be complimented on their practice in using resources to increase student engagement, particularly where visual resources were used to garner students’ interest and application to texts and tasks.

Group work and pair work were used regularly. In one senior-cycle lesson, students were placed in groups of three for an interview exercise. This took the form of a role play involving an interviewer, interviewee and an observer. Roles were clearly assigned and the lesson worked very well, incorporating a peer-assessment element which was most impressive. In general, group work and pair work were most effective where roles were assigned to each member of a group, maximising participation and language development. The English department is encouraged to consider the manner in which group work and pair work can be organised to support the development of students’ skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as placemat, snowball and envoy may prove useful in this regard. Further support in the area of co-operative learning strategies may be accessed at www.slss.ie.

A wide variety of reading strategies also featured in lessons. Approaches adopted by teachers to support student reading included a sequencing exercise connected to a Shakespearean text, a pre-reading exercise linked to the title of a poem about to be explored and the use of large print versions of poems which unified students’ initial reactions to the texts in question. Beyond this, in a number of instances, students’ personal responses to texts were sought and encouraged by the teachers involved. The imaginative and varied approach adopted by English teachers in this area is strongly commended.

There was an appropriate focus on the examination and analysis of language in English lessons. In one lesson, a teacher read a student’s written homework to the class and used the opportunity to affirm the student’s purposeful use of colloquial language. This was positive and a further
extension of this worthwhile approach could include linking this commentary to a reminder of the rubrics which had been set regarding the writing of the particular genre involved and the suitability of this type of language in that context. In another lesson, a differentiated approach to the language in a poem had been adopted through the provision of keywords, in advance of the lesson, for some students. The presence of a number of EAL students highlighted the significant amount of planning which had gone into the creation and execution of this lesson.

There was a safe and supportive atmosphere in lessons. A very good relationship was evident between teachers and students. Teachers were affirming to students. In one instance, it was suggested that the importance of maintaining a ‘line of sight’ to aid understanding when EAL students were part of the class group should be borne in mind. Student learning was evident in all lessons observed. Students remained on task throughout each lesson and displayed a good knowledge of the texts studied. This was particularly the case in one lesson, where the excitement of junior-cycle students in relation to the study of a Shakespearean text was clearly evident and translated forcefully into their knowledge of its different features.

A particularly noteworthy element of the evaluation was the manner in which the English department has established the creation of a print-rich environment in students’ classrooms as a core element of its practice. There were numerous examples of very good practice in this area, with teachers’ classrooms incorporating the display of students’ genre exercises, keywords, student projects, media posters and, in one instance, a ‘wall of honour’ for students’ work. Tentative suggestions which might be made here include the lamination of student work and the adoption of webquests to support project work, on occasion. However, both of these suggestions are made with a full acknowledgement of the commitment teachers have displayed in developing very good learning environments for their students, which also provide a purpose and motivation for students’ written exercises. Beyond the display of students’ work, classrooms frequently included the display of a range of texts as well as the availability of dictionaries and thesauruses for students’ use. All of this is most worthwhile.

**Assessment**

Homework was regularly assigned and corrected in all classes visited or lessons observed during the evaluation. In a number of classes, a folder system was used to organise students’ notes and resources and, where this was the case, folders were maintained diligently and were well organised. In almost all cases, there was evidence of comment-based, formative assessment of students’ work. This was a successful feature of the department’s work. The rubrics applied in the certificate examinations were also utilised on occasion. It was suggested that, as a further extension of teachers’ good work in this area, the application of other assessment-for-learning strategies such as self-assessment and peer-assessment, in the area of homework, may be worthy of investigation on a departmental basis.

There was evidence of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in some of the homework assigned to students, along with the use of staged questions and summary exercises. Overall, however, it is recommended that, in planning the study of literature, teachers should incorporate homework exercises based upon a wide range of genres and language techniques at regular intervals. Such an integrated approach will achieve a number of objectives more effectively than one which is overly concentrated on staged questions or summaries. It will encourage students to engage with literature at a different level while also providing the opportunity for the texts in question to be used as a language model for students’
writing. Beyond this, it will focus students on the different features of genres which they encounter. With this latter aim in mind, it is important that, when exercises are assigned, clear rubrics should be explicitly stated regarding the features of language which students are expected to incorporate in their written homework. This will, in turn, facilitate self-evaluation and peer-evaluation of students’ writing in subsequent lessons. There was some evidence of the setting of differentiated homework exercises and this included the use of graphic organisers to focus on a particular character and the creation of a collage around the imagery used in a poem. This was positive.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and summer for first-year, second-year, TY and fifth-year students. Fifth-year students also participate in in-class assessments at the October midterm break and at Easter. In addition, mock examinations are organised for third-year and sixth-year students. Parents are sent reports regarding students’ progress following all of these examinations. There is also continuous assessment for students in third year and in sixth year and monthly reports to parents arise from this process. Common examinations are organised across year groups, where practicable. Reasonable Accommodations in the certificate examinations have been recognised as part of students’ house examinations. The achievement of students in the certificate examinations has been analysed in comparison with national norms. All of this constitutes a comprehensive approach to student assessment.

As well as the system of reporting students’ progress which has been outlined in the previous paragraph, there is one parent-teacher meeting per year group per year. The student journal is used to facilitate communication between the home and the school. This is worthwhile.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is an enthusiastic and professional English teaching team.
- The quality of teaching and learning in English is very good.
- The English department has established the creation of a print-rich environment in teacher base-rooms as a core element of its practice.
- A number of English teachers have developed class libraries. The school has undertaken significant work in planning for the development of a central library.
- There is a collaborative atmosphere in the English department and a comprehensive subject plan has been developed.
- The English department displays significant commitment in organising co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- Lessons were universally well-planned. A very strong feature of lessons in English was a highly imaginative use of resources to support student learning.
- A very good relationship was evident between teachers and students.
- Group and pair work were used regularly in lessons.
- A strong focus on the use of language was evident in English lessons.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The English department should develop common plans for all year groups which have clearly identified learning goals to be achieved in specific time frames.
• An integrated approach to the study of language and literature should be adopted in planning by individual teachers and by the English department as a whole.
• The English department should adopt the exploration of an area of teaching-and-learning as a specific element in the subject-planning process.

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.

Published June 2011