

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Presentation Secondary School
Listowel, County Kerry
Roll number: 61380H**

Date of inspection: 21 January 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 Presentation Secondary 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 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

Presentation Secondary School is an all-girls school. Classes in first-year are provided with four lessons of English per week. This is adequate provision. The school is encouraged to investigate the possibility of expanding this provision to five lessons per week, as is recommended in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. The inevitable limitations of the timetabling process must, however, be recognised in making this suggestion. Timetabled provision for English in second year, third year, Transition Year (TY), fifth year and sixth year is good. The allocation of three lessons for English and Communication in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is adequate. Overall, timetabled provision for English is good.

Classes in junior cycle are of mixed ability. One small class group is also organised which facilitates the provision of additional support for those students with difficulties in literacy development. The concurrent timetabling of these latter class groups with other classes is commendable. Students are assigned to levels following their mock examinations and their decisions are informed by their teachers' advice, along with students' and parents' preferences. Delaying decisions with regard to levels to be attempted in the Junior Certificate examination until third year in this manner is positive. In senior cycle, students' decisions regarding level are again informed by their teachers' advice, along with their own and their parents' preferences.

There is a school library. A post-holder organises the library, which is open to all students for two lunchtimes each week. A survey is carried out to assess the reading needs of students. The library incorporates contemporary posters to motivate student reading, along with an impressive and enticing range of teen fiction. Beyond this, a section for reluctant readers is located in the library. There is also a class library in one of the school's support rooms. A number of teachers run a book club for their classes which is facilitated through the library. All of this is commendable. Further ideas on the development of school libraries can be accessed at www.jcspliteracy.ie, which contains a valuable evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) Demonstration Library Project. Two possibilities which may be worthy of investigation include

the *wordmillionaire* reading initiative and the organisation of a paired-reading programme. Again, information on both of these ideas can be accessed on the aforementioned website. It is suggested that the English department should consolidate current good practice through the incorporation of a reading policy in the subject plan.

English teachers have reasonable access to audio-visual equipment. The school is encouraged to expand the availability of such equipment, within the limits of available resources. This should be viewed as an important step in supporting the development of English teaching in the school. This is the case due to the centrality of film in the Leaving Certificate syllabus. Beyond this, the judicious selection of DVD excerpts to support pre-reading and other exercises in both junior and senior cycle cannot be discounted. English teachers are strongly encouraged to seize opportunities to utilise audio-visual resources, wherever they occur. During the evaluation the use of audio-visual equipment in conjunction with information and communication technology (ICT) was observed and teachers are strongly encouraged to share good practice in this area wherever possible.

Classrooms are generally student-based, although the English department has been assigned a base-room which it shares with the Irish department. This development is strongly endorsed and it is suggested that the assigning of a specific base-room for English should be considered. There is an annual budget provided for the English department. This is good practice.

Access to ICT is available through the school's computer room, two computers in the staffroom and internet access which is available in some classrooms. A number of data projectors are also available. The English plan has a list of relevant internet resources and the internet is used for research to support the subject. Beyond this, visual resources accessed through ICT were observed during the evaluation and an imaginative use of 'youtube' was planned as part of the English programme in one instance. The English department is strongly urged to grasp other opportunities which arise for the use of ICT to support teaching and learning, particularly as the availability of ICT equipment expands across the school. Indeed the area of e-learning should be of particular interest to English teachers.

The school is supportive of teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). Teachers have availed of CPD opportunities in English and maintain links with the relevant subject association. The school supports teachers' membership of their subject association. The school has also engaged with whole-staff in-service education on the area of assessment for learning. As an extension of this work it is recommended that assessment for learning should become a focus for departmental CPD in the future. This should incorporate a teaching-and-learning focus for discussion in subject departmental meetings where members of the department would share their experiences and skills with each other in developing the use of assessment-for-learning strategies in the medium-term. This focus on assessment for learning should incorporate departmental inputs from the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) as well as teacher-led presentations within the department and, potentially, between the English department and other subject departments. Ultimately, this CPD could incorporate teachers' observation of each others' practice in the area of assessment for learning. Opportunities for co-operative teaching might usefully be considered in this context. The involvement of all departmental members in this process is strongly urged.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A junior cycle and a senior cycle co-ordinator have been appointed on a rotational basis. There is one departmental meeting per term, along with other, informal, meetings between members of the department. Minutes of formal departmental meetings are kept in the subject folder. The focus of recent departmental meetings has been on the updating of the subject plan and text choice. Some records of discussions with regard to teaching-and-learning methodologies were also contained in the subject plan. As recommended in the previous paragraph, the department should move to incorporate a formal teaching-and-learning focus in departmental meetings and, in the medium term, this focus should be on the sharing and development of assessment-for-learning strategies. Analysis of students' performance in the certificate examinations in comparison to national norms has been undertaken and the English department is involved in this process. This is good practice and it is suggested that analysis of uptake of levels should also be included in this process in the future.

The subject department has demonstrated considerable commitment in the development of a subject plan. A range of documents relevant to the teaching and learning of English are maintained in the subject folder, including syllabus documents, circulars, material dealing with special educational needs and the Department of Education and Science publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. Beyond this, common schemes of work have been created which are time-linked and incorporate some links to skills development. This is positive and it is recommended that the current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, syllabus-based and time-linked learning goals. These plans should be developed incrementally and should allow teachers considerable freedom in the selection of the content they will cover, although some synchronicity between classes in each year group will, of course, still be desirable. The recent *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle which is published on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website at www.ncca.ie could provide some useful insights for this work. The suggested focus on learning goals will aid teachers' assessment of students. It is also recommended that the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be highlighted as part of each yearly plan.

A range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities are organised by English teachers. These include visits to the cinema and theatre and the involvement of a number of senior cycle students in public-speaking competitions. Of particular note is the school's yearbook which is a comprehensive overview of the school and its activities. It is also representative of the literary heritage of the greater Listowel area, incorporating extensive poetry pages and other literary endeavours which are most impressive. All of these efforts are to be applauded.

There is some variation of texts in junior cycle and senior cycle, within syllabus guidelines. This practice is encouraged as a means of suiting texts to students' interests and experiences. A Shakespearean text is studied as part of the students' junior cycle, as well as a modern play. This practice is commendable, particularly in a context where the modern play chosen is clearly linked with the students' own local cultural heritage. In the context of Leaving Certificate classes, it is recommended that the current practice of synchronising the single text studied in ordinary-level classes with the single text being studied in higher-level classes should be discontinued. Some synchronicity between levels should certainly be applied to the choice of texts in senior cycle, in order to facilitate ease of movement between levels where this proves to be necessary. However, the adoption of one of the comparative texts used in higher-level classes as the single text in

ordinary-level classes would be a more reasonable strategy. The approach currently in place may lead to needless frustration and anxiety for ordinary-level students. With this latter concern in mind, the quantity of poetry currently studied in ordinary-level classes should also be reconsidered.

There is a subject-specific TY programme for English. It is suggested that, as a further addition to the very good work already being undertaken, an English portfolio, consisting of a set number of major genre exercises linked to texts being studied during the year could be adopted. This could serve as an element in the students' overall assessment, thus acting as a further focus and motivation for their written work during the year. In addition, the incorporation of an oral element in the assessment of English in TY should be considered. Such an assessment could be linked to the current work undertaken in debating and oral presentations as part of students' TY experience. A competition which may be worth investigating in this regard is *Poetry Aloud*, details of which may be found at www.poetryireland.ie. In undertaking future revisions of the TY plan, the department is referred to the Transition Units, which are currently available on the NCCA website, as a potentially useful model.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs team. Education plans have been developed for students with special educational needs and these are shared with mainstream English teachers. Professional development in the area of students with special educational needs has been provided in the past and further in-service education in this area is planned. It is suggested that, as a further development of its current practice, the English department should investigate possibilities with regard to harnessing co-operative teaching as a further addition to the models of support currently offered to students with special educational needs.

There are a number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). The school recognizes this as an area for development. An EAL policy is in the process of being drafted and a range of resources has been collated to support EAL students' language learning and access to the mainstream curriculum. Resources from the website www.elsp.ie are stored in the EAL folder and set out a range of strategies which would aid students' learning in mainstream classrooms. The English language support teacher has attended in-service education provided by the SLSS. It is suggested that the policy should contain an explicit statement regarding the importance of acknowledging and supporting students' home languages. It is positive to note that elements of the school environment have already begun to be adjusted in support of such an acknowledgement. Beyond this, reference to the use of the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit* to assess students' English language competence should form an element in the policy. The use of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) as a key approach in supporting these students should form an element in the English subject plan, with particular reference to the use of writing frames as a means of supporting extended writing for EAL students.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, teaching and learning was of a good standard. Lessons began in a number of ways, variously incorporating recapitulation of work already covered, the taking of the roll and the reading of students' homework. In a number of lessons, teachers gave an indication of the theme of the lesson or the homework which it was anticipated that students would engage with that evening, based on the work done that day. This was positive. As a further extension of this good

work, the learning intention should be stated clearly for students at the outset of all lessons. This will serve to focus students on the skills and knowledge which they should have appropriated, while also aiding teachers and students in assessing the extent of learning which has taken place. Planning was evident in all cases. Very good planning was observed where shifts in activity and pacing were factored into the preparation for the lesson. In the majority of cases, the pacing of lessons was well-handled. In many instances teachers also presented records of students' achievement which were carefully maintained.

A range of resources was used to support teaching and learning during the evaluation. These included the whiteboard, a bag of potatoes, labels, ICT and the television. Of particular note was the imaginative use of a number of different materials in a senior cycle lesson to aid students' understanding of the themes of prejudice and understanding. The English department is encouraged to continue to expand the use of varied resources to ensure increased engagement and understanding on the part of students. This is particularly relevant with regard to the introduction and study of literary texts. In one lesson a dictionary and thesaurus was available for use by the class group. This was positive and it is suggested that this practice should be expanded across the English department.

The use of pair work and group work, along with other active-learning methodologies was observed in a number of lessons during the evaluation. In one instance *hotseating* was used, with students adopting the persona of a character in the text they were studying during a staged television interview. This worked very well, not only engaging students with the exercise in question, but also advancing their understanding of, and empathy with, the characters involved. The use of a laptop to reproduce the music of the television news, along with the provision of various costumes, added to the impact of this strategy. In another lesson students discussed a character from a short story in pairs. This placed responsibility on students for their own learning, which was worthwhile. It is suggested that the further investigation of strategies such as *placemat*, *snowball* and *envoy* would be worthwhile to further add to the focus of these types of activities. In a number of lessons teachers were encouraged to move towards a greater balance between teacher and student talk. In particular, the adoption of active methodologies and assessment-for-learning strategies would be useful in addressing the issue of student passivity, where it occurred. Overall, teacher questioning varied between whole-class and directed questioning. In one instance a move towards a greater range of questioning strategies than was undertaken in class was advocated and here, the incorporation of a wider range of active methodologies should also be incorporated into practice.

Activities focused on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing featured frequently in lessons. In one, senior cycle, lesson a class listened carefully for details regarding their classmates' identities, an exercise which had been expertly linked by their teacher to the theme of 'prejudice'. In another lesson, a pre-reading exercise was facilitated through the use of a film poster to scaffold students' thoughts and engagement with the story and the characters in a class novel. In a junior cycle class, students listened to each other constructing elements of a story. This was followed by their being offered an opportunity to provide input, with each of these activities being linked to writing and reading exercises. The integration of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in this manner is most positive and the English department is encouraged to continue, and to expand, its practice in focusing on the development of these and other approaches which achieve this goal.

There was a focus on the discussion and analysis of writers' use of language in a number of lessons. In one, junior cycle, lesson the use of short sentences and carefully organised punctuation to create a feeling of tension was highlighted for students. The teacher then proceeded to link the

new text being analysed with poetry which had been studied in the past, thus building on students' previous experiences and understanding. In another, senior cycle, lesson a notes grid was distributed which focused on the language features of a piece of writing. Students were also focused on their personal responses to a piece of writing during this lesson. This was worthwhile.

Good classroom management was observed in all cases and classes were conducted in an ordered and safe environment. In one instance, classroom seating was appropriately rearranged 'in the round' to add to a sense of openness and sharing which greatly enhanced the work undertaken. In another lesson, it was suggested that the pace of presentation by the teacher should be decreased, particularly in the context of the presence of an EAL student. Teachers were affirming to students and this was particularly evident in a number of junior cycle lessons where students' success was highlighted and celebrated. Students were generally engaged in lessons and, overall, displayed a good knowledge of texts being studied.

The assigning of a base-room for use by the English department, in co-operation with the Irish department, is very positive. It is recommended that opportunities to expand the English print-rich environment in this room should be pursued, or in any other room which might be assigned to the English department in the future. Strategies such as the display of keywords, key quotes from texts being studied, character diagrams, graphic organisers and media posters would all be worth pursuing. In addition, the display of students' work in a variety of genres would enhance their awareness of audience as well as the drafting and redrafting process. Such approaches will aid the learning of EAL students, students with difficulties in literacy development and, indeed, all students. In other, student-based, classrooms there were instances of some development of a print-rich environment. This is positive and the department is strongly encouraged to continue to advance this process. The creation of print-rich and text-rich environments should be noted in the subject plan as a key aspect of English departmental policy and practice.

ASSESSMENT

There was evidence of homework being assigned in all cases. In one instance the publication of a book of students' writing was very worthwhile, adding to their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The use of comment-based assessment was frequently in evidence and was very worthwhile in those classes where it occurred. In a number of senior cycle classes the use of the rubrics adopted in the Leaving Certificate examination and the sharing of these with students was also featured as part of the teachers' practice. It is suggested that, where these rubrics are applied, teachers should also incorporate some comment-based marking in order to further inform the development of students' literacy skills. A very good aspect of one support lesson was the use of awards and peer assessment to enhance students' self-esteem and sense of self-efficacy. Opportunities to explore the many possibilities available in the area of peer assessment should be undertaken, in conjunction with the subject departmental focus previously recommended in this report.

The use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses was observed in some students' homework. This was positive. The English department is strongly encouraged to further expand its use of this strategy. This could involve the greater utilisation of genre-transfer activities as elements in students' homework, along with encouragement towards the use of writing techniques encountered by students' in their own writing. The setting out of clear rubrics around the expected features of language and genre to be utilised in students' homework when it is assigned would further aid the efficacy of this approach. Differentiated

exercises were assigned in a number of lessons observed. In this respect, worthwhile approaches adopted to aid the engagement and learning of students with difficulties in literacy development included the provision of writing frames and cloze tests as well as the anticipated use of ICT in smaller support classes. This was good practice.

Formal house examinations are organised for all students in February. Students who are not participating in the certificate examinations have formal house examinations at the end of the academic year. Common examinations between classes are organised where practicable. This is good practice. In the case of students who have been granted Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE), these are acknowledged in house examinations where this is feasible. Continual assessment on the part of teachers is also used and evidence of this practice was provided during the evaluation. Parents receive reports regarding students' progress twice yearly. There is one parent-teacher meeting per year held for each year group. Class teachers pass on information regarding students' performance to those parents who are able to attend these meetings. Beyond this, the students' journal is also utilised as a means of communicating with parents. These arrangements are worthwhile.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall, a good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation.
- The English department has been assigned a base-room which it shares with the Irish department.
- There is reasonable access to audio-visual equipment.
- There is a school library which incorporates contemporary posters to motivate student reading, along with an impressive and enticing range of teen fiction.
- The department has shown considerable commitment in developing a subject plan.
- A Shakespearean text is studied as part of students' junior cycle along with a modern play. The choice of this latter text is linked to students' local literary heritage.
- Students displayed confidence and security in answering questions.
- Lessons were planned diligently and, in the main, pacing was good.
- The use of active methodologies was observed during the evaluation. These worked well and their use is strongly advocated.
- The use of an integrated approach to the syllabuses was observed in some lessons.
- There was a strong focus on writers' use of language in a number of lessons.

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

- The current practice of synchronising the single text studied in higher-level Leaving Certificate classes with the text studied in ordinary-level classes should be discontinued.
- The English department should move to incorporate a formal teaching-and-learning focus in departmental meetings. In the medium term this focus should be on the development of the use of assessment-for-learning strategies allied with continuing departmental engagement with CPD in this area.

- The current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, syllabus-based and time-linked learning goals.
- Opportunities to expand the English print-rich environment in the subject base-room should be pursued. The creation of a print-rich environment should be noted in the departmental plan as a key aspect of English departmental policy and 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.