

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Pobalscoil Rosmini
Drumcondra, Dublin 9
Roll number: 91344V**

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**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | 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 Pobalscoil Rosmini 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

Pobalscoil Rosmini currently offers the following programmes: the Junior Certificate and Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP); an optional Transition Year (TY); the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme and the established Leaving Certificate. Enrolment currently stands at 333 students, of whom approximately ten per cent are visually impaired. The school also has a significant number of students who have special educational needs.

Three class groups are formed for English in first year. A new arrangement this year has meant that one third of first-year students have been allocated a place in a special support class group for English and Mathematics from the beginning of first year. Students in this class group are following the JCSP and English is timetabled for three consecutive periods on each of three days during the school week. A second first-year class group comprises two students who are on a reduced curriculum. These students join the special support class for English. The third first-year class group has been subdivided for English so that a small group, who are taught English at a slower pace, has been formed. The remaining students are placed in a mixed-ability class for English. English is timetabled for these latter two class groups five times each week. This arrangement is indicative of the recognition in the school of the need for a high level of support teaching.

Students in second and third year also have English five times a week. This is in keeping with the requirements of the syllabus. However, the distribution of lessons for one second-year class group is unsatisfactory, as the subject is being taught on just three days per week. It is recommended that this should be addressed. Best practice is that students should have contact with the subject on at least four of the five days available.

Prior to September 2009, all first-year students were placed in three mixed-ability class groups for English. The majority of students take the Junior Certificate examinations in English at ordinary level. A concern to raise participation at higher level and to support students who experience difficulties in English informed the changes made this year which are described earlier in this

report. It is noted, however, that the absence of concurrent timetabling for English in both first year and second year does not support students who may wish to change levels as their skills and knowledge in English develop. Furthermore, sight should not be lost of the benefits of teaching English in mixed ability settings, especially in the early stages of post-primary education.

Timetabling for English is good in senior cycle. English is timetabled three times per week in TY and four times a week in LCA1 and LCA2, in line with the recommendations of both those programmes. English is concurrently timetabled for fifth year and sixth year to facilitate students' choice of level. The allocation of six periods per week in fifth and sixth years for Leaving Certificate students is very good, as the provision for a double lesson facilitates the teaching of film studies and drama particularly. It is noted that in senior cycle a very small cohort of students opts for the higher-level course.

The English teaching team is large, relative to the size of the school. Six of the ten teachers teach English to only one class group and one other teacher is assigned to two class groups. As was noted in a previous subject inspection report, this has implications for the co-ordination and planning for English. It is recommended that a core group of English teachers should now be established. Members should hold specialist qualifications in the subject and should, insofar as is practicable, be assigned to class groups on a rotating basis and remain with the same group through each programme. This is good practice because such an arrangement consolidates skills and experience in the subject. It allows teachers and students to develop a good working relationship with one another and facilitates the teacher's knowledge of students' aptitudes.

Resource provision to support the teaching and learning of English is very good. Some teachers are assigned their own classrooms and this allows for the storage of resource materials and the display of students' work and other learning materials. This has been done in some classrooms. However, in general the potential value of the visual environment to support learning is not adequately recognised. This should be addressed by all teachers of English.

Audio-visual equipment is available in each classroom and teachers of English have good access to the school's computer rooms. There is a mobile unit with data projector available on a booking system for use in English classrooms and this was used during the evaluation to support teaching and learning. The school has a library which also functions as an English classroom at present. This means that timetabled access to the library for class groups is limited though students do have access to borrow books during two lunch times each week. It was not clear what steps have been taken by the teachers of English to promote the habit of reading. Recommendations in this regard are made in the following section of this report.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Time is allocated three times a year to facilitate subject department meetings and minutes of the discussions held are recorded and retained in a subject department file. However, full attendance at English department meetings is not often achieved. This may be because those teachers who do not identify themselves as primarily English teachers will attend meetings for their specialist subjects. This has an impact on the teaching and learning of English in the school. Opportunities for collaborative work are limited and the benefits that derive from sharing of ideas and resources are lessened. Department meetings have the potential to develop the knowledge of teachers about the purposes, aims and most appropriate pedagogies for the subject. Action on the

recommendation made earlier regarding the formation of a core team of specialist teachers would address this situation.

No evidence of formal collaborative planning was available at the time of this evaluation and the information provided indicated that common agreed plans of work for each year group have not been developed. This should be addressed as a matter of priority. A structured, collegial, approach to the teaching of English in the school is a prerequisite to achieving the school's professed aim of supporting all students to reach their potential in the subject. As a first step in developing a subject department plan, the teachers of English have conducted an audit of the strengths and opportunities for improvement within their current practice. This work should now be progressed. The schemes of work developed by individual teachers for their class groups should be collated and reviewed. In reviewing these schemes, attention should be paid to the identification by the full English teaching team of core competencies to be taught in each year of each programme and to establishing agreement on how students' progress is to be monitored and assessed. The draft rebalanced syllabus for the Junior Certificate, available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, www.ncca.ie, and section four of the Leaving Certificate syllabus should be consulted in this work. It is suggested that this work can be done incrementally, commencing with planning for second year and fifth year.

Given the proportion of students with literacy support needs in the school, the absence of a co-ordinated approach to English which integrates the support provided by the learning support department and the work of mainstream class teachers is particularly regrettable. Teachers of English reported that they were not consulted regarding the changed arrangements for English in first year, for example. It is recommended that the department plan for English should include clear reference to the interface between both departments. In particular, planning for the first year support class should engage all teachers of English. Planning for this group should identify the learning outcomes to be achieved by students during first year. It should also ensure that the imaginative and affective aspects of the subject are not separated from the mechanical and technical aspects of the language. All students in first year should be exposed to the full range of language and literature learning experiences, so it is recommended that planning for this group should present a set of clear aims which reference the students' participation in the full English curriculum. In planning for second year English, consideration should be given to the particular needs of students moving from the support class to mainstream English lessons in second year.

The implementation of the recommendations made in each of the preceding paragraphs would ensure an incremental approach to the delivery of the subject, informed by the needs of the students, leading to a consistent learning experience for them.

An emphasis on students' reading should be a key component in the junior cycle programme for English. Planning in English should include initiatives which make full use of the school's library facilities. A paired reading programme, for example, or participation in the MS *Readathon*, or "Reading Weeks" during which teachers include time for reading in their schemes for class groups should be considered. Activities such as these would build the confidence of students, broaden their vocabularies and provide them with opportunities to acquire and practise literacy skills. The teachers of English should collectively review the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) publications *Time to Read* and *Room for Reading: The Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project* for additional strategies that could be used to further promote personal reading.

It is also recommended that the school develops a whole-school literacy policy. Useful guidance on this can be accessed on http://www.jcspliteracy.ie/school_wide.htm and <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/>.

Very good individual planning was observed among the teachers of English. As noted earlier, some teachers have developed schemes of work which describe the work to be covered with their class groups and indicate the resources and teaching strategies to be used. In some instances, lesson plans for the individual lessons observed were available. In all cases, the availability of apt resources, notes and other support materials which were provided to students indicated a good level of preparedness for teaching.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The teaching strategies used at the beginning of the lessons observed created a clear sense of purpose in lessons and ensured that students were fully aware of what they would be doing during the course of the lesson. Teachers generally moved swiftly into the lesson once students had settled at their desks. In two cases, clear lesson objectives were written on the whiteboard. Other teachers provided a brief oral review of work completed in previous lessons and made explicit links between that work and new material. It is suggested that planned lesson outcomes should be referred to as lessons progress and they should be used to facilitate recapitulation at the close of the lesson. Students should be encouraged to review what they have learned by summing up some key aspect of learning within the lesson.

A range of teaching methodologies was observed. These included teacher presentation, the use of ICT and audio-visual equipment to present material, and opportunities for students to work on writing tasks in class. Very good quality illustrative support was provided to students addressing poetry, film, fiction and drama texts. For example, a map of the places mentioned in a poem was drawn on the whiteboard prior to the commencement of one lesson observed and was used by the teacher to help students situate the story of the text. In another lesson, the teacher had collated a series of video clips of advertisements for popular products. These were presented to the class to illustrate how colour and music are used to establish product identity. In both of these lessons, the support material and initial teacher input served built the necessary groundwork to enable students to successfully negotiate the texts studied in the developmental phase of the lessons. Generally, whiteboards were well used to model the organisation of information and ideas in preparation for writing tasks, to record student feedback to questions, and to set homework assignments.

In some classes, teacher talk dominated the lessons and students were passive learners. The questioning strategies used allowed students to provide short answers which functioned to prompt further teacher input. In those lessons where classroom discussion worked best, students were expected to extend their answers, through closer reference to a text, for example, or an invitation to support their opinions. Where necessary, the teacher repeated and simplified questions or used visual resources to direct students' thinking and prompt responses. Classroom discussion can provide a context within which the development of students' oral skills may be addressed. Oral work in class is also a very good foundation for students' writing. It is suggested that this should inform planning for lessons by all members of the English department.

Although classes are formed based on students' ability in the subject, it was evident from observation of students' work and participation in classroom activities that a range of ability

levels is represented in all classes. In some cases, the strategies employed by teachers were very effective in engaging all students. The practice of rehearsing key vocabulary with students is very good. This was done in two lessons observed, where teachers used the whiteboard to good effect in the opening phase of the lessons. Attention was paid to words learned previously and to new words which would be encountered during the lesson. Some attention to language development featured in the other lessons visited also: teachers' own language was accessible and there was good checking to ensure that words in texts were understood. However, there is scope to do more to cater for students' different learning styles and ability levels. More extensive use is suggested of prepared *PowerPoint* slides or other visual resources, for example, which list key vocabulary for use in a lesson or summarise the characteristics of a specific genre or provide a mind-map of a character's traits and actions.

Opportunities for students to work independently of the teacher featured in some of the lessons observed. In one lesson, students were supported in attempting a task on advertisements by working in pairs to complete a structured worksheet. The teacher was free to move around the classroom to provide advice and guidance. Pair work and group work are useful strategies for engaging students in collaborative learning. Good practice in this regard is to clearly specify what students are expected to achieve through completion of a task, establish the amount of time available to them to work on the task; and to ensure that there is a good match between the level of complexity of the task and students' ability. In another lesson, a board game designed and prepared by the teacher turned revision of students' knowledge of a studied text into an engaging group challenge. In the second phase of the lesson, students were assigned tasks to complete using the internet. The tasks were very well defined and the language used on the task cards was accessible to all students. Good planning for this lesson resulted in a stimulating forty minutes for this group of foundation-level students.

Student achievement is appropriate to school context factors. Although a range of ability in the subject was evident, the majority of students have no difficulty achieving well in English at their chosen level. An examination of students' copies and folders indicated that they have been set a range of writing tasks from short answer work designed to test understanding and recall to more extended pieces of work. A staged approach to the acquisition of writing skills was evident in some students' copies and notebooks. The process of writing, drafting and editing has been emphasised and good pre-writing strategies, such as mind-mapping, have been taught. The standard achieved by better able students is good. They are able to work creatively with language to communicate their ideas and to adapt their use of language to meet their purpose and the needs of their readers. Good mastery of sophisticated syntax and accurate use of the appropriate critical vocabulary was evident in the best of this work. Errors related principally to careless spelling mistakes and some weaknesses in paragraphing. Less able students often struggled to compose written responses to questions set and they relied heavily on the wording of questions to frame their opening sentences. Their answers to questions were generally underdeveloped and it was clear that some struggle to infer meaning for themselves and that they rely heavily on notes supplied by teachers. More extensive use of writing frames and directed activities related to texts, such as text re-structuring, cloze exercises and pre-reading and post-reading exercises, is recommended to support these students at first draft stage. Across the ability range, students' written work indicates that they have a very thorough knowledge of their studied texts.

The standard of maintenance and presentation of notes was inconsistent across the class groups visited. In some instances, students had retained all handouts and notes provided by teachers together with their own work. Some teachers had established clear routines around this, requiring separate copies for in-class and home work, for example. In one instance, the teacher retained student copies to ensure that they would be available for in-class writing work. However, in some

cases, the organisation by students of different sections of their written work was poor, leading to the recording of disorganised notes that were unlikely to serve as effective revision aids. It is recommended that the department develops a policy on homework. This should determine common expectations regarding how students should present and store their written work, and teachers should consistently communicate these routines to their students.

Very good classroom management was evident in lessons observed. This was achieved through a combination of factors, including good lesson planning so that students were engaged in suitable activities. Clearly communicated expectations of students' behaviour, together with light-touch correction and proximity management, ensured that interruptions to learning were few. The composed and friendly demeanour of teachers helped to create and maintain a secure learning environment which was important given the range of abilities present in the classes visited.

In summary, the quality of teaching and learning in the lessons observed was good. In some instances, it was very good. A more cohesive department structure would facilitate formal sharing among the teachers of English of methodologies proven to be relevant and effective so that all students can benefit from them.

ASSESSMENT

A range of assessment modes is used to assess students' competence and progress in English. In the classroom, teachers use questions and short written exercises to check achievement of understanding and provide students with opportunities to practise newly acquired skills. Homework is set and monitored for all class groups. In all cases, a very good balance between helpful marking and proofreading is maintained and detailed developmental feedback is provided to students. The very positive, affirming, tone of teachers' comments was particularly noted as a motivating strategy. Students in third year and sixth year should be familiar with the marking criteria applied in the certificate examinations and some of their work should be marked accordingly. This will give them insights into strengths and areas for development in their writing. For the same reason, students should be encouraged to read the exemplars of standard from the 2008 chief examiner's report for Leaving Certificate English and the 2006 chief examiner's report for Junior Certificate English.

Consideration should be given to setting differentiated tasks for homework with some class groups. It is not always appropriate or indeed desirable to set the same task for a class group and students may respond well to having some choice regarding the level of challenge posed by homework. This suggestion is made in the context of teachers' expressed concerns about low levels of motivation regarding homework exhibited by some students. It was clear that a minority of students do not complete homework assignments and this was referenced by some teachers as a particular challenge. Coupled with poor attendance, this has impacted on the progress being made by these students. In developing a department homework policy, attention should also be paid to determining agreed strategies for addressing the non-completion of homework.

It is recommended that teachers should keep careful records of student achievement on homework and class assignments. This would provide teachers with a clear and objective measure of students' progress in English and facilitate lesson planning to address areas of difficulty which emerge. Consideration should also be given to a regular audit of certificate examination results in the department. This should examine the uptake by students of higher-level, ordinary-level and foundation-level courses over a period of time. While current patterns of uptake in certificate

examinations are good, there may be scope to encourage greater uptake of higher-level English in the junior cycle.

Formal examinations are held for all students at the end of the first term and all non-examination year groups also have summer examinations. Third-year and sixth-year students also sit pre-certificate examinations in the spring term. A system of continuous assessment is in place for students on the TY programme. This requires them to complete assignments at specified times during the year. Parents are kept informed of how their children are doing in English through reports, which are sent home twice yearly, and at the annual parent-teacher meetings.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetabled provision for the teaching of English is very good and the subject is well resourced.
- Teachers used a variety of teaching styles to support student learning and, while these were generally effective, there is scope to improve the questioning strategies used and to disseminate good practice across all class groups.
- Lessons were well prepared and there was clear evidence in some classes of good practice in the use of differentiated content and methodologies to ensure that the learning needs of all students were met.
- Across the ability range, student achievement is appropriate.
- A range of assessment modes is used to assess student competence and progress in English. Teachers provide students with very good information about the quality of their work.

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

- A core team of English teachers should be established. Members should hold specialist qualifications in the subject.
- A formal, collaborative, approach to the teaching of English in the school should be adopted. The department plan should identify core competencies to be taught in each year of each programme and should establish agreement on how students' progress is to be monitored and assessed. An emphasis on students' reading should be a key component in the junior cycle programme for English. All students in first year should be exposed to the full range of language and literature learning experiences.
- The department plan for English should include clear reference to the interface between the learning support department and the work of mainstream English teachers.
- A subject department policy on homework should be developed to agree strategies for addressing the non-completion of homework and to address how students should present and store their written work. Teachers should keep careful records of student achievement on homework and class assignments.

A post-evaluation meeting was 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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