

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**McEgan College
Macroom, County Cork
Roll number: 71030J**

Date of inspection: 10 November 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in McEgan College. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had 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

McEgan College is a co-educational school which participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) action plan. Classes in first year and in third year are provided with four lessons of English per week. This is adequate provision. Students in these classes who are experiencing difficulties with literacy are provided with additional support lessons through a withdrawal model of support. In addition, team-teaching and a range of other initiatives are in place to support these and other students. The school has recently undertaken a full review of the curriculum and currently provides a 'taster' system for first-year students to support their choice of subjects for the Junior Certificate. This latter system is considered good practice, but curtails the number of lessons which can be provided in some subjects in first year. While recognising all of these points, the school should examine the provision of lessons for English in first year and in third year in light of its identification of literacy as a priority area for development under DEIS. In this context, it should be noted that the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* recommends one contact point with the subject each day as optimal timetabling for English in junior cycle. Students in second year, fifth year and sixth year are provided with five English lessons per week, while students in Transition Year (TY) are provided with four English lessons per week. This is good provision. There are three lessons in English and Communications for the first year of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) class group, which is adequate provision. English lessons in all year groups are timetabled concurrently. This is good practice.

Standardised tests are administered to first-year students prior to entry. Students are assigned to set class groups in English, Irish and Mathematics on the basis of these tests, and these groups are maintained through junior cycle. Movement between class groups, where necessary and appropriate, is facilitated through the concurrent timetabling highlighted in the previous paragraph. The current system should be reviewed and questioned regarding the aims of the current system, whether it is achieving these aims and whether these aims are legitimate. The possibility of greater use of mixed-ability class groups in English, allied with a specific literacy-

support class group should, for example, be examined. In particular, the impact of the current system in first year on student aspirations should be considered. The very wide disparity in literacy levels which are evident among first-year students must, however, also be acknowledged in making these observations. Students are assigned to levels for the Junior Certificate examination in third year. This is appropriate as it allows sufficient time for students to develop so that they can give a true reflection of their abilities. Students are assigned to levels in fifth year on the basis of their performance in the Junior Certificate, a meeting of the subject department and consultation with parents. English teachers are provided with base classrooms. This is positive. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified prior to entry through the aforementioned standardised tests.

There is a school library which has undergone considerable development in the recent past. New shelving units have been installed, which are attractive and contribute to a sense that the library is a 'different space' despite its location in a teacher classroom. Funding for this development has been provided through the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and donations from the Parents' Association. The library room is very impressive, encompassing a strong print-rich and text-rich environment which is enticing for students and will serve to encourage their interest in reading. An eclectic mix of texts has been chosen for inclusion in the library and these continue to be funded through the JCSP. Further development of the facility is planned. A number of reading initiatives are undertaken each year and the library collection has been electronically catalogued, again with the support of the Parents' Association. The home-school-community-liaison (HSCL) co-ordinator has also been involved in organising reading initiatives between parents and students. The commitment displayed by staff and school management to the development of the library as a key tool to support students' literacy and to encourage a love of reading is strongly commended.

Currently there is adequate availability of audio-visual equipment for English teachers. However, the anticipated purchase of data projectors and other information and communications technology (ICT) for mainstream classrooms in the near future should significantly enhance the availability of these important resources for English classes. There are two ICT rooms, as well as one mobile projector and laptop computer. Students in the LCA are provided with laptop computers while students in receipt of literacy support also have additional access to ICT. English teachers are open to the use of ICT. This is positive and the department should grasp the opportunities offered by greater availability of ICT in mainstream classrooms. The use of data projectors and ICT to support visual resources and the explicit modelling of reading and writing strategies are two areas which should be considered. The adoption of *webquests* to support genre-transfer activities and project work in English could also be investigated. As part of the school's DEIS literacy targets it is suggested that a universal font should be adopted by all subject departments to support students who may have difficulty engaging with the use of varying forms of text across different teachers' classes.

Planning has been undertaken to support the delineation of literacy targets as part of the school's engagement with the DEIS action plan. There is considerable very good work already being undertaken regarding students' literacy. It is recommended that current approaches to DEIS literacy targets should continue to be developed, with a particular emphasis on the consistent highlighting of literacy as a key area for staff, parents and students. It is suggested that a collation of baseline data in the area of literacy should be undertaken which is comprehensive and up-to-date. This can then serve to inform the school's self-evaluation processes in this important area. This baseline data should include all of the current strategies being undertaken to support students' literacy. A plan to improve literacy levels was presented during the evaluation, based on resources developed by the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI). This includes

SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-linked) targets and is very worthwhile. To ensure a consistent emphasis on the achieving of these targets, regular meetings of the DEIS literacy and numeracy group should be convened and advances should be noted at staff meetings. The group should seek to highlight developments and the whole-school nature of the project whenever possible. Some of the approaches involved have been linked to other work being undertaken in the school in the area of instructional intelligence and this is appropriate. Teacher and student questionnaires could serve as a means of further examining the progress being made in the implementation of whole-school literacy strategies in classrooms, while the very good progress in areas like library services, ICT and reading initiatives should not be neglected. A useful text to support this work is *Resources for Developing a School-Wide Literacy Plan* which is available on the website www.jcspliteracy.ie. In the area of students' achievement, it is noted that the department has met with considerable success, with a decrease in the number of students participating in the foundation level examination in the Junior Certificate in recent years.

Informal induction processes are in place for new English teachers. All new teachers are assigned a mentor, usually from the relevant subject department. In addition, the size of the school facilitates consultation with colleagues and team-teaching serves as a further mode of support. These arrangements should be formalised. This is necessary particularly in the context of the development of whole-school approaches to literacy, as well as recent developments in teachers' appreciation of instructional intelligence. Consistency in the manner in which new teachers fit into the teaching and learning culture of the school should be addressed in the context of formalised subject-induction procedures.

The school is supportive of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). English teachers have engaged in considerable whole-staff in-service education as well as participating in a number of initiatives developed by County Cork VEC. These have included a special educational needs and ICT initiative, a team-teaching initiative and a course dealing with instructional learning. Beyond this, a number of courses organised by the JCSP support service which dealt with students' literacy have been engaged upon. All of this is positive. Recent moves towards a greater emphasis on internally provided CPD are also very worthwhile. Given the very good practice observed in most lessons during the evaluation, the sharing of ideas regarding teaching and learning in subject departmental meetings is strongly endorsed. Such an approach will provide support to all members of the subject department and all teachers are strongly encouraged to recognise and benefit from the potential for CPD and shared approaches to the subject through this forum. The participation of all members of the subject department in CPD opportunities in English is strongly encouraged.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed and there are regular meetings of the English department. Minutes of departmental meetings are maintained. It is suggested that, in the future, these minutes should be recorded and stored using ICT. The recent focus of departmental meetings has been on team-teaching, the assigning of class groups, the organising of reading initiatives and requests for resources from the principal.

A subject file has been created. This comprises a range of resources relevant to teaching and learning in English, including relevant circulars from the Department of Education and Skills, syllabus documents and teacher guidelines. In addition, the file includes analysis of the performance of students in the certificate examinations. It is suggested that the aforementioned

Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* should also be added to the file. This document contains many useful ideas regarding teaching and learning in English. In addition, the teacher guidelines and the English curriculum for primary schools may be worth exploring as a means of supporting students' transition from primary to post-primary school. These documents may be accessed at www.curriculumonline.ie.

The department has begun to develop common written programmes. This is positive. It is recommended that the creation of common schemes for each year group and for different levels within each year group should now be prioritised. These schemes should be time-linked, syllabus-based, skills-based and incorporate clear learning goals. During the evaluation a good model for such an approach was presented in one of the individual schemes of work included in the subject plan. It is further recommended that departmental and individual planning and practice should adopt an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses, making note of the manner in which texts will serve as springboards to or models for the discussion of particular techniques or genres. In addition, the department plan should include a detailed section dealing with assessment, laying out clear guidelines regarding what constitutes good and acceptable practice. The plan of the English department to focus on the further incorporation of instructional learning in its practice is worthwhile.

Currently, texts are synchronised between particular class groups at appropriate points. This is positive and the focus on skills-based common plans already set out in this report should leave teachers sufficient freedom to suit texts to student interests in their own class groups as much as possible. Texts are varied within syllabus guidelines. Texts used in junior cycle have begun to be reviewed. This is worthwhile. Useful resources to support this work may be found at www.childrensbooksireland.com. Three comparative texts are studied by ordinary level class groups in senior cycle. This is in compliance with syllabus requirements. To consolidate this good practice it is suggested that it should be noted as policy in the subject plan.

A written, subject-specific TY plan is in place for English. This includes an oral element. The plan should now be further developed to incorporate clear learning goals for TY, as previously recommended for other yearly plans. It is further suggested that an English-specific portfolio of student writing should be included as an important part of the TY programme. This portfolio should encourage a process approach to writing and highlight the importance of the drafting and redrafting process through the inclusion of a number of major written works undertaken in a range of genres. In addition, the portfolio should be regarded as an opportunity for students to 'publish' their best work in English. Planning for English and Communications in the LCA programme was also presented during the evaluation.

There are a very small number of English as an additional language (EAL) students. In this context, the school is encouraged to identify a member of staff to engage in CPD in this area so that capacity may be increased and maintained for the future. The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) provides in-service education sessions for language-support teachers. Arising from this, the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit*, which is available in the IILT area of the NCCA Action website at www.action.ncca.ie, should be used to chart the progress in English language proficiency of EAL students. This website also includes a range of other useful resources relevant to this area.

The English subject plan includes a comprehensive section dealing with support for students with special educational needs. This includes a delineation of relevant methodologies and it is suggested that this might usefully include a list of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) for teachers to be aware of. There are very good links with the special educational needs

department. Students' literacy is retested every year and retesting is also undertaken in connection with some of the reading initiatives organised by the school. The adoption of team teaching, in combination with individual and group withdrawal as a further support for students with difficulties in literacy is a very positive development. The strong involvement of the English department in the development of this aspect of the school's provision is to be greatly praised.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

In most lessons, the quality of teaching and learning was good. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the roll, the recapitulation of topics previously encountered and the monitoring of student homework. An effective and imaginative approach to recapitulation was observed in one lesson where students developed a 'character wheel' which would ultimately be consolidated in a classroom poster. Planning was presented in all cases. English teachers are encouraged to develop their practice so that a key element is the stating of a number of clear learning goals at the outset of lessons. Such an approach will not only provide students with a clear structure through which they can understand the various activities undertaken during the lesson, it will also focus teacher planning and assessment. In addition, teachers are encouraged to think carefully regarding the literacy and language goals they plan to incorporate in each lesson.

A range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, various texts, worksheets and ICT. The English department is encouraged to further expand its use of resources, with a particular focus on visual resources. Visual resources may be more interesting for students less motivated by verbal or written presentations. Dictionaries were available in a number of classrooms. Teachers are encouraged to expand the appropriate use of dictionaries and thesauruses in English lessons. Students' familiarity with these texts will serve to highlight the importance of imagination and precision in their use of language while also serving as aids in expanding their vocabulary.

The use of active methodologies, pair work and group work was frequently observed during the evaluation. In one instance, following reading from a text, students were initially directed to work as individuals in discussing the opening they had just encountered. This was followed by well-structured pair work where one student was allocated the role of recorder and the other the role of reporter. Students were to discuss their views which were then noted on the whiteboard. This provided a very good scaffold from which students could ultimately develop the homework assigned for that evening. In another lesson, students were placed in pairs and were instructed to discuss a character's experiences in the society of the novel and to note their ideas on a worksheet. While this worked well, at times the arrangement of the activity encouraged isolated, rather than shared, engagement with the activity. Teachers should be aware of the need for strongly structured approaches to pair work and group work in English, in order to ensure communication is facilitated and encouraged in these arrangements. In particular, the use of such approaches to support the skills of listening and speaking and, ultimately, reading and writing, should be an important consideration in teachers' planning. In this context, the development of student oracy is vital and strategies such as *placemat*, *envoy* and *jigsaw*, among many others may be of considerable service.

Good practice in highlighting the use of particular words and techniques on the part of writers was observed in one lesson. Here the use of adjectives and verbs was noted for students' benefit. In another lesson, students had clearly undertaken work in this area on previous occasions. The possibility of further consolidation of these concepts during a discussion of the traits of particular

characters might therefore, in this instance, have been of benefit. In one junior cycle lesson, where a drama was being read, while there was some commentary on the part of the teacher involved, this should have been further added to through a greater emphasis on the writer's use of language and the addition of a 'gloss' to the text on the part of students or through a DARTS activity such as text-marking. Such an approach would have increased students' engagement with the text while also reinforcing their understanding of the manner in which writers create atmosphere, characters and settings through imaginative and powerful use of language.

Reading and writing activities were undertaken frequently in English lessons. The use of team-teaching in one lesson worked particularly well in supporting students' reading. A spidergram was developed to provide a scaffold around which students could structure their thinking about the opening of the drama being studied. This was followed by the reading of an excerpt, with both teachers taking on roles from the text. Questions had previously been outlined on the whiteboard, with one teacher providing prompts to support students' answers, effectively creating a guided reading approach to the text. All of this was very positive. In another, senior cycle lesson, ICT was used effectively to support students' writing. A writing frame was created, along with keywords to aid students' engagement with a genre-writing activity. Students developed their written work using a word-processing programme and it was clear that their technological literacy had been a focus for development on previous occasions. All of this was very worthwhile. In another lesson a student was set a 'scanning' activity, while the entire class subsequently engaged in the creation of a graphic organiser and a notes grid to facilitate their engagement with aspects of a novel being studied. The widespread and appropriate use of DARTS activities is to be strongly praised. As a further development of the very good practice which is already present in the department, it is recommended that English teachers should investigate and adopt the use of explicit modelling of reading and writing skills for students, where appropriate.

Overall, there was good classroom management and there were good relationships between teachers and students. Affirmation of student efforts was a strong feature in many classrooms during the evaluation. Student learning was evident in all lessons and student engagement was clear in almost all cases. Where student engagement could have been enhanced strategies such as text-marking, greater activity on the part of students and the appropriate use of visual resources would have added considerably to the impact of the lesson. Especially good practice was observed where there were high expectations of student behaviour and contributions.

In a majority of cases a strong print-rich and text-rich environment had been developed in teachers' classrooms. These rooms incorporated the display of keywords, peer reviews, media posters, graphic organisers and key quotes from particular texts. This is very good practice and the department should consolidate this work through the inclusion of a statement in the subject plan setting out the creation of a print-rich environment as policy and practice in the English department. As an element of the department's engagement with literacy under the DEIS action plan, it is suggested that the further expansion of print-rich environments to all English classrooms could be highlighted.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was regularly set and monitored in all classes observed during the evaluation. There was evidence that key assignments were completed and stored appropriately in English and Communications. Comment-based assessment was also frequently in evidence. This is good practice. The department is encouraged to delineate clear rubrics for students to follow when setting written homework exercises. Such an approach will increase the efficacy of commentary

following the completion of these assignments, either on the part of the teacher or by peers or, indeed, by students themselves. In one instance, comments recorded by a teacher in students' copybooks were not appropriate. Here, clear direction was provided by the inspector regarding the need for commentary to focus on the key aim of improving students' work through clear and professionally presented advice. Such commentary should focus on the development of students' language skills and on providing appropriate affirmation for students' efforts. As outlined in a previous section of this report, the further development of the subject plan should include clear guidelines regarding good practice in the assessment of students' work to which all English teachers should conform. The highlighting of students' work in a team-teaching lesson by one teacher to a colleague was a very positive and affirming practice for the students involved.

The use of notes grids to support students' homework was observed in one instance. In addition, during the evaluation, the process approach to writing, with students drafting and redrafting work was observed, as well as the use of writing frames. These latter strategies would be of particular benefit in some classes where students' written work suggested difficulties with punctuation and other aspects of literacy. The department is encouraged to discuss strategies to support students with literacy difficulties, especially in the context of supporting engagement with written homework.

A limited number of tasks requiring students to take an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses were set as homework. Tasks requiring this integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently utilised by English teachers in both individual and departmental planning and practice. Homework exercises should lead students through an exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Texts should be used to model particular genres, language techniques and skills which then inform students' written work. As previously outlined, where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which direct students' attention to the features of the genre to which they will need to adhere, as well as to particular language techniques that they may be required to include. The adoption of an integrated approach, in combination with other strategies such as staged questions, should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students' macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*.

Formal house examinations are organised at the end of the academic year. Students in third year and in sixth year participate in mock examinations in the early spring. In addition, all year groups are assessed every six weeks in their class groups. There are no house examinations at Christmas, although in-class examinations may be organised. Students with Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE) are provided with special arrangements to reflect these in the house examinations. This is good practice. Student performance in the certificate examinations is analysed. This is worthwhile.

There are two parent-teacher meetings organised for sixth-year and third-year students each year. All other year groups have one parent-teacher meeting per year. Reports regarding student progress are communicated to parents following all of the assessments organised during the school year. In addition, the HSCL co-ordinator supports links between the school and home. These links are good practice.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school library encompasses a print-rich and text-rich environment which is enticing for students and a number of reading initiatives are undertaken each year.
- Teachers have engaged in regular CPD and there is an expanding focus on internal CPD opportunities.
- A subject co-ordinator has been appointed and significant work has been undertaken in the development of a subject folder and schemes of work.
- There are good links with the special educational needs department.
- Students with RACE are provided with arrangements to reflect their needs in the house examinations.
- In most lessons, a good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- Students were generally engaged in lessons and worked well.
- Good use of pair work was observed on a number of occasions.
- Team-teaching was observed and worked well.
- Very good examples of the use of the drafting and redrafting process and of writing frames were observed during the evaluation.

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

- Current approaches to planning for and achieving DEIS literacy targets should be further developed. The DEIS literacy group should meet regularly to co-ordinate these efforts.
- Common schemes should be developed for each year group with a clear focus on the creation of syllabus-based, time-linked plans with clear learning goals.
- The subject plan should clearly outline the English department's policy regarding the assessment of student work and what constitutes good and acceptable practice in this area.
- An integrated approach to the language and literacy elements of the syllabuses should be adopted in departmental and individual planning.
- The use of explicit modelling of reading and writing activities should be developed as an important part of the English department's practice.

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.