Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Carrigallen Vocational School
Carrigallen, Co. Leitrim
Roll number: 71540J

Date of inspection: 10 February 2011
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Carrigallen Vocational School. 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 one day 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

Carrigallen Vocational School has a current enrolment of 242 students. The Junior Certificate, the established Leaving Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Vocational programmes are provided in the school. An optional Transition Year (TY) programme was introduced in senior cycle in the current school year and two class groups have been formed.

Curricular provision and timetabling for this subject is very good. Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups for first year and, based on a common assessment test, are provided with the option to study English at either higher-level or ordinary-level from the beginning of second year. The allocation of an additional teacher and concurrent timetabling for English from the beginning of second year provides significant support to students so that uptake of the higher-level course is both encouraged and facilitated.

Two class rooms have been designated as English rooms and great work has been done to create a supportive language learning environment in both these rooms. The range of resources available to support teaching and learning in English is very good. Data projectors and an interactive whiteboard are available in the English rooms and it was positive to note that students may remotely access notes and other resources through an e-portal on the school’s website. There is a library available, though pressure for classroom space has meant that access to the books is somewhat restricted. Nevertheless, the teachers of English have put in place strategies to encourage usage of the library and to promote reading among the students. Time is set aside for reading in the schemes of work for first and second years and this is very good.

The English teaching team is appropriately qualified and their commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) is well supported by management. They are commended for the co-curricular activities that they facilitate. These range from trips to the theatre, to debating and public speaking, to encouragement to write creatively. Students have participated in poetry
competitions and in Dáil na nÓg. The learning experiences that these activities provide are valuable supports to the development of practical communication skills and social literacy.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

There is very good quality planning for teaching and learning in English evident in this school. A collaborative team spirit characterises interactions between members of the subject department who have made very good use of the time provided to them by management to develop a subject plan. All of the recommendations made in a previous subject inspection report have been addressed.

The planning documentation presented for this evaluation was very good. It provides a clear and concise summary of the arrangements in place for teaching English and included well-developed schemes of work for each year group. The high quality TY plan typifies the very professional approach taken by the English teaching team to planning their work. It includes opportunities for students to gain practical experience of creating both drama and film and encourages their creative writing. Strong links with the learning support department are referred to in the English plan, which includes a comprehensive note on the role of the English department in supporting students with literacy support needs.

To progress the good work described above, the following recommendations are made: the general description of the course content to be taught to each year group should include a list of intended learning outcomes to be achieved across the four domains of language – speaking, listening, reading and writing. The benefits of establishing a specific developmental aim for each year group in junior cycle should also be considered. For example, a focus on reading skills such as skimming and scanning in first year, or on note-making skills in second year, might be considered.

Teachers’ individual planning for lessons was very good. Resources appropriate to the lesson task and to the abilities of students were prepared and on hand.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very clear routine for the beginning of lessons has been established. Lessons opened with a recap of previous lessons and correction of homework. This is good practice as it reinforces prior learning and helps students to situate new material. It also helped to establish a good working atmosphere in classes from the outset. Students were, as a result, very quickly focussed on their work and teaching and learning time was used productively. It is recommended that teachers should share clear intended learning outcomes with students at the beginning of the lesson. These should be revisited both during and at the conclusion of lessons to ascertain students’ learning.

The teaching strategies used in the lessons observed ensured that students were focussed and actively involved in their own learning. For example, in a junior-cycle lesson on poetry, students were asked to construct a mind map of ideas prompted by the topic of the poem. This established an interactive atmosphere in the lesson, such that students were very confident contributing to class discussion of the poem. The practice, as observed, of linking students’ interpretation of poetry with their own experiences is commended. In this lesson, as in others, particularly good
attention was paid to the teaching of key words and newly encountered vocabulary. This approach was very supportive of all students including those who do not have English as their first language. In all classes, the language used by the teachers was appropriate to the class group being taught so that the lessons were communicated in a way that was understood by all students. Key concepts and skills were clearly explained to the students and repeated adequately.

In some of the lessons observed, students were encouraged to tackle a task independently of the teacher, for example, to compose an autobiographical poem while the teacher moved through the room to interact with them. Strategies which push students to think tasks through either individually or in pairs or small groups create opportunities for students to learn from each other and for the teacher to offer discreet encouragement to less able students. More frequent use of these approaches is suggested. Questioning was the most frequently used teaching tactic and it was effective in both directing students’ attention and in identifying where learning needed to be reinforced. In all cases, questioning was specific, relevant and clear. Students with different levels of ability were catered for in all classes. Teachers avoided dominance by any one student in answering questions by encouraging all to respond. Adequate time was allowed for students to formulate answers to questions.

The quality of learning in the lessons observed was good. In their contributions to class discussions, it was evident that students are very familiar with their studied texts and are confident discussing characters and themes. Opportunities for critical analysis were provided in all lessons. In some instances, closed questions were used to lead students through small analytic steps. Students’ understanding of the features of different text types was evident and they are proficient at identifying the techniques used by writers. However, it was not clear that they can use that knowledge effectively to advance an argument or to support an opinion. It is important that technique is always discussed in context, so that its effect is considered.

An examination of students’ copybooks indicated that senior-cycle students are required to complete exercises in evaluation, critical commentary and critical analysis. The quality achieved here is good. Where there were weaknesses, these related to students’ failure to develop ideas sufficiently and, in a minority of instances, syntactical and phrasal errors. There was an emphasis on comprehension and knowledge questions in the junior-cycle copies seen, drawing on completion of anthology questions or past certificate examination questions. It is suggested that more attention should be given to encouraging students’ creativity in composition at this level. Some very good work was seen in these copies. An over-reliance on questions for answer stems and inappropriate colloquialisms were the principal flaws in this work. However, the very good use of writing models and the teaching and learning interventions planned by the English team address these difficulties. To further support this, it is recommended that the teachers of English should agree common expectations regarding the presentation of students’ work and the maintenance of notes. Developing strategies to communicate these standards to students is also recommended.

ASSESSMENT

The English department has developed its own homework policy and it was evident that homework is regularly set and monitored. The nature of the teacher feedback on written work varies across the department. It ranges from tick marking which acknowledges completion of homework to more comprehensive commentary on students’ work. It is recommended that a more consistent approach should be agreed. Comment marking allows the teacher to provide students
both with affirmation of their efforts and with advice on areas needing attention. More extensive use of such a strategy is recommended. Teachers maintain good records of students’ work. The practice evident in one classroom visited of creating a ‘report sheet’ which profiles students’ completion of and achievement in homework exercises and class tests is very good and should be considered by the full department.

In order to support the aim expressed in the school and by the teachers of English to improve students’ achievements in certificate examinations, it is recommended that opportunities for students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their own work should be developed. The benefits of this approach include greater awareness, prior to the writing phase, of what constitutes a good piece of work. This can help students to shape their work, practise targeted skills and monitor their own progress. Teachers could draw on the published marking schemes for past certificate examinations to begin this process.

In addition to occasional class tests in English, students sit summative house examinations at Christmas and at the end of the summer term. Students in third and fifth year sit house examinations at Christmas and ‘mock’ examinations early in the spring term. Continuous assessment is facilitated in TY. Reports issue twice yearly to parents following these tests. In addition, a progress report is sent home during the first term for students in fifth year.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Curricular provision and timetabling for English is very good. A supportive language learning environment has been created in the English rooms and there is a very good range of resources available to support teaching and learning in the subject.
- The co-curricular activities available to students support the development of practical communication skills and social literacy.
- There is very good quality planning for teaching and learning in English evident in this school.
- The teaching strategies used in the lessons observed ensured that students were focussed and actively involved in their own learning.
- Students are making good progress through their courses and the quality of learning achieved is good.

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

- The general description of the course content to be taught to each year group should include a list of intended learning outcomes to be achieved across the four domains of language.
- Opportunities for students to identify relevant criteria for evaluating their own work should be developed.
A post-evaluation meeting was 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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