An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Sexton Street Limerick
Roll number: 64250J

Date of inspection: 23 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 Presentation Secondary School, Sexton Street, Limerick, 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

The timetabling of English is satisfactory in most years and programmes. The provision of four classes of English per week to sixth-year Leaving Certificate (LC) students is the only unsatisfactory area here. It was reported that this situation has only arisen in the current school year. Senior management is committed to increasing this provision to five periods per week next year, in keeping with the school’s past practice.

English is generally concurrently timetabled in first, second, third, fifth and sixth years, thus enabling students to move between classes as necessary and providing teachers with the facility to establish inter-class activities and to use modular teaching approaches. However, the co-timetabling of first-year English did not take place in the current school year. Senior management is committed to restoring this provision next year.

Five teachers are currently involved in the delivery of English in the school. Deployment is generally in line with teachers’ knowledge, skills, and interests. Due to a significant amount of staff turnover within the department, it has not been possible to rotate teachers across all subject levels and programmes in recent years. When the core team of English teachers stabilises in time, this principle should be revisited.

There is a good range of resources available to support the teaching and learning of English. School management makes funds for the purchase of resources available on request. Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) funds have also been very helpful in this regard. It is good practice that a subject department cabinet has been established to which all members have keys, in the base room for English. A partial inventory of the resources in the cabinet has been compiled and is included in the subject department plan. Looking toward the future, encouraged the department is encouraged to continue to expand its stock of audio-visual materials, particularly audio versions of studied plays and novels, to aid the exploration of key moments in class and possibly support differentiation for individual students through a Readalong approach.
The information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and equipment that has been built up in the school is very impressive. School management is commended for being very proactive in this area.

The promotion of personal reading is a priority in the school and this is highly commended. The post-holder for the library is focused on building up a stock of books relevant to students’ leisure interests and curricular needs and on developing and maintaining the library as an attractive, stimulating learning environment. It is laudable that paired reading programmes have increased partnership between Presentation Secondary School students and their parents, guardians, grandparents, or interested family friends and also between those students and pupils of the feeder primary school. The weekly reading class timetabled for JCSP students has also been successful in developing students’ positive attitudes toward reading. The fact that students are brought to the public library and are taught library skills as part of this class is very good practice. Furthermore, literature and language teaching are also reportedly integrated in the weekly reading class for JCSP students, incorporating a keyword approach, dictionary usage, the comparison of print and film versions of texts, and the writing of book reports. Given how this reading class initiative is targeting students’ literacy skills and attitudes toward reading, it is recommended that the English department seek to integrate it into the agreed first-year programme for Junior Certificate (JC) students as well. Finally, the teachers of English are also encouraged to further increase their students’ enthusiasm for the subject by creating print-rich environments in classrooms or on a central wall of the school. Such environments should feature syllabus-related samples of students’ work and also learning aids customised to the texts and skills being taught (such as timelines, spider diagrams of character traits, maps of key locations, and family trees illustrating relationships between characters).

After assessment by the special educational needs support team, incoming first-year students are either placed in a JCSP class or in one of two JC classes, grouped according to ability. Consideration should be given to organising first-year JC students into mixed-ability classes, with setting at the end of first year if necessary. Advice in relation to the formation of classes and to the placement of students can be found in *Looking at English: Teaching & Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* and in *Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Post-Primary Guidelines* (See http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobservlet/des_insp_inclusion_students_sp_ed_needs_pp_guidelines_foreword.htm).

English teachers are encouraged and facilitated to attend continuing professional development (CPD) activities.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities support the teaching and learning of English in the school, including trips to theatrical productions, participation in debating and quiz competitions, and visits by guest authors. The commitment and enthusiasm of the teachers of English, evident in these activities, is highly commended.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Whole-school support for formal subject department planning has been insufficient to date. One annual subject department meeting and informal co-operation of teachers throughout the year is not a secure enough basis for building good planning practices that will be of enduring benefit to teachers and students. As is recommended in *Looking at English*, senior management should ensure that the English department has timetabled meetings “at least three times in the academic year.”
Notwithstanding the structural deficiency described above, some aspects of departmental practice already demonstrate good collaborative planning among the teachers of English. There is good liaison between the subject department and teachers supporting students with additional educational needs. Some self-evaluation has taken place within the department and it is suggested that returning to the diagnostic window used to prompt that self-evaluation would be a good means of focusing departmental planning on an annual basis. Furthermore, progress has been made in compiling the subject department plan. By the time of the evaluation, the headings of the relevant School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) subject-planning template had been used to describe the teaching and learning context for English in the school. Also, termly programmes of work for all year groups had been prepared. To help develop the English department’s planning even further, three recommendations are offered.

First, it is recommended that the department review its stated learning outcomes for each junior - cycle year group, in the light of the specific targets that feature in JCSP statement materials and of the draft rebalanced JC English syllabus, available on www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/ Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/English/English.html. Once this review is completed, the department should agree an incrementally-sequenced list of listening, speaking, reading, and writing outcomes stretching from first year to third year as the framework for programme planning for those year groups. Second, planning for students in JCSP and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) groups needs to be further developed and formally included in the electronic department plan for the subject. Third, all subject department year group plans should include a column where assessment tasks relevant to particular units of work are identified and an evaluation/reflection column for collecting teachers’ thoughts about the feasibility of particular aspects of the agreed year-group programme. Those reflective comments should then be used to inform the ongoing improvement of year group plans.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A high standard of preparation for teaching was observed in most of the lessons visited. Some teachers had prepared PowerPoint presentations to structure their lessons and, at the outset of lessons, gave students copies of the presentations, so that they could write keywords and their personal responses on the scripts and also keep them as a revision aid. This is commended. Where the presentations began with a slide specifying the lesson objectives and ended with a recap slide, this was very good practice.

Resources such as concrete objects and newspapers were used effectively to enhance learning in classes. In particular, the use of ICT to focus students’ attention on texts for discussion was very successful. Good use of film clips to expose students to the range of choices that can be made in staging a play was also observed. Building on this foundation, and given the variety of learning styles and of student ability in the school, it is encouraged that live internet searches be more regularly used during classes, for purposes such as investigating unfamiliar objects and allusions encountered in texts. Finally, the compilation of booklets supporting the study of lengthy texts by students is encouraged. Such booklets would provide unitary revision aids and could also help absent students catch up with work missed.

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, teachers asked a blend of questions open for whole-class answering and of questions targeted at particular students. Where weaknesses were noted, the majority of questions posed sought lower-order responses (the recall
and recognition of information) and few higher-order questions were posed (seeking students’ personal responses supported by textual evidence). To motivate students across the range of ability, it is advised that occasionally students be encouraged to consult in pairs when developing answers to higher-order questions.

Among the teaching strategies observed were teacher exposition, question and answer, teacher and student reading, connecting new material to students’ relevant prior knowledge and experience, matching activities, pair and group work, and short in-class writing tasks. Evidence was also gathered that some teachers use creative interventions such as asking students to compose a dialogue, letter, or police report about featured characters in studied texts. They also use popular song to introduce poetic techniques; orchestral music to set an appropriate mood for in-class writing; visualisation techniques such as asking students to draw scenes described in a text; and student-directed comprehension activities (using the SRA Reading kit). The teachers of English now need to formally share these methodologies to ensure that all students get the benefit of them. In particular, further development of departmental resources and strategies for teaching the process and sub-skills of writing should be a focus of such “show and tell” sessions. Some examples of good practice already taking place in individual classrooms include the use of writing frames to model the organisation of specific writing tasks and equipping students with banks of keywords to draw on for describing characters and settings. Further areas for development include incorporating vocabulary copies and spelling tests into junior-cycle lessons, teaching students agreed presentation and editing routines from first year onward, and the use of ICT to reinforce the process approach to writing.

Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all classes. While learning activities were generally well managed, there were two areas for development in this regard. First, it is vital that students have copies of texts for discussion in front of them. Establishing a routine of moving students to ensure that they are all looking at a copy of the text and planning for the use of photocopies or ICT to display the relevant section of the text would help in this regard. Second, care should be taken in the area of giving instructions to students. An important step for incorporation in all lessons should be questioning individual students after the setting of in-class and homework tasks, to check their understanding of the task set, the time frame for completion, and the desired final product.

Most students were engaged in their learning in the classes observed. Where graphic organisers, active learning methods, and keyword approaches were in use, students’ levels of engagement were particularly raised. In contrast, where teacher-talk predominated, casting students in the roles of listeners and responders only, some student disengagement was noted. Oral questioning by teachers and by the inspector demonstrated that students generally understood the concepts being taught in the lessons observed. Notably, some students were using relevant technical vocabulary accurately and appropriately and were engaging in higher-order thinking about texts. An examination of a sample of students’ copies revealed that some varied writing tasks had been assigned to students, including grammatical exercises, functional writing tasks, comprehension questions and personal writing tasks. It was evident from those copies that some students had been directed to redraft substantial pieces of writing to improve and develop their process approach to writing. This was good practice. However, in a number of instances, it was clear that 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. Some students 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

Considerable variation in the type and depth of monitoring and in the feedback being given to students’ homework was noted. Where good practice was observed, specific formative feedback had been provided, criteria for assessment had been shared with students, and those criteria were being used to mark substantial pieces of writing.

Three other aspects of assessment need to be developed by the department. First, 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. Second, it is recommended that teachers further develop their diagnostic use of assessments. For instance, teachers are advised to 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 teachers a good benchmark for skill development programme planning. Thirdly, it is recommended that the department produce an annual analysis of students’ certificate examination results in relation to national norms for the uptake of levels and for the spread of grades as an aid to departmental self-evaluation and planning.

In-house examinations are administered at Christmas time and in summer, as well as ‘mock’ examinations for the certificate examination classes. Reports are sent home after all formal assessments. In addition, meetings between parents and teachers are organised once a year.
SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There is a good range of resources available to support the teaching and learning of English in the school, including impressive ICT equipment and infrastructure. School management is commended for being very pro-active in this area.
- The promotion of personal reading is a priority in the school and this is highly commended.
- There is good liaison between the subject department and teachers supporting students with additional educational needs.
- English-related co-curricular and extracurricular activities are commendably organised for students in support of their learning.
- The teaching and learning context for English in the school has been documented and termly programmes of work for all year groups have been prepared.
- A high standard of preparation for teaching was observed in most of the lessons visited.
- Resources were used to enhance learning in all classes visited.
- Teachers generally used questioning to good effect to stimulate and interact with students and to structure the learning activity.
- Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all classes.

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

- Whole-school provision should be made for a minimum of three timetabled subject department meetings per year and subject department planning should be further developed in line with the advice in this report.
- Over the coming years, the English department should formally pool its teaching strategies and resources. Among topics to be discussed should be how to incrementally develop students’ language and literacy skills from first to sixth year in a consistent manner.
- The English department should further develop its common approach to assessment, as advised in this report.

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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