An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Davis College
Mallow, County Cork
Roll number: 71020G

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

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Davis College. 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. 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

Davis College is a co-educational school and participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. Classes in junior cycle are provided with four English lessons each week. This is adequate provision. It is recommended that the school should examine ways in which it can expand its current allocation for junior cycle English classes. This would be consistent with recommendations in the Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. This report highlights the optimal number of English lessons per week as encompassing at least one contact point with the subject each day. This recommendation is important when considered in the light of the school’s current DEIS literacy targets and has particular relevance with regard to provision for students participating in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). Transition Year (TY) classes are provided with three English lessons per week, which is adequate provision. English classes in fifth year and in sixth year have five English lessons per week. This is good provision. Overall, timetabling for English is well-organised, incorporating concurrent timetabling in all year groups. This is good practice.

Classes in junior cycle are of mixed-ability, along with one JCSP class. The concurrent timetabling of class groups in junior cycle allows for movement of students between the JCSP class and the other class groups, where appropriate. This is important and should be maintained. In recent years the school has moved towards the wider provision of mixed-ability class groups. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified prior to their entering the school in first year through the administration of assessments, communication with students’ parents and primary schools, and on the basis of psychological reports. Ultimately, the level at which students will participate in the Junior Certificate examination remains flexible until third year, although choices may often be made prior to this point. This is appropriate. Students’ choice of levels in senior cycle is predicated on their achievement in junior cycle, although there is some scope for flexibility in this regard.
There is a school library. The English department is responsible for administering the library which has an annual budget for its maintenance. Library stock is regularly updated, as is evidenced by the interesting, eclectic and up-to-date selection of texts which is available. These texts have been electronically catalogued. The library is used during class times by English teachers and is also open during lunchtimes. The English department has begun to investigate the purchase of books on compact disk and on other interactive electronic devices. This is positive. A whole-school literacy policy has been devised. As part of the policy, a number of initiatives to promote reading among the student body have been undertaken. These include Wordmillionaire, Make-a-Book and paired reading. In the latter programme, TY students have undertaken work with students in the JCSP and JCSP students have, in turn, undertaken work with students in local primary schools. This is most worthwhile and it is suggested that the possibility of incorporating a module in TY based on paired reading might be considered. This would consolidate the very good work which is already underway through its formal inclusion in the school timetable. In addition to these initiatives, paired work is also organised between parents and students with the support of the home-school-community-liason co-ordinator. An especially noteworthy and unusual achievement of the English department in the last number of years has been its support for students involved in the Young Scientist competition. This involvement has consisted of projects investigating the effectiveness of team-teaching as well as of the JCSP Wordmillionaire reading initiative. Both projects gained an award in the competition and are emblematic of the imagination and commitment which underlies so much of the English department’s work. It is suggested that, as a minor addition to the current literacy policy, the delineation of DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) to support students experiencing difficulties in literacy development in mainstream classes could be considered.

English teachers have been provided with base rooms. This is positive and English teachers have built up a very wide range of resources, both in their own rooms and at a central location in the school building. The English department has also grasped the opportunities offered by the provision of base rooms through a strong commitment to the development and maintenance of print-rich and text-rich environments. Students’ achievements are highlighted in teachers’ rooms, along with literacy strategies such as keywords and character diagrams. This work is strongly praised and the department is encouraged to include the development of a print-rich environment as policy and practice in the subject plan. This should be done in order to consolidate and preserve current practice. English teachers have very good access to audio-visual equipment. All English base rooms are equipped with information and communication technology (ICT) facilities. Each room is equipped with a desktop computer, a scanner, broadband internet access and a data projector. In addition, and underlining the department’s forward-thinking approach, electronic visualisers are currently being introduced. Considerable praise is due to senior management for its role in supporting this provision. Two ICT suites are also available, along with ICT facilities in the teacher workroom and the staffroom. In the context of work observed during the evaluation, the adoption of webquests as useful resources to support students’ project work and writing in different genres could be considered. It is positive to note that the use of ICT in teaching and learning featured prominently in the evaluation, as is detailed in a later section of this report. In addition, the use of ICT was highly effective.

There is a whole-school induction policy for student teachers. In addition, student teachers of English are mentored by nominated members of the English department. This mentoring process includes classroom observation of the student by an experienced colleague. Student teachers are also given the opportunity to observe experienced teachers. This approach to classroom observation is most worthwhile. It is suggested that the current induction procedures should be briefly delineated in the English subject plan. In doing so it should be noted that such
arrangements could equally be undertaken when any new English teacher arrives in the school. The current induction process should be regarded as a key element in preserving and further developing the exceptional teaching-and-learning culture which currently exists in the English department.

English teachers have displayed a very high level of commitment to their own continuing professional development (CPD) and this has made a clear impact on their approach to the teaching and learning of English. All members of the English department have participated in postgraduate courses in education in the recent past. All teachers have maintained links with the relevant subject association. Teachers have also attended numerous in-service education courses. Of particular note in this regard is the involvement of the English department in professional development in the area of instructional leadership and instructional intelligence. The English department has taken a lead role in developing these approaches in the school. English teachers have delivered in-service education sessions to both their own staff and in other schools. In addition, the department has been involved in a team-teaching initiative, supported by County Cork Vocational Education Committee. Again, this involvement has led to exceptional development in the area of team-teaching which was observed during the course of the evaluation. The English department has been involved in national developments with regard to the adoption of team-teaching. As in other areas of its practice, the English department is deserving of great praise for its pro-active and reflective approach towards developing its practice in order to enhance students’ learning experiences.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator is appointed on a rotational basis. There are regular formal and informal departmental meetings. Minutes of formal meetings are maintained. The most recent focus of departmental meetings has been on the assigning of classes, student movement and text choice. In addition, the English department has adopted a clear teaching-and-learning focus with regard to its planning process in the area of instructional leadership and instructional intelligence. This is very positive and is making a clear impact on the approach of teachers to teaching and learning.

A comprehensive subject plan has been developed. A wide range of documents relevant to the teaching and learning of English have been collected and are included in the plan. These include the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. Relevant syllabus documents are maintained in the subject’s filing cabinet. Common plans for each year group have been developed and the plan also includes teachers’ individual planning. It is suggested that baseline data, developed as part of the school’s DEIS planning targets, could also usefully be included and referenced in the English subject plan. Beyond this, it is recommended that the current common plans for each year group should be further developed so that they incorporate clear, skills-based, time-linked learning goals. Such an approach will facilitate the setting of common examinations for each year group. It will also allow teachers to continue to choose texts which suit the particular interests and experiences of their class groups, although some level of synchronicity between class groups, particularly in senior cycle, may need to be maintained. A useful model for this work may be accessed through the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) which includes the *Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus* for junior cycle.

A wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities are organised by English teachers. A number of these have already been mentioned in this report. In addition, the English department organises theatre and cinema trips along with students’ participation in a number of speaking
competitions. These have included the Concern and University College Cork Philosophical Society debating competitions. The department prepares students for the Rotary Youth Leadership competition in which they have achieved national success. English teachers also support the school’s engagement in drama workshops and productions. Teachers’ efforts in all of these areas must be praised.

There is some variation of text choice in junior cycle and in senior cycle, within syllabus guidelines. Teachers are encouraged to experiment with text choice in this context. This point is of particular relevance in junior cycle class groups where the wide range of excellent young adult fiction now available can be linked very strongly to students’ own experiences. Support in the area of text choice can be accessed on the website www.childrensbooksireland.com.

There is a subject-specific TY programme for English. Students produce two newsletters during the course of their TY studies and encounter a range of different texts and genres. Cross-curricular activities with other subjects are also organised. This is positive. A useful resource to further inform departmental planning with regard to TY is provided by the NCCA website which includes a number of exemplars of Transition Units.

There are strong links between the English department and the special educational needs department. This is facilitated through a crossover of personnel. In addition, there is a clear and strong professional interest in the English department in supporting students who may have difficulties in accessing the curriculum and, in particular, in raising literacy standards among all students. Currently, a member of the department is undertaking postgraduate work in the area of special educational needs. As is highlighted in other sections of this report, the English department is involved in advancing the use of team-teaching to support students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, along with a range of other initiatives in literacy development. There is regular retesting of students, particularly with regard to the impact made by literacy initiatives in which they have participated. The development of education plans for individual students is currently underway. All of this is very good practice. The appropriate sharing of education plans, within the confines of necessary confidentiality, will be a further aid to communication between the English department and the special educational needs department.

The school organises additional support for students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) through group withdrawal. This is appropriate. A teacher who is qualified in the area of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) provides English language support lessons for EAL students. In addition, this teacher has accessed a number of professional development courses in this area. The teacher is aware of the difference between TEFL and EAL, where the latter places a clear emphasis on the importance of the language of instruction. It is suggested that in-service education opportunities provided by the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) may also be worth investigating in the future. In particular, these courses will help to inform the use of the English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit to track the progress of EAL students’ English language proficiency.

During the evaluation an EAL lesson was observed and consisted of very good practice throughout. It is important that the school would maintain a focus on the continued development and maintenance of a skills-base in the area of EAL, as has been its approach to date. EAL lessons take place in a support room where a print-rich environment has been developed. This is good practice. The room incorporates access to ICT and the programme being provided maintains a focus on the language of the curriculum. An extensive range of resources to support students’ learning in EAL has been collated. A number of further developments are suggested. The development of a whole-school policy on the use of home languages to support students’ learning
could be considered, along with the adoption of DARTS to support extended writing activities on the part of EAL students. The use of writing frames is of particular relevance in this area. It is very positive that students’ home languages and students’ diverse cultures have been acknowledged in the school environment.

There are good links between the EAL department and the special educational needs department. This is positive. In this context it is important that the different needs of students with special educational needs and EAL students be noted by all concerned. This is of particular relevance when considering whether to combine groups of students with special educational needs and EAL students. It is acknowledged that, where such groups are formed at present, it is done in order to establish a suitable group dynamic within EAL lessons. Along with these developments, the extension of links between the EAL department and mainstream teachers should be supported and the occasional inclusion of time in whole-staff meetings for inputs from the EAL department might be considered in this regard. A useful document to inform teachers’ understanding of the strengths and needs of bilingual students is Learning in 2+ Languages which can be found on the website www.ltscotland.org.uk. Further resources to support EAL students can be accessed at www.ncca.ie.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very high standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation. The professionalism and dedication of the English teaching team were evident in all lessons observed. Individual planning was presented by all teachers. In all lessons teachers provided appropriate scaffolding for student learning. Learning objectives were clear in all lessons. There was a strong emphasis on the explicit delineation of learning intentions at the outset of lessons throughout the department. This is very good practice. Alongside this approach, another element of good practice was the recapitulation of work previously covered at the beginning of lessons.

A wide range of resources was used in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, photocopied resources, visual resources and ICT. The choice of visual resources in a number of junior-cycle lessons, which were then displayed using ICT, was particularly appropriate. These linked well to students’ interests and experiences while providing a useful scaffold for students’ learning in the area of advertising. In another lesson, PowerPoint was used with considerable aplomb and to very good effect. Here, a blank spidergram was displayed using a data projector. Students then filled in the spidergram, with some facilitation on the part of their teacher, with ideas linked to specific poems they had previously encountered. The spidergram then served as a comprehensive and appropriate introduction to the study of a new text. This approach was particularly effective in not only placing the responsibility for learning on students themselves, but also in creating a tangible product which could be retrieved easily at any point in the future. The English department is encouraged to maintain its very good practice with regard to the utilisation of appropriate resources to support teaching and learning.

Group work, pair work and other active methodologies were regular features of English lessons. These were organised well in all cases and were most effective where teachers assigned specific roles to students in each group. This approach ensured that all members of the group had responsibility for their own learning. English teachers are encouraged to maintain a focus on the possibilities offered by group work and pair work to develop the key skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as snowball, jigsaw and envoy are particularly relevant in this regard. A number of approaches were also used in English lessons to differentiate presentations and material for the variety of students in each class. Especially impressive in this regard was the
expert use of team-teaching which succeeded in delivering a seamless, high-paced lesson which was characterised by very high expectations of the students involved.

There was a strong emphasis on the analysis of writers’ use of language throughout the evaluation. In one lesson, students were asked to identify language techniques used in a poem and their work was initially supported through the teacher noting a variety of such devices on the whiteboard. In particular, the use of higher-order questioning as the lesson progressed regarding the reasons why particular techniques were utilised, was worthwhile. In another lesson, students were divided into groups which then offered their thoughts regarding a poet’s use of language. These ideas were then combined with the teachers’ own suggestions to form the basis of a very good note-making process, aided through the use of ICT.

There was a very good relationship between teachers and students in all instances. A strong feature of this relationship was teachers’ expertise in finding moments where they could affirm students, either directly, to other students, or to another adult. Teachers’ enthusiasm for their subject was universally evident. Student learning was evident in all lessons. Students variously displayed familiarity with important terms, engaged with tasks set during lessons and answered questions readily.

ASSESSMENT

There is a homework policy. Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in all classes observed. In one class, a folder system was utilised for students’ work and this was well-maintained and organised. There was evidence of the use of comment-based, formative assessment in the correction of students’ work and this was good practice. The adoption of the rubrics utilised in the certificate examinations was observed in one lesson, ensuring that students were aware of what would be expected of them in this context. Where team-teaching was undertaken, particular strengths were observed where teachers provided students with feedback about their homework. This was achieved with great immediacy, incorporating useful, affirming commentary, alongside involvement of the wider class group in the process of correction.

In a number of instances, differentiated strategies were used to provide a scaffold for students’ homework. These included notes grids and writing frames. This is good practice. There was some evidence of the use of an integrated strategy towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in homework assigned in the lessons observed. In one class, crosscurricular work in a variety of genres was undertaken and this was worthwhile. In another class, group diary entries and letters, arising from texts which had been studied, formed elements of students’ homework. Beyond this, there was a strong emphasis on the setting of staged questions and summary exercises in students’ homework. In one lesson, summaries were arranged in brief bullet points, which is appropriate. While recognising the worth of both summary exercises and staged questions, it is recommended that teachers should incorporate an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in their planning for students’ homework. This planning should include the exploration of a wide and varied range of genres. Such an approach will allow studied texts to act as ‘springboards’ to and as models for the development of students’ language skills. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which will draw students’ attention to the features of the genre to which they will need to adhere. Beyond this, particular language techniques that they will be required to include could also be highlighted. Where specific language techniques have featured during the analysis of a text during a lesson, these could also form the basis of written exercises with which students will have to engage. The adoption of this integrated strategy in the assigning of students’ homework should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students’ macro-
language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the NCCA’s *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*.

Formal house examinations are organised at the October mid-term break, at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Mock examinations are also organised for those students participating in the certificate examinations. The English department has begun to file examination papers for these examinations. Moves have also begun towards the setting of common examinations within the department, although such arrangements have been limited to date due to variation in the texts used by different teachers. The setting of common examinations, where practicable and appropriate, should continue to be advanced as departmental policy and practice. Such an approach will allow for a clear view of student achievement across each year cohort, as well as obviating the unnecessary duplication of work between members of the English department. This process should be more easily advanced through the further development of the department’s common plans which was recommended at an earlier point in this report. Students who are availing of Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE) are facilitated in formal house examinations. This is good practice. Analysis of students’ performance in the certificate examinations is undertaken and this is worthwhile.

A parent-teacher meeting is organised at least once per year for all year groups. Parents receive reports regarding students’ progress following formal house examinations. The student journal also serves an important role in maintaining good communication between students’ homes and the school. Beyond this, the home-school-community-liason co-ordinator also supports links with students’ parents.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very high standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- There is an excellent culture of professional learning.
- The English department has adopted a teaching-and-learning focus on the area of instructional leadership and instructional intelligence.
- ICT was used very effectively to support teaching and learning.
- The English department displays a strong commitment to the maintenance of print-rich and text-rich environments in English base rooms.
- There was a strong emphasis on the explicit statement of learning goals at the outset of lessons.
- The adoption and expert use of team-teaching to serve the needs of students is a very positive development.

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

- The school should examine ways in which it can increase the current allocation of four English lessons per week to junior cycle classes, within the constraints of available resources.
- The current common plans for each year group should be further developed so that they incorporate clear, skills-based, time-linked learning goals.
• English teachers should incorporate an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in their planning for students’ homework

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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