An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School, Templemore
County Tipperary
Roll number: 65440T

Date of inspection: 4 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Our Lady’s 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 and examined students’ work. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ in-class resource materials. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Our Lady’s Secondary School is a co-educational school. There is good provision for English on the school timetable. Teachers are generally assigned to different levels and cycles on a rotational basis. This is good practice.

Classes in first year are of mixed ability. Following first year, classes continue to be largely organised on a mixed-ability basis, however, an additional English class is created in second year and in third year to provide literacy support for students with difficulties in literacy development. The number of students in this additional class may be lower than in the other classes in the relevant year group. A comprehensive strategy for ensuring the identification of students with difficulties in literacy development is set out in the school’s special educational needs policy. Classes in the Transition Year (TY) programme are of mixed ability while classes in fifth year and in sixth year are divided on the basis of levels, with classes of mixed ability within each level. Classes are timetabled concurrently in second year, third year, fifth year and sixth year. This is good practice.

English teachers have very good access to audio-visual equipment. There are two well-equipped information and communication technology (ICT) rooms and a laptop trolley. In addition, a large number of teachers have undertaken in-service education in the area of ICT and most classrooms have at least one computer and a data projector. The English department has placed a strong emphasis on developing the use of ICT as a tool to support teaching and learning. This has been supported by the school through the provision of ICT equipment in subject classrooms. The very effective use of ICT was observed on numerous occasions during the evaluation. The English department has been involved in the Teaching and Learning for the 21st Century (TL21) project and undertook work on the integration of the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English poetry in junior cycle. This work is most praiseworthy. It is particularly positive that the use of ICT is continuing to spread through the English department on foot of the work undertaken with TL21. In particular, the sharing of teachers’ experiences of the project with other staff is an example of very good practice and is a model which should continue to be adopted in connection
with teachers’ engagement with ICT. A possible area to consider would be the adoption of a universal font to be used in presentations as a means of aiding students with difficulties in literacy development.

There is a school library. The library is equipped with a data projector and other ICT resources. There is a booking form for the library and teachers also use bookboxes and class libraries to provide reading experiences for their students. The English department has also organised students’ participation in the MS Readathon. This commitment on teachers’ part to increasing students’ awareness of the value of reading for pleasure is worthwhile. It is suggested that the development of a reading policy to consolidate current good practice in promoting students’ reading should be considered. A useful text which contains a range of ideas in this area is an evaluation report on the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project which may be located at www.jcsplitteracy.ie. The initiatives outlined in this report are particularly aimed at reluctant readers, but should be useful in developing all students’ appreciation of reading and overall literacy skills.

There is a good informal induction process in the English department. General staff induction includes a subject meeting where new teachers or student teachers meet to discuss curricular and subject planning. These teachers are also offered support by the deputy principal and teachers in their own subject department. There is also some classroom observation of new teachers, which is worthwhile. A teacher in the relevant subject is assigned to student teachers to aid their integration into the school as well. All of this is positive and it is suggested that the current practice in English could usefully be consolidated through inclusion as a brief induction policy in the subject plan.

The English department has displayed considerable commitment to continuing professional development (CPD) and the school is supportive of teachers in accessing CPD. This is positive.

**Planning and Preparation**

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed on a rotational basis. One formal departmental meeting is organised per term. Numerous informal meetings between members of the department are also organised. Minutes are kept of formal meetings. The focus of recent departmental meetings has been on the creation of study plans, links between teachers in each year group regarding work undertaken to a particular point in the year, text-choice, the analysis of results in the certificate examinations and the assigning of students to classes. It is suggested that, as a means of aiding the presentation and storage of minutes, ICT should be used in their compilation.

A subject department plan has been developed. A subject folder also contains a range of resources relevant to the teaching and learning of English. This includes school magazines, the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle and the Leaving Certificate English syllabus. It is suggested that the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* could also be added to this folder. This publication can be accessed in the Inspectorate publications section of www.education.ie. Beyond this, the English department has developed common yearly plans for each year group. These plans are syllabus-based. All of this is positive. The further development of the current common plans to incorporate skills-based, time-linked, termly plans incorporating clear learning goals for each year group is recommended. As has been undertaken in some of the current planning documents, an integrated approach towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be highlighted.
The English department is involved in organising a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include the formation of a writers’ group this year, involvement in debating competitions, library trips, drama workshops and theatre trips. The department also contributes to the annual yearbook and termly newsletters. All of this is praiseworthy.

Students study an appropriate number of novels and plays in junior cycle, with the English department displaying a commitment to students encountering a variety of different genres in each year of their junior cycle studies. There is some variation of texts studied in senior cycle and in junior cycle. The English department is encouraged to explore further possibilities with regard to text choice, within syllabus confines. Such an approach will enhance the department’s ability to suit texts to students’ interests, while also providing opportunities for teachers’ own professional development. In particular, the wide array of high-quality literature now available for young adults, which would serve well for study in the junior cycle, should be investigated.

A subject-specific TY programme for English has been created. The programme highlights an integrated approach to language and literature as a key strategy to be utilised. The programme is imaginative and has adopted texts and methodologies which encourage active learning on the part of students. A wide variety of modes of assessment is utilised. All of this is positive. To further develop the provision, it is suggested that the department should consider the study of a short novel during the year, in order to ensure students encounter as wide a variety of genres as possible during the course of the programme. A further suggestion is the use of an English-specific portfolio to capture the various types of writing and other literacy activities undertaken by students during the year. This could then form an element in their overall mark for the year. Evidence was also presented that the LCA programme is well-planned and that key assignments are being assigned, undertaken and stored appropriately.

There is a comprehensive special educational needs policy. The policy notes that students with special educational needs will be provided with additional support through individual or small group withdrawal. A very positive feature of the evaluation was the adoption of team-teaching as an element in the English department’s practice. It is suggested that the use of this form of support should also be noted in the policy and that the department should continue with its development, particularly with a view towards the support of students with difficulties in literacy development. In addition, the rationale and procedures for the current practice of adding an additional literacy support class for students in junior cycle could also be included in this section of the policy. There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department, which are supported through the crossover of some personnel between the two. In addition, education plans for some students with special educational needs have been distributed and there are a variety of informal links. Information regarding the area of special educational needs is provided at all staff meetings. A further positive feature is the inclusion of methodologies to support students with special educational needs in the subject plan. A move towards listing Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTs) as an element in the subject plan could be a further development of this approach.

In the area of support for students for whom English is an additional language (EAL), it was reported that the *English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit* is being used. This is positive. A very worthwhile feature of the school environment during the evaluation was the prominent display of students’ home languages throughout the school building. This is good practice. Further useful advice and training opportunities regarding EAL are available on the Second Level Support Service website at [www.slss.ie](http://www.slss.ie). A useful resource regarding the
importance of students’ home languages is the publication *Learning in 2+ Languages* which can be accessed in the EAL area of [www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk).

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed in all cases. Lessons began in a number of ways, with teachers variously taking the roll, examining students’ homework and recapitulating work already studied as an introduction to new topics. All of this worked well. Planning was evident in all cases and objectives were clear. Particularly effective practice was observed where teachers explicitly stated the learning intention at the beginning of the lesson, with one class being informed of the structure the lesson would follow in order to achieve the learning goal. Questioning was used widely in lessons as an evaluative and learning tool. In this regard the use of higher-order questions is particularly advocated.

A wide and impressive range of resources was used in English lessons to aid students’ learning. These included textbooks, compact-disc recordings, the whiteboard, ICT, character quote diagrams and photocopied resources. The use of visual resources in particular was positive, as these serve to increase the engagement of students who may be less motivated by purely verbal or written presentations. The English department should continue with its good practice in this area.

There was a strong focus on the manner in which writers used language in a number of lessons. In one, that was particularly noteworthy, junior cycle students were asked to give their personal responses to an author’s use of language in a piece. Students responded well to this query and were supported in developing their answers and in constructing an effective analysis of the manner in which the piece had been constructed. This approach spoke to high expectations on the part of the teacher involved.

Active methodologies and strategies to aid differentiation were frequent elements in classroom practice. The distribution of a handout to scaffold a presentation by students regarding characters in a play they were studying was very worthwhile, as were similar approaches adopted which incorporated the use of graphic organisers, revision sheets and visual resources. All of these strategies served to involve all students in the work being undertaken and to increase their understanding of topics through a variety of different gateways. In particular, one junior cycle lesson featured a student production of a play which was presented on a data projector. In addition, to support the students in their subsequent work, a writing frame was also displayed using ICT. This was good practice. Group work and pair work also featured regularly in classes with, in one instance, the analysis of a number of advertisements being undertaken in groups. This worked well, with students delivering their work to the overall class group through a selected spokesperson. In this area, it is suggested that the English department should consider the development of group work and pair work with specified roles for each member of a group or a pair. These roles should focus on the advancement of students’ skills in the areas of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Useful information on the area of co-operative learning strategies can be found on the website of the SLSS or at [www.co-operation.org](http://www.co-operation.org). An especially positive feature of the English department’s current work is the focus on students’ oral development through presentations and drama in education during lessons.

Reading and writing activities were also frequent elements in lessons. In one instance, the adoption of ‘hot-seating’ as a prereading exercise was very sound practice and students’ engagement with the activity and with subsequent readings of the relevant poem showed that this was the case. Silent and individual readings of the poem then followed. In another lesson, a class
discussion regarding racial prejudice was followed by a slide show dealing with the same topic which eventually led to the playing of a compact-disc recording of a speech by Martin Luther King. The language used in the speech became the subsequent focus of the lesson. This was very effective. In a senior cycle lesson, the use of ICT on the part of students as a support for their writing was observed. Students were comfortable with the use of this technology which, along with their teacher’s input, helped to scaffold the activity being undertaken.

There was good classroom management in all cases and a positive atmosphere permeated all lessons observed. There was a good relationship between students and teachers. Teachers were affirming of students’ efforts. In a number of cases, teachers’ enthusiasm for their subject was evident, with students responding in kind. Strong student learning was evident in all lessons. Students displayed understanding of topics which had been previously studied and worked diligently at the tasks they had been set. In a number of lessons, students’ facility in discussing the choices made by particular writers was impressive, while in another lesson a profound engagement with and enjoyment of a play being studied was displayed.

There was a very good commitment to the development of a print-rich environment in English classrooms observed. This is strongly praised. It is suggested that the department’s commitment to the development of and belief in the value of a print-rich environment should be set down as policy and practice in the English subject plan. This should be undertaken in order to further consolidate the very good practice which is currently in place.

ASSessment

There is a comprehensive whole-school assessment policy, which the English department has also adopted as part of its practice. The policy places an emphasis on assessment for learning and this was also evident in teachers’ practice where comment-based, formative assessment of students’ work was universally adopted and where learning objectives were clearly set out in lessons. The policy also highlights the use of peer and self-assessment as elements in the department’s assessment-for-learning strategy. In one instance, students were exhorted to listen to other students’ homework and to comment on it. This was good practice. The department participates in an analysis of students’ uptake of levels and performance in the certificate examinations each year. This is worthwhile.

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in those classes visited during the course of the evaluation. While there was a large amount of staged questions assigned to students as homework exercises, there were also examples of homework exercises which relied on an integrated approach towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. In one lesson, where a persuasive speech was examined in detail, the setting of staged questions as an element in students’ homework was undoubtedly worthwhile. However, the adoption of the relevant speech as a model for students’ homework could have further added to the lesson’s impact on students’ own understanding of language and writing skills. Overall, it is recommended that when homework is set it should include specific language requirements. It should also be used as an opportunity to guide students in exploring a wide range of genres in their written work and this process should be aided through the use of the texts being studied as models for written homework with greater frequency. This approach should be incorporated in teachers’ planning, thus aiding the greater use of assessment-for-learning strategies, but also expanding beyond the single genre of staged questioning which is currently to the fore in students’ written work.
The setting of differentiated homework exercises was frequently observed during the evaluation. Approaches included the use of ICT to support students’ writing, the provision of writing frames and the preparation of oral presentations by students regarding characters in a Shakespearean play. All of this is very worthwhile and a further element which could be added is the appropriate use of graphic organisers to consolidate students’ learning. Resources in this latter area may be found on the website of the SLSS.

A wide range of assessments is undertaken during the school year to evaluate students’ learning and progress. These include monthly tests, formal examinations and other forms of continuous assessment. Further arrangements are in place for students with special educational needs. TY students are assessed on the basis of a portfolio produced during the year, while their parents also receive reports regarding their progress in November, February and June. Common assessments are also agreed, where appropriate, within year groups. Overall, the school’s approach to assessment is diligent and comprehensive.

One parent-teacher meeting is organised for each year group per year. Reports regarding students’ progress are sent to parents in November, February and at the end of the academic year. The school website and student journals are also used as modes of communication with parents. These arrangements are positive.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed in all cases.
- There is very good timetabled provision for English.
- The school has placed a strong emphasis on the development of ICT.
- There is a strong culture of CPD in the English department.
- Regular subject departmental meetings are organised and a subject plan has been developed.
- The use of assessment-for-learning strategies in the English lessons observed is positive.
- A very good commitment to the development of print-rich environments in English classrooms was observed.
- A wide and impressive range of resources was used in classes to enhance student learning.
- The use of active methodologies was frequently in evidence.

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

- The current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, time-linked, termly plans which incorporate clear learning goals for each year group.
- Specific language requirements should be delineated when assigning homework exercises, with students exploring a wide range of genres in their written work.

A post-evaluation meeting was held with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.
Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 2: Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection

The Board of Management wishes to acknowledge the professional and courteous manner in which this subject inspection was conducted. The Board recognises the positive report given to teachers and compliments them on their commitment to teaching and learning in the area of English. The Board takes cognisance of the recommendations for future development of the subject and commits to addressing the issues highlighted in the report.

- Our Lady’s plans to introduce Comic Sans as the universal font to be used in presentations throughout the school.
- The English Department will explore further possibilities with regard to text choice depending on the availability of resources.
- The English Department will continue to develop the subject through the subject planning process which is well established in the school.

Published December 2010