

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Rice College
Westport, County Mayo
Roll number: 647000**

Date of inspection: 27 November 2009



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Rice College, Westport, 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 some teachers. The inspector was not in a position to view school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation as these were not provided. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Provision of English to junior cycle classes is only adequate as all classes have just four lessons each week. Provision is even less favourable in Transition Year (TY) as students have just two lessons each week which makes it difficult to provide a comprehensive course of study. Provision improves to five lessons each week in fifth and sixth year. This is good provision and provision is also satisfactory for Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students as they have three lessons a week of English and Communication. English lessons are evenly distributed across the week and this is commended except in the case of LCA students who have one double period and one single period each week of English and Communication. It is recommended that management conduct a review of provision for English for all year groups with a view to improving provision given that literacy competency underpins every other subject in the school. In this review, management should also ensure that the imbalance on the timetable, particularly for fifth-year students, where English lessons are predominantly in the afternoon, does not reoccur. Management timetables English lessons at the same time for all year groups with the exception of TY, which facilitates movement of students between levels and the organisation of whole year group activities.

Students in the school are placed in mixed-ability groups from first year through to third year, with one small resource class timetabled concurrently for students with special educational needs (SEN) or who are in need of extra literacy support. Those with SEN are also supported if they have an exemption from Irish. The provision of mixed ability for junior cycle is commended. In addition, it is good practice that students have the same teacher from first year to third year as it encourages continuity of experience for students.

The deployment of English teachers is an area that needs review. Currently, the same teachers teach TY English, LCA English and Communication and higher-level fifth and sixth-year English on a year-to-year basis. Almost all English teachers have English to degree level and all of these teachers should be given the opportunity, on a rotational basis, to teach all year groups, all programmes and all levels. It is strongly recommended that teachers be rotated across all year groups, programmes and levels to build capacity and ensure that no teacher becomes associated

with teaching particular levels or year groups. Management should ensure that such a policy is implemented for the next school year.

The current placement of students in fifth and sixth year should also be reviewed in future years. A top class group made up of the students who achieved the highest grades in Junior Certificate English is formed and then two other class groups, which contain both higher and ordinary-level students, are also formed. While mixed-ability is appropriate at junior cycle, it is more challenging to teach mixed ability at senior cycle for both teachers and students. It is therefore recommended that two higher-level classes be formed (either in a banded or set formation) and that one class remain a standalone ordinary-level class group. A common examination could be set for higher-level students in October or Christmas of fifth year to determine placement in the higher-level classes.

Most of the English teachers have their own classrooms. These were observed to be well equipped with televisions, DVD players, and, in many cases, data projectors and laptops. Many teachers' classrooms were observed to have students' work on display, which is motivational for students. Others also had relevant posters pertaining to English and were print rich. It is recommended that developing a print-rich learning environment be prioritised by all teachers who have their own base classrooms.

There is a small library in the college which is currently not in use as there is no longer a teacher in charge of this area. The English department should consider organising a team of students to organise this library so that it can be open once more to all students to borrow books, thus further encouraging reading. It is acknowledged and commended that individual English teachers encourage students to read many books during their time in school.

Teachers are facilitated to attend continuing professional development courses or other meetings associated with their work. Two of the teachers are examiners in English for the state examinations and this is an advantage for teachers and students alike.

Many individual teachers organise co-curricular activities to enhance English in the school. These include taking students to the theatre to see productions on their course, arranging for visiting writers to come to the school, involving students in public speaking competitions and creative writing competitions. In addition, TY students also participate in an annual school musical and will soon be involved in producing a school magazine. Such opportunities for students to express themselves outside the classroom are commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

It was reported that English teachers have an opportunity to meet formally once a term to plan for their subject and that minutes of these meetings are recorded. However, the subject plan was not formally presented during the evaluation. It is recommended that management should have access to all subject plans and subject documentation. In addition, individual planning documents and records were not presented.

There is a co-ordinator of English who has held this position for a number of years. It is recommended that this position be rotated among all English teachers on a yearly or two-yearly basis to facilitate all teachers over a period of time to have experience of co-ordinating the subject and to bring new ideas and perspectives to the subject.

Teachers are autonomous when it comes to choosing literary texts for study at junior cycle and this works well in the main, especially given that most students do not move classes. However, given the possibility of movement of students from the Special Educational Needs (SEN) literacy support class into the mainstream English classes, teachers need to agree on key learning outcomes that should be taught for each year group.

There is evidence of collaboration around choice of some texts at senior cycle which is good practice as it facilitates movement of students. Teachers are commended for the broad and interesting range of texts they cover with their students. Most class groups study at least one novel in each of first, second and third year and often two plays, including a Shakespearean play, over the course of the three-year programme. The range of poetry observed to be studied by students is also commended. In this way, students are not only prepared in junior cycle for their Junior Certificate state examination but teachers ensure that they are also prepared for the greater challenges of senior cycle and an incremental approach to learning is thus assured. It is recommended that individual teachers plan to ensure coverage of courses in time for 'mock' examinations, to allow for revision and consolidation of work.

TY students have a number of assignments to do throughout the year including an essay and the reading of a biography. They are also expected to make a number of oral presentations to their class group throughout the year. This focus on oral presentations is commended and such a focus should be extended to all year groups. The TY plan needs to be expanded and prepared for the entire year and should follow the guidelines for planning that are stipulated by the Department of Education and Skills.

While some class groups sit common examinations, there is not a consistent approach to this across the English department. It is recommended that common examinations be implemented at Christmas and summer for each year of junior cycle and, where appropriate, at senior cycle, as this will facilitate consistency. This is not to say that the same texts should be taught; rather the same learning outcomes should be agreed and tested at these times.

Teachers were well prepared for individual lessons observed in terms of resources. However, there was evidence that a more collaborative approach to department planning could be affected.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The quality of teaching and learning was very good in lessons observed. The purpose of all lessons was clearly communicated to students from the beginning and there was good continuity from the previous lesson and good pre-reading strategies implemented before moving into the main part of each lesson. Good links were also made with contemporary life and anecdotes of interest were told which linked the studied topic to the students' world thus putting learning in context. The thematic approach to English adopted by some teachers is also commended.

A feature of many lessons was the very good work done in relation to the studied novel or other pieces of writing. It was observed that teachers were building up character profiles, engaging their students in critical analysis and reflection of their text and developing higher-order thinking skills. Texts were interrogated and an appropriate focus on key moments and personal response was also observed. The same was noted when the topic of the lesson was poetry as the poetry was brought to life for the students through very good teacher-led discussion which generated interest and understanding. Students were also encouraged in some instances to read newspaper articles

and link these with the topic in hand which made the topic more real for the students and so students were encouraged to become critical readers and to reflect and develop their responses.

Students were stretched and challenged in all lessons and this was particularly the case when teachers named students when asking questions as opposed to asking for hands up. In this way, all students, regardless of ability or personality, had to participate in their lessons. On the whole, it was observed that there were very good student contributions made in lessons and students were very well engaged in their learning and willing to participate in discussion or to ask questions during the lesson. They were well able to discuss their work with the inspector and to answer intelligently and articulately, showing a good understanding of what they were studying. Co-operative learning was used by one teacher to engage students in discussion among themselves about the topic of study before sharing with the class group. This allowed for students to hear a range of perspectives and it is recommended as a teaching and learning strategy for all teachers. Some other interesting methodologies such as building up a character profile through maintaining a specific folder on each character in a studied novel were also observed.

Teachers were lively and enthusiastic about their subject matter and as a result students responded with equal enthusiasm. In addition, teachers were very affirming of their students' efforts.

As noted earlier, many classes are equipped with ICT and the use of ICT was observed in two lessons which put learning in context and brought the topic to life. There is great scope for use of ICT in English and this is an area of development for teaching and learning in English in the school. Audio versions of texts were used in a couple of instances which also made the topic more meaningful for the students and allowed them to understand, for example, the difference between reading and hearing a speech. It is suggested that the audio version of Shakespearean plays be also used, especially where students find such plays difficult, rather than reading the text from beginning to end. The board was well used in all lessons for recording students' contributions, for brainstorming and for recording homework. In addition, teachers had prepared additional resources as appropriate for students to use in their lessons, which enhanced learning.

ASSESSMENT

First-year, second-year and fifth-year students sit formal examinations at Christmas and summer and examination classes sit 'mock' examinations. Some teachers also set tests for examination classes at Christmas. It is recommended that all examination classes have some form of formal assessment prior to their 'mock' examinations. TY students do not sit formal examinations but present project work as part of a portfolio of work throughout the year. As noted earlier, common examinations for English are recommended.

The use of hardback copies for students' work in most English lessons is commended, as generally they were well maintained. The practice of students having a different copy for each aspect of their course is also commended. TY class groups should have a copy or folder for their work. An examination of students' copies showed that most class groups receive regular homework including longer pieces of writing. This is important and it is recommended that the English department agree a homework policy for each year group which stipulates frequency and types of homework including frequency of longer pieces of work including essay type answers. Very good formative written feedback was observed in some classes, especially recently and such assessment for learning strategies are very important if students are to improve in their writing. Students should also be asked to draft and redraft work to improve. The use of the discrete criteria of assessment when correcting longer pieces of senior cycle work is commended. It was noted

that many teachers require students to write summaries at the end of each chapter of study of their novel or scene of their play. It is recommended that teachers vary the tasks students are given at the end of a chapter of study or scene of a play and include other tasks which integrate with other aspects of the course and move students away from the habit of summarising texts in their answers into more personal response type answers.

The principal carries out an analysis of results in state examinations on an annual basis. The English department should also examine the results of the entire cohort of students sitting English on an annual basis to identify trends and plan for improvement. One trend worthy of note is an increase in the number of candidates taking higher-level English in the Junior Certificate. The uptake of higher level in the Leaving Certificate has remained fairly constant over recent years. Attainment at all levels is good.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups throughout junior cycle and continuity of teachers within cycles is assured.
- There is good provision of resources for teachers of English.
- Individual English teachers encourage students to read many books during their time in school.
- Teachers are facilitated to attend continuing professional development courses or other meetings associated with their work.
- Co-curricular activities pertaining to English are provided.
- Teachers are commended for the broad and interesting range of texts they cover with their students and an incremental approach to learning is thus assured.
- The quality of teaching and learning was very good in lessons observed.
- Teachers engaged their students in critical analysis and reflection of their text thus developing higher-order thinking skills.
- Texts were interrogated and an appropriate focus on key moments and personal response was also observed.
- Students were stretched and challenged in all lessons.
- Very good student contributions were made in lessons and students were very well engaged in their learning and willing to participate in discussion or to ask questions during the lesson. Teachers were lively and enthusiastic about their subject matter and as a result students responded with equal enthusiasm.

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

- It is recommended that management conduct a review of provision and timetabling for English for all year groups with a view to improving this provision.
- It is recommended that teachers be rotated across all year groups, programmes and levels to build capacity and ensure that no teacher becomes associated with teaching particular levels or year groups.
- The current placement of students in fifth and sixth year should be reviewed in future years.

- The position of co-ordinator should be rotated among all English teachers on a yearly or two-yearly basis.
- The English department should: agree on key learning outcomes that should be taught for each year group; collaborate to agree a homework policy for each year group; and implement common examinations where appropriate. The department should also examine the results of the entire cohort of students sitting English on an annual basis to identify trends and plan for improvement.
- Individual teachers should plan to ensure coverage of courses in time for 'mock' examinations, to allow for revision and consolidation of work.
- The TY plan needs to be expanded and prepared for the entire year and should follow the guidelines for planning that are stipulated by the Department of Education and Skills. TY students should have a copy or folder for their work.
- Co-operative learning is recommended as a teaching and learning strategy to be adopted by all teachers. So too is the use of ICT in teaching and learning.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.