REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste na Coiribe, Galway, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Timetable provision for English is in line with syllabus requirements. School management is commended for concurrently timetabling English classes for most year groups.

Six teachers are currently involved in the delivery of English in the school. Deployment is generally in line with teachers’ skills, knowledge and interests and facilitates the rotation of teachers across programmes. With regard to teacher deployment for Transition Year (TY) English, it is advised that teachers qualified and experienced to teach Leaving Certificate (LC) English be appointed to such class groups, to ensure that appropriate bridging work with senior cycle English can be delivered as part of the TY English programme. Staff on permanent or contract-of-indefinite duration contracts teach just under half of all class groups for English and teachers on pro rata contracts teach just over half of all class groups for English. Given the school’s status as a developing school, this situation is understandable. Inevitably, though, there is a degree of staff turnover in the teaching of English from year to year. Effective subject department planning and co-ordination is vital in this context.

Students are placed in mixed-ability classes in first year and remain in mixed-ability classes until the end of sixth year. This practice is highly commended. In 2008/09, extra class groups for English were created in third and fifth year by school management. It is advised that as part of subject department planning, the teachers of English evaluate the benefits of those smaller classes in relation to the needs of all students, and then recommend to school management where, if necessary, such extra class groups should be created in future, based on priority needs.

Requests for resources by the subject department co-ordinator on behalf of the teachers of English are met by school management where possible. Students have classroom bases and teachers have to move between rooms. Overhead projectors are located in most classrooms. While TV and DVD/VCR players on movable trolleys are available for borrowing by teachers, this arrangement is not suitable where trolleys have to be moved across yards to be transported to prefabricated classrooms. The school currently has two computer rooms: one in the base school and one in the
block of rooms rented by the school in a nearby building. The English department has been provided with its own laptop, data projectors are fixed to the ceilings of some rooms, and one data projector can be borrowed by teachers for individual lessons. It is recommended that a map of the school’s rooms be created, indicating where permanent audio-visual (AV) and information and communications technology (ICT) equipment is located, and that a booking form be created to facilitate room swapping arrangements. Also, the subject department is encouraged to identify specific rooms where AV/ICT equipment still needs to be permanently located, to facilitate greater multi-media use in the delivery of the subject. If an inventory of all AV and print resources in the possession of individual teachers of English were included in the subject-department plan, that inventory would promote maximum use of available in-school resources and would also act as a useful resource for future planning. Finally, to promote greater use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English, teachers are advised to prepare handouts listing websites linked to particular topics and texts. Those websites can then either be examined live in class or the handouts listing them can be distributed to students, to support their own independent research and learning.

The current school library consists of a small office and lockable, movable book trolleys located in the corridor outside the office. Part of a post of responsibility has been assigned for library management. The library is open for lunchtime borrowing twice a week, and a good deal of fiction stock has been purchased by school management in recent years. To promote the habit of personal reading, first years are encouraged to enter the M.S. Readathon. Also, students in other year groups are encouraged to produce reports on books they have read independently, under a number of specified subheadings. To further motivate students’ personal reading, a few recommendations are offered. First, it is recommended that the library itself be further developed as a whole-school resource. Obsolete print and ICT stock in the office should be removed and class sets of texts and teacher reference texts should be located in a separate area. Given that books currently housed on trolleys cannot be scanned easily by prospective borrowers and that the trolleys cannot easily be wheeled to other locations because of weight distribution issues, it is advised that floor to ceiling shelving be installed on the wall where the trolleys are currently located, with sliding lockable doors. Then the library stock should be organised into junior fiction, senior fiction, and other curricular area sections, between the corridor and office areas. The local public library service could be consulted in this regard. Secondly, it is recommended that the English department interweave the promotion of personal reading into its schemes of work for junior cycle students in particular. For instance, the teachers of English could decide to celebrate “World Book Day” and other similar landmark days, to include the explicit teaching of dictionary skills and skimming and scanning techniques in the first-year scheme for English, and to post a list of recommended books for particular age groups on classroom walls and have them included with booklists for parental reference. See Circular M16/99 “Guidelines for reading at Second Level Schools”. Thirdly, it is encouraged that the English department and the relevant post-holder collectively review the publication Room for Reading: The Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project http://www.jespliteracy.ie/library_demo_project.htm to learn additional strategies that could be used to further strengthen whole school literacy. Relevant JCSP in-service courses and materials, the School Library Association of Ireland and the UK School Library Association could also be referred to in the ongoing development of departmental and whole-school practice in this area. (See http://www.libraryassociation.ie and http://www.sla.org.uk/advice-and-support.php).

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities support the teaching and learning of English in Coláiste na Coitríbe. Students benefit from trips to cinematic and theatrical productions, in-school workshops with visiting writers and guest speakers, the production of a school magazine, and extracurricular debating training. A school musical is produced every few years that provides
students with insights into the mechanics of drama to support their reading of plays and that gives them a lifelong interest in performance. It is suggested that links between the English department and the team that directs that show be established to facilitate the delivery of lessons to different year groups demonstrating the use of stagecraft effects using the dressed stage for the school show. Also, it is suggested that the English department actively and consistently encourage students to take advantage of local literary and film festivals, which constitute wonderful opportunities for independent learning. School management, the English teachers, and other teachers who organise English-related activities are highly commended for their commitment to organising such activities for their students.

English teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities. Sources of professional development that have been accessed by the English department as a group include whole-staff inputs on visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic learning, assessment for learning, active and co-operative learning methods, and homework and learning. External sources of professional development that have been accessed by individual members of the department include in-service courses for the introduction of the new LC syllabus, film studies courses, in-service courses for other subjects that are relevant to English, and further study. With regard to the professional development of the department into the future, it is recommended that Teaching English Support Service (TESS) courses through the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) be more frequently availed of and that the department further deepen its expertise in relation to differentiation and to the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. External CPD providers such as the Special Education Support Service (SESS), the SLSS, and the distance learning course provider ICEP may be helpful in this regard. (See www.slss.ie, www.sess.ie, and http://www.icepe.eu/index.html).

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject department planning is facilitated by school management through formal termly meetings. The teachers of English also meet informally from time to time to discuss issues arising. Minutes of these meetings are documented and this is good practice. Given the non-permanent status of most teachers of English in the school in recent years, the principal asked a permanent staff member teaching English to a large number of class groups to act as subject department co-ordinator. This arrangement is appropriate within the current staffing context of the school. Commendably, specific tasks associated with subject planning, such as co-ordinating the planning, keeping minutes of meetings, and preparing and photocopying common assessments, are voluntarily performed by members of the department every year, thus building teamwork and leadership skills across the team. Also, it was evident that a strong commitment to mentoring new teachers exists in the department and this is lauded. At the beginning of each subject department meeting, it is recommended that time be specifically allocated for a “show and tell” input. Individual members of the department would be asked to present an effective resource or strategy they use in their practice or to share insights they gained from a professional development course, from practices they observed in the English departments of other schools, or from further study.

By the time of the evaluation, the teachers of English had documented their practices under the headings of the relevant School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) subject-planning template and had prepared long-term plans for each year group. Three particular aspects of the current plan demonstrate good practice. From its documentation, it is clear that the department has been engaging in some action planning, identifying its own needs for further development.
Moreover, the agreed long-term departmental plans for year groups have been developed into half-termly or termly schemes of work in some cases, where the knowledge to be gained within a set timeframe is specified. Finally, it was evident that collective decisions have been reached by teachers of different year groups on how their students should record and organise their written work. However, given that the language of instruction for the subject is English, it is advised that all department meetings in relation to the subject should take place in English and that all documentation for the subject should be produced in English. To help develop the English department’s planning even further, three recommendations are offered.

First, it is recommended that the department identify what it considers to be appropriate student learning outcomes for each year group. The draft rebalanced JC English syllabus available on the website of National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the LC English syllabus, and Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) statement materials for exemplars of such learning outcomes are useful resources in this regard. For example, a progression should be clearly apparent from first year onward in plans for the development of students’ writing skills, pre-writing, drafting, proofing, editing, and modelling strategies; spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing competencies; and the planned expansion of students’ vocabularies; reading skills, word and text-attack techniques, library layout and usage, and dictionary and thesaurus usage; and oral communication skills. As part of that work, the department’s existing longterm plans for year groups should be reviewed, to minimise overlap and to ensure such incremental progression. Secondly the department is advised to review the teaching time being allocated to different syllabus elements across the year groups, to ensure that a disproportionate amount of time is not spent on any one area to the detriment of others. Thirdly, in relation to the junior cycle English course being taught, it is encouraged that the department re-visit the concept of planning thematic units of work across the year groups, to ensure that a disproportionate amount of time is not spent on any one area to the detriment of others.

Key strengths of the current TY programme for English include its cross-curricular links with Gaeilge in the creation of the school magazine and its links with Enterprise Studies through mini-company projects, the fact that the two teachers of TY English engage in ongoing joint planning for its delivery, and that project work is incorporated into the programme to promote collaborative and independent learning. Further development of three aspects of the programme will make it an even more stimulating and educative experience. First, it is encouraged that further bridging between junior and senior cycle study be incorporated into the programme, possibly through the introduction of concepts such as the five languages and the comparative modes and through the incorporation of a film-making component into the programme. Secondly, it is advised that students be encouraged to read contemporary newspaper or online reports on topics of their choice, as a basis for individual oral presentations to their peers. This would encourage the development of TY students’ comprehension, vocabulary, and oral communication skills in a purposeful, integrated manner. Thirdly, it is advised that more cross-curricular links be made with TY events that support the teaching and learning of English, such as the production of a school show. To further promote the concept of students taking responsibility for their own learning, an outline of the TY English programme and of the associated key assignments, including criteria and dates for completion, should be provided to students at the beginning of the school year. Lastly, annual evaluations of the programme by students should be closely attended to in planning subsequent TY English programmes.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

In all lessons observed, there was evidence of planning and continuity with prior learning. General classroom instructions were given to students in Irish. This was appropriate, given the mission and characteristic spirit of the school. When subject instruction was being delivered though, all teachers acted as oral language role models in English, and this was appropriate. Where best practice was observed, teachers introduced their students to the learning outcomes for lessons at the outset. All lessons were well-structured and most were delivered at a suitable pace. Areas for development in a few cases were planning adequate time allocations for groups to feedback to their peers on tasks completed within the class and substituting language development activities for written, in-class answering of lower-order comprehension questions that could equally have been set as homework tasks.

Resources used in the lessons evaluated included handouts, copies of studied texts, and dictionaries. There was also evidence that individual teachers use audio versions of poems and film versions of plays and novels to reinforce students’ textual understanding, create customised workbooks to support the study of particular topics, provide students with graphic organisers such as character trees and mindmaps for revision purposes, and also download exemplar answers and notes from internet websites to support the study of particular texts. Whiteboards were used effectively in classes to highlight elements for comment when analysing a text, to record student feedback, and to set in-class or homework assignments. No uses of ICT were observed during the evaluation. It is recommended that the department substantially increase its use of writing samples from newspapers; audio and graphic versions of texts; concrete objects such as relevant props and models; and ICT. Given the general absence of print-rich environments for English due to the lack of base rooms for the subject and to the student- based nature of general classrooms, it is vital that teachers of English use a wider range of resources in their teaching to support student learning.

Teachers generally used questioning to good effect to stimulate and interact with students and to structure the learning activity. Where very good practice was seen, guiding questions were set on the board to guide the reading of a scene and teachers asked a blend of lower-order questions to check understanding, and higher-order questions to elicit students’ personal responses and insights into thematic or character developments. Where weaknesses were noted, questions seeking personal responses and higher-order thinking did not feature sufficiently in the range of questions posed. To motivate students across the range of ability, it is advised that students be occasionally encouraged to consult in pairs when developing answers to higher-order questions.

Among the varied teaching strategies observed were question and answer, teacher and student reading, group work, peer learning where students were asked to listen to and comment on samples of other students’ work read out to them, mind maps, connecting new material to students’ prior knowledge and experience, and in-class writing assignments. Evidence was also gathered that some teachers use creative interventions such as asking students to compose a letter, diary entry, report or other piece of functional writing from the perspective of a particular character in a studied text, spelling tests, word searches, the use of popular songs to introduce poetic techniques, and project work. The teachers of English now need to formally share these methodologies to ensure that all students get the benefit of them.

Two recommendations for pedagogical development across the department are offered. First, the department needs to further advance students’ language and literacy skills from first to sixth year
in a consistent, incremental manner. Some examples of good practice already taking place in individual classrooms in this regard include linking writing tasks with real-life purposes, the identification of new words in texts and their subsequent reinforcement by asking students to seek and record their dictionary meanings, and teacher modelling of paragraph plans for essays on the whiteboard. Areas for development include the setting of more creative intervention exercises in the course of textual study, the reinforcement of new vocabulary through sentence-creation exercises and spelling tests based on those new words, and increased incorporation of in-class free writing to help students articulate their personal analyses and responses to texts. Useful resources in this regard can be accessed from http://www.jcspliteracy.ie/school_wide.htm and http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/. Secondly, while it is acknowledged that differentiation by question was observed in some classes and differentiation by task was observed in one class during the evaluation, it is recommended that the English department further develop its expertise in this area.

Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all lessons evaluated and discipline was maintained in all classes. Teachers affirmed students’ responses and integrated them into lessons and students were comfortable enough to ask their teachers questions where they were unclear about an assignment. Oral questioning by teachers and by the inspector demonstrated students’ very good levels of knowledge of the plot, character traits and relationships, and literary elements of studied texts. Also, it was evident from oral questioning that some students had wide-ranging vocabularies and that some students were able to articulate personal, well-expressed opinions on texts, grounded in evidence. An examination of students' copies revealed that some varied writing tasks had been assigned to them, including summaries, comprehension questions, functional writing tasks, exam-style questions, spelling tests, book reports, grammatical exercises, and projects. In most cases, the balance of writing tasks being set needed to be reviewed, to ensure that enough compositions and personal writing tasks were being set to enable students to incrementally develop their skills in this area. Also, in some instances, students were not implementing routines for the organisation of 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 on how students should present and store their written work, and should consistently expect and communicate such routines to students.

Assessment

A range of assessment modes is used to monitor student competence and progress in English including oral questioning, homework, in-class writing assignments, and formal examinations. Commendable assessment practices are also used by individual members of the department. For instance, one teacher notes errors frequently made across a class group in response to a particular assignment and then plans lessons to remediate those errors. In addition, some teachers provide students with exemplar answers to help them identify and internalise the elements of successful answers. Furthermore, rather than providing decontextualised marks or grades at the end of substantial assignments, some use is made of the State Examination Commission criteria for LC English (Purpose, Coherence, Language use, Mechanics) to mark and comment on senior cycle assignments, thus giving those students more specific insights into strengths and areas for development in their writing. A simplified version of the criteria could similarly be introduced in teacher commentary on or marking of substantial pieces of junior cycle writing. Finally, another teacher prepares quotation quizzes to enable students to engage in self-assessment. Such
assessment practices are highly commended and it is recommended that they be incorporated into the department’s collective assessment practices.

From a review of student copies, it was evident that homework was being set and monitored in all classes. Students’ work was either acknowledged by a tick and short comment, by a general suggestion for the improvement of the piece of writing, or by specific formative feedback, affirming specific strengths in the assignment and offering specific advice for the improvement of the piece. All members of the department now need to move toward giving the latter type of formative feedback on substantial pieces of student writing. The department is urged to discuss this issue and to arrive at a consensus on it, so that teachers’ responses to students’ writing are consistent from first to sixth year. While the department has already had an input on assessment for learning from the SDPI and from an in-house staff member currently working on a whole-school pedagogical initiative, it needs to further investigate this area. In this regard, the department may find the NCCA’s assessment for learning web pages and the JCSP publication Between the Lines useful.

Two other aspects of student assessment need to be developed by the department. First, it is encouraged that teachers 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 will give the teacher a good benchmark for skill development programme planning. Secondly, it is suggested that the department agree a common position on awarding some marks toward end-of-term results for tasks linked to the agreed learning outcomes for different year groups. Tasks could include spelling and vocabulary tests, a cumulative average for composition work, folder maintenance, quotation tests, oral presentations, and project work.

A common Christmas assessment of second years’ progress in English was administered in 2007/08. This practice is commended and it is encouraged that more common assessments be prepared for class groups preparing for the same examination level. Most teachers use State Examination Commission chief examiners’ reports and marking schemes to inform their work and this is good practice. Students’ results in certificate examinations are compared with national norms by the principal. It was reported that the board of management, teachers, and parents are informed of those outcomes every year.

Students are assessed using in-class assessments and formal Christmas and end-of-year examinations. Reports are issued by the school twice yearly, communicating the results of formal examinations. Information regarding student progress is also communicated to parents through annual parent-teacher meetings.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Timetable provision for English is in line with syllabus requirements.
- School management is commended for its concurrent timetabling of English classes in most year groups, for making funds available on request for the purchase of resources, and for encouraging and facilitating the teachers of English to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities.
Students are placed in mixed-ability classes in first year and remain in mixed-ability classes until the end of sixth year. This practice is highly commended for encouraging and facilitating all students to aspire to sitting higher-level examinations.

The teachers of English, school management, and other teachers who organise English-related activities are highly commended for their commitment to organising such activities for their students.

A subject department co-ordinator is in place, formal departmental meetings take place and are minuted, and a subject department plan and long-term plans for each year group have been produced.

In all lessons, there was evidence of planning and continuity with prior learning and varied teaching strategies were used.

Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms evaluated and discipline was maintained in all classes.

Evidence of good assessment practices being used by individual teachers was gathered during the evaluation.

From a review of student copies, it was evident that homework was being set and monitored in all classes.

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

- Over the coming years, the teachers of English should formally share the various methodologies they employ and should continue to develop their collective range of teaching strategies. Specific topics for discussion should include how to incrementally develop students’ literacy skills from first to sixth year in a consistent manner, differentiation approaches and resources, and the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English.
- The English department should further develop its common approach to assessment, as advised in this report.
- Advice provided in relation to planning and teacher deployment for TY English should be implemented over the coming years.
- Whole school support for the subject should be further developed by increasing the availability of AV and ICT equipment through planning and swopping arrangements and through the further development of the library.

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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