An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Comeragh College
Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary
Roll number: 72400V

Date of inspection: 16 September 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Comeragh College, Carrick-on-Suir. 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, deputy 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

Comeragh College is the only co-educational school in Carrick-on-Suir and it caters for students from the town and surrounding areas. Its buildings are on two sites that are some distance apart, one housing junior cycle classes and most specialist rooms, and one for senior cycle. The school offers the Junior Certificate, the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) and Leaving Certificate. The Leaving Certificate Applied programme was offered up to 2009 but has been discontinued. In this context, the English teaching team is mindful of the needs of students who may not be academically inclined but need to succeed in Leaving Certificate English.

First-year students are placed initially in random groups and are then tested in mid-September, using a combination of standardised and school-generated assessments. Students are then placed in streamed class groups of different sizes, and generally remain in these groups, as evident from the records of class lists seen during the evaluation. Streaming is a long-established practice in the school, and the management and long-serving teachers feel that it serves both the very able and less able students well. However, the teachers of English have identified the raising of attainment of students of average ability as an objective within the subject plan. This should lead to an examination of the impact of streaming on these students. Another factor to consider is that the system of streaming has tended to create a large middle stream in all years, in comparison with class sizes in the high and low streams, and this situation also merits examination and adjustment.

Six teachers are deployed to teach English in the school, a relatively large number given the size of the school. Three teach English as their main subject, a fourth delivers literacy support and takes some small class groups for English, and the remaining two mainly teach other subjects. The practice of regularly deploying teachers of English to only one or two class groups should be avoided if possible, as it limits their scope to deliver the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth. However, it is good that most of the teachers of English teach in both the junior and senior cycle. All teachers with a significant English-teaching commitment should have the opportunity to teach the subject to the full range of years and levels. Some team-teaching is taking place in the junior cycle to support students with literacy deficits.
While such an initiative is to be encouraged, at the moment there is a striking difference between the teacher hours allocated for English to the middle and the lower groups. For example, a lower-stream group of five students has almost six teacher hours of English each week, while a middle-stream group of twenty-seven students in the same year has just three. This allocation exacerbates the imbalance in class sizes, and should be addressed for the next academic year.

English is generally well provided for on the timetable. All junior cycle class groups have five periods per week, with some additional provision for lower streams. Lessons are distributed throughout the week and optimal provision, a lesson per day, is offered in many instances. The importance of this very regular contact with the subject should be borne in mind, especially in the case of class groups where there are significant literacy difficulties. Where a lesson per day is not possible, English should be timetabled on both Monday and Friday so as to minimise the gap between lessons. English is timetabled concurrently for all class groups in fifth and sixth year, with five lessons provided in fifth year and a generous six lessons in sixth year.

Classrooms are not assigned to teachers or to class groups, so a class group may have English in a number of different rooms over the week. While the split campus rules out teacher-based rooms, the greatest possible continuity in the assigning of rooms to class groups for English would allow the rooms to be developed as a resource, with appropriate subject-related displays, including displays of students’ work. The development of a resource room for English could be included as part of the longer-term plan for the subject and merits the support of school management. Teachers of English should also discuss the classroom layout most appropriate to the subject, and there would be great merit in making this a whole-school topic. At present, a number of the larger rooms are being underutilised as learning spaces as a result of traditional and inflexible seating. An arrangement of desks and chairs that facilitated activity-based learning and student interaction would be likely to increase students’ participation and engagement. The learning support room visited was pleasant and visually stimulating, and an attractively stocked library space has been created in the junior school building.

Planning and Preparation

School development planning is well established in Comeragh College and the school’s planning co-ordinator is a member of the English teaching team. Subject planning for English has progressed to a good standard. A system of rotating the subject co-ordinator is in place, although the teachers acknowledged that the rotation has involved only a few members of the team. It would be a useful exercise to discuss and agree a description of the role of co-ordinator along with a rota involving all the main teachers of English, to be included in the subject plan. Formal meetings take place three times a year and extend beyond organisational matters to include a focus on the development of students’ skills, analysis of results, ways of raising attainment, and both review and forward planning. A pleasing level of reflective practice was evident in the English planning folder, and in the teachers’ comments on the development of the subject in the school. In addition to the hard copy plan, an electronic folder has been set up, containing relevant official documents and a range of in-house and externally sourced resources.

The English plan is based on the relevant syllabuses, and covers course content, methods of teaching and assessment, and resources. In the junior cycle plan, the syllabus aims can be seen in the emphasis on personal, social and cultural literacy beginning with simple personal writing and moving towards a more challenging engagement with language and literature. A range of novels and a thematic treatment of poetry is suggested, an approach suited to the syllabus objectives. A section of the plan refers to strategies and resources for those following the JCSP. The plan is
cognisant of the school context and refers to a wide range of material, from accessible books to Shakespearean drama. The senior cycle plan is less detailed and reflects an approach based on teachers’ individual schemes of work and choice of texts from those prescribed. A greater level of collaboration in senior cycle planning is recommended. A common approach to the poetry course, with a sampling survey in fifth year and more detailed study in sixth year, was discussed and could perhaps be considered for inclusion in next year’s plan.

The English plan is understood to be a work in progress and two areas for development could be considered: a greater collaborative element to planning to ensure the sharing of good practice among all members of the teaching team; and a greater focus in planning on the learning objectives appropriate to the students and the programmes. With regard to the latter point, a common approach that identifies for each year group what students ‘must, should and could’ be able to do provides a practical means of differentiating learning targets. It also ensures a focus on the development of skills in tandem with the coverage of course content.

It was clear that teachers who have taught senior cycle English for many years work closely together. Further development of collaborative planning and the sharing of expertise within the teaching team would be of particular assistance to teachers whose main subject focus is other than English and would help to ensure a more cohesive and unified delivery of the subject to all students. It would also enhance the good individual planning observed and strengthen the level of reflective practice already established within the teaching team.

Stimulating and challenging texts were chosen in many of the junior cycle lessons observed and this is particularly commendable given the open nature of the syllabus. However, anthology-style textbooks should be used judiciously, especially with the lower streams. Efforts have also been made to choose appealing and substantial material from the texts prescribed for Leaving Certificate. A careful distinction must be made between texts for the single and the comparative study. A lack of clarity in this regard was noted in one instance during the evaluation. Care should also be taken in planning the very different approaches required for the single and comparative study, as these can sometimes cause confusion, especially for students taking ordinary level.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Nine lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes, and involving all members of the English teaching team. Where teaching of a good quality was observed, it reflected an evident enthusiasm for English, a broad knowledge of the subject, and a desire to provide stimulus and challenge for the students. In the few instances where the teaching observed was not of this standard, there was less certainty with regard to syllabus aims and objectives, and a less purposeful approach to the development of the appropriate level of reading and writing skills. Discussion and agreement on the “must, should and could” learning targets mentioned above would help to ensure a more consistent and skills-based approach in all teaching and learning activities in the English classroom.

Most of the lessons observed were well planned and the pace and sequencing of lesson activities were generally effective. However, in a few instances an obvious end-point, such as the end of a chapter, was not reached. A short pre-reading exercise to point up key moments and alert students to plot developments would allow the subsequent reading to proceed with fewer interruptions for explanation. In one junior cycle lesson on the short story, a very successful reading was accomplished, aided by an introductory exercise in which students recalled key aspects of the short story form, and therefore followed the reading very attentively.
Areas covered in the lessons observed included report-writing skills, grammar, poetry, the short story, the novel, and drama. Most lessons observed covered a satisfactory amount of work, although purposeful forward movement was better managed in some than others. In these cases, a clear statement of the lesson topic and planned learning outcomes at the outset would help to establish a sense of purpose, and would underline to students that they have an active part to play in their own learning. Similarly, a recapping of learning outcomes to conclude the lesson is suggested as a means of consolidating progress made.

An open and discursive approach was taken to the studied texts. A particularly strong feature of the practice observed was the readiness with which teachers spoke of their personal responses to texts. A number of teachers commented during the evaluation that they found this approach engendered trust and was likely to lead to more open and considered responses from students. The modelling of thoughtful personal response was observed to be successful in generating classroom discussion, although care should be taken to ensure that such discussion remains structured and purposeful, and is of a noticeably different kind in, for example, a first-year and a sixth-year group. Imaginative approaches to the study of poetry were noted, and they elicited perceptive responses from students in many cases.

Questioning formed a natural part of the classroom interaction in all lessons observed. Questions were used to test recall and basic understanding and, less often but very effectively, to prompt students towards more considered responses. Questions requiring higher-order skills of analysis or inference were put to students in both junior and senior classes, but greater attention to higher-order questioning is recommended, and this includes the use of follow-up questions to elicit more extended responses. While class groups have been formed on the basis of perceived ability, a considerable ability range was evident in many of the lessons observed. The differentiation of outcomes already mentioned with regard to the ‘must, should and could’ approach has a very clear practical application with regard to questioning techniques. The greater use of probing questions to challenge students and to provide an oral rehearsal of ideas for a written task would be a good way of indicating to students what they should and could be able to write about.

Teachers were mindful of the need to develop students’ writing skills and in particular to encourage more extended and substantial writing. In some of the lessons observed, an integrated writing task formed part of the classwork. However, a staged approach to the development of writing skills should perhaps be regarded as an area for development in subject planning and practice. The usefulness of a variety of writing frames was discussed during the evaluation, and creating a bank of such scaffolding techniques to assist students to extend their writing would be a very useful collaborative project. With regard to the explicit teaching of grammar and syntax, a non-contextualised approach should be avoided. It is much easier for students to grasp correct usage and sentence construction if they have an opportunity to see them at work in a text. Exercises requiring students to produce their own texts, imitating exemplars they have studied, are much more likely to lead to more accurate writing than are drill-type unlinked sentences.

In most of the lessons observed, there was clear evidence of students’ engagement with the subject and of progress made, even at an early stage in the school year. Students were often able to link new and prior learning and to recall significant points from the previous year’s work. A number of students were notably articulate and confident, and clearly enjoyed the airing of different points of view in class discussion. In many cases, students had little difficulty in supporting their opinions, and numerous perceptive responses were noted across the range of class groups, not only in top streams. However, a greater emphasis on students’ responsibility for
their own learning within the very supportive environment provided is recommended. To this end, the teaching team could consider more use of interactive and co-operative learning methods.

**ASSESSMENT**

There was good classroom monitoring of students’ work and student participation in most of the lessons observed. Targeted questions were used to check students’ understanding and to ensure that they remained focused on the work in hand. Where classroom discussion was purposeful and structured, it also provided teachers with a means of gauging students’ grasp of ideas. Where classroom tasks were set, teachers circulated to monitor students’ work and to provide direction where required.

A number of students’ copybooks and folders were reviewed. The good practice of organising folders so as to build up an accessible store of material for revision was noted in many cases. Copybooks assigned to different areas of the course were also noted. Students should be encouraged to organise their work in a way that adds to its value for them, in order to underpin a sense of ownership of their work.

Interesting assignments were set, for example a comparison between a tired and a fresh view of the world with reference to the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh. There was evidence that students had learned from errors made and corrected, and helpful feedback was given on a number of the assignments seen. However, in some cases the homework assigned was not sufficiently challenging or meaningful. A clear link should be maintained between work done in class and homework, and all substantial written work should merit a comment to affirm effort and to support improvement.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable makes good provision for English.
- Subject planning for English has progressed to a good standard, and a pleasing level of reflective practice was evident during the evaluation.
- Much of the teaching observed reflected an evident enthusiasm for English, a broad knowledge of the subject, and a desire to provide stimulus and challenge for the students.
- In most of the lessons observed, there was clear evidence of students’ engagement with the subject and of progress made.

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

- The present system of class formation in the junior cycle should be examined in terms of its implications for class size, student attainment and best use of teaching resources.
- Collaborative planning should involve all teachers of English and should focus on agreeing what students must, should and could be able to do.
- There should be a greater emphasis on encouraging students’ responsibility for their own learning within the very supportive environment provided.
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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