

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Carrigaline Community School
County Cork
Roll number: 91388S**

Date of inspection: 30 April 2010



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT
OIDEACHAIS | OF EDUCATION
AGUS SCILEANNA | AND SKILLS**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Carrigaline Community 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 three days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and examined students' work. 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 school management. 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

Carrigaline Community School is a co-educational school. Overall, timetabled provision for English is very good. There are five lessons of English per week for each of the junior cycle class groups, four lessons in Transition Year (TY) and six lessons per week in fifth-year and sixth-year class groups. Students in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) are provided with three lessons in English and Communications each week. This is adequate. The English department has suggested that, where there are currently five English lessons per week for classes in first year and six English lessons per week for classes in fifth year, this arrangement could usefully be reversed. This merits serious consideration, particularly in the context of the challenge posed for students by the transition from primary to post-primary education, along with the very positive impact additional English lessons in first year could have for students experiencing difficulties in literacy development. In a very small number of cases English classes did not achieve the maximum possible number of contact points with the subject across the week. Best practice in this regard is that students would have at least one English lesson on each day of the week. In one instance a class was shared between two teachers, which is not ideal. Senior management is encouraged to work towards resolving these limitations. However, in making these observations, the inevitable constraints of the timetabling process must be acknowledged. Concurrent timetabling for English classes is utilised in second year, third year, fifth year and sixth year. This is good practice.

A combination of mixed-ability class groups and setting is used in junior cycle. The school has moved towards expanding the use of mixed-ability beyond first year in the last number of years. It is also planned that, from next year, a literacy-support class group will be created in second year, as a support for students with difficulties in literacy development. These moves are appropriate. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified in first year on the basis of assessment tests administered prior to their entry to the school as well as consultation with their primary schools and their parents. Diagnostic tests in October or November of first year are also used as a means of identifying areas where students need additional support. Students are

assigned to levels in the Junior Certificate and in the Leaving Certificate on the basis of individual choice informed by advice from students' teachers.

At present there is no central school library due to space constraints, although there is a library room which is used for a variety of activities. It is anticipated that a major extension to the school building will be undertaken in the near future. English teachers have developed a number of class libraries to provide library facilities for students. It is also positive to note that the school is currently in the process of developing a central library store. The English subject plan includes reference to 'reading days' and the department is to be commended for its involvement in a paired reading programme which is connected to the development of a whole-school-literacy policy. In the context of the expected extension of the school building, the English department is encouraged to consider the development of a proposal to senior management regarding the provision of library facilities in the future. This might involve the creation of a central library / information facility or might seek support for the sustained development and maintenance of classroom libraries. A useful document for ideas in this area can be found on the website www.jcspliteracy.ie which contains a report on an evaluation of the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project. Beyond this, initiatives such as *Wordmillionaire* or *Reading Challenge* may be worth exploring as a means of promoting reading for pleasure among first-year students.

There is very good availability of audio-visual equipment throughout the school. Televisions and DVD players are available in almost all classrooms. English teachers are generally provided with their own base rooms. This is very worthwhile and English teachers are strongly encouraged to grasp the opportunities available to support teaching and learning through the appropriate utilisation of this valuable resource.

The school has a campus-wide information and communication technology (ICT) network. Wireless broadband access is available throughout the school building and ICT facilities are widely available. Currently there are two ICT centres as well as an ICT suite in the library room. This latter resource is most worthwhile. ICT can be a powerful resource in supporting students with difficulties in literacy development through the appropriate use of word-processing packages. With this in mind, the English department and senior management are urged to remain cognizant of the impact the availability of this ICT suite to the proposed literacy-support class in second year could make. Data projectors are widely available throughout the school and the availability of this equipment in classrooms continues to be expanded. ICT facilities are also available for the use of teachers in the staff workroom. Senior management is to be strongly praised for its pro-active stance in acquiring significant ICT resources to support teaching and learning.

There was evidence of teachers and students using ICT during the evaluation. Especially strong practice was seen in a number of lessons, particularly where archived interviews and visual resources were used to powerfully engage students with the topic they were studying. Beyond this, the English department is involved in an innovative e-learning programme which allows students to access homework and notes from their teachers online, as well as links to websites which are relevant to material they are currently studying. The very positive steps the English department has taken in harnessing the use of ICT to support teaching and learning are roundly praised. The English department is encouraged to continue to develop its practice in this area and to share practice at meetings of the subject department. The English department should also be

pro-active in seeking additional ICT resources from senior management, given the important role they can play in advancing students' literacy skills and love of the subject.

Comprehensive induction arrangements for new teachers and student teachers have been organised on a whole-school basis. A teacher mentor, who is a post-holder, is assigned to support all student teachers and weekly meetings between the mentor and student teachers are organised. Senior management also participates in these meetings, on occasion. A subject mentor is also assigned for student teachers and provides support in a range of different areas. It is suggested that, as a means of consolidating these very good arrangements, subject-induction procedures should be briefly noted in the subject plan, a document which should itself be central to the induction process. Beyond this, the inclusion of an element of classroom observation as a means of sustaining the teaching-and-learning culture in the department might be worth including in the subject-induction policy.

The school is supportive of English teachers' continuing professional development (CPD). Teachers have availed of CPD opportunities and the subject department maintains links with the relevant subject association. In addition, Carrigaline Community School maintains a Teaching-and-Learning committee. This committee takes a lead role in organising in-service education for staff in the school. Much of this is delivered by staff members themselves. This approach is very good practice as it recognises the unique expertise of teachers in addressing the needs of their own school. The English department has provided CPD to colleagues in the past. All of this is very positive.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. This is positive. A range of formal and informal departmental meetings are organised each year. Senior management has been very supportive of these meetings and members of senior management have, on occasion, participated in English departmental meetings. Minutes of formal meetings are maintained. This is worthwhile. The recent focus of departmental meetings has been on the organisation of class groups, the development of a resource room, the creation of a common examination for first-year classes and the achieving of greater continuity between texts taught within each year group.

Significant work has been undertaken towards the development of an English subject plan. Various resources and examination papers relevant to the subject have been collated in one subject folder. A second departmental folder has also been created. This includes syllabus documents, circulars relevant to English from the Department of Education and Skills, departmental minutes and the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools*. This latter document contains useful advice with regard to subject planning and other aspects of teaching and learning in English. As an aid to teachers in facilitating first-year students during the transition from primary to post-primary education, it is suggested that the primary English syllabus and teacher guidelines could also be made available to English teachers in the subject folder. These latter documents are available at www.curriculumonline.ie.

Common yearly plans have been developed. Considerable work has been involved in creating and agreeing upon the content of these plans. This is highly commended. In particular, the focus on time-linked plans in senior cycle is very positive. As a means of further advancing this good work it is recommended that the English department should focus on the further development of these

plans to incorporate clear learning goals which are skills-based and time-linked in all cases. Such an approach will focus teaching and learning, will aid substitute teachers in appreciating the work undertaken by class groups and will serve the creation of common examinations within year groups, where appropriate. Furthermore, common plans, based on clear learning goals, will maintain teachers' flexibility when choosing texts which they feel are particularly suited to the interests and experiences of their own students. However, the need for some synchronicity between the texts being studied in each year group, for example between ordinary-level and higher-level class groups, in senior cycle, must still be recognised. The department should also be very vigilant regarding the possibility of texts being repeated by different teachers in different year groups to the possible detriment of students' experience of the subject. In addition, it is recommended that both individual teacher and departmental planning should incorporate an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. This should find particular expression in planning for written exercises which are to be assigned for homework. The exploration of a wide range of genres should be planned and linked to specific, relevant points in the texts being studied. These texts can then serve as models for students' writing.

Currently, the English department has selected the development of a whole-school literacy policy as a focus in the area of teaching and learning. This is positive. Lists of keywords have been gathered and a number of other initiatives are also underway. A useful approach to investigate in this context is the incorporation of *Directed Activities Related to Texts* (DARTS) as an element in the subject plan and in teachers' methodologies. In the future, once whole-school literacy strategies have been developed and adopted to an appropriate level, it is recommended that the department should investigate the area of assessment for learning as a topic for the development of practice in the medium term. This will allow the department to further develop the good practice which already exists in this area among English teachers.

English teachers are involved in organising a wide range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include debating, links with *Poetry Ireland*, TY drama, theatre excursions, and public speaking. In addition, students have been involved in a number of poetry competitions including *Poetry Aloud*. A number of collaborations with other subject departments are also undertaken, with the department supporting the 'Artscape' festival in the school and also pursuing involvement in the production of school dramas. Teachers' efforts in these various areas must be applauded.

Texts are varied in junior cycle and in senior cycle, within syllabus requirements. This is positive and the adoption of new and interesting texts in junior cycle is especially worthwhile. The subject department plan suggests that a novel may be studied in first year, although short stories are preferred in some class groups. English teachers are urged to ensure that a novel is studied in all first-year class groups so that students will experience a full and challenging range of genres. In addition, the department should investigate the possibility of adding a further text to those studied in second year and third year where currently only one novel and one play are studied over the course of these two years. Again, this should be done to fulfil the aspirations of the syllabus and offer students a diverse and wide-ranging literary experience in their junior cycle studies.

A subject-specific TY plan has been created for English. This is positive. The programme is imaginative and includes work on media studies and creative writing as well as the publication of the school's *Sketch* magazine. A media scrapbook is used as a mode of assessment and students are also assessed on the basis of a number of pieces of work for English which are included as part of their overall TY folder. The possibility of expanding these very worthwhile assessment strategies to incorporate students' work in an English portfolio, developed over the course of the year, may be worth considering, although the good work already under way is acknowledged in

making this suggestion. As has been recommended with regard to other yearly plans, the TY plan should now move towards a focus on the learning goals for English in TY. A useful resource to support this work can be located at the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie which contains a number of *Transition Units*. During the evaluation appropriate planning for the English and Communications element of the LCA programme was also in evidence.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. This is facilitated through crossover of personnel between the two departments. Communication regarding the needs of students is also supported through the sharing of education plans. Individual and group withdrawal is used to provide additional support for students with special educational needs. It is also very positive to note that the use of team-teaching has been supported in the department and is reported to have worked well. Students' literacy development is assessed during the year and the results of these assessments are shared with mainstream teachers. There has been substantial CPD provided for staff in the area of special educational needs.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, a very good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation. Lessons began, variously, with the taking of the roll, the monitoring of students' homework and the recapitulation of material previously encountered. This latter strategy was worthwhile, facilitating students in establishing links between previous knowledge and the new work to be undertaken during the lesson. Best practice was observed where the learning intention for the lesson was explicitly stated at the outset, an approach which gives students a clear idea of the ultimate aim towards which they are progressing during the lesson. Individual planning was evident in all cases and there was a clear structure in all lessons. In a number of instances, teachers displayed a very high level of skill in maintaining the pace of the lesson and the engagement of their students through appropriately shifting between different methodologies at regular intervals.

A wide range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English. These included the blackboard, the whiteboard, ICT, photocopied resources, student dictionaries and thesauruses. The use of a thesaurus was particularly worthwhile as this will highlight for students the importance of precision and imagination in their use of language. The English department should delineate the use of individual student or class dictionaries and thesauruses as policy and practice in the subject plan.

There was a focus on the analysis of the language used in particular genres or by particular authors in a number of lessons. In one senior cycle lesson, a strong focus on the development of students' appreciation of the language used in travel brochures worked very well and was maintained throughout. In another lesson, an emphasis was placed on the analysis of language techniques used in a poem and this was subsequently consolidated through the use of the whiteboard. Again, this was positive. Beyond this, in a number of instances a longer period could usefully have been allocated, following the reading of a text, to allow students to 'dwell' on the piece. Alternatively, a second reading of the text could have been undertaken. Each of these approaches should be contemplated as a means of further encouraging students to develop their own personal responses to literature encountered during lessons. Very good practice in this area was observed in a senior cycle lesson where a poem was read and students were exhorted to listen and then to note an element which particularly appealed to them. This was very worthwhile.

Reading and writing activities featured frequently in English lessons. These included the use of a prediction exercise, teacher, student and choral readings, the creation of brainstorms, guided reading, text-marking, the use of a notes grid, and the utilisation of realia to support students' engagement with reading material. In one lesson a very imaginative guided reading approach was used to develop students' media literacy, with questions distributed to help them in assessing an interview which was displayed with the use of ICT. In another lesson, guided reading was used to highlight key aspects of a poem for students to note and to aid their engagement with the piece. On occasion, a shift towards greater 'meaning-making' on the part of students themselves might have been desirable and could have been achieved through a shift from teacher questioning to independent work on the part of the students themselves in engaging with the relevant texts.

The use of active methodologies, pair work and group work often formed a part of lessons during the evaluation. In one instance, students were moved out of their seats to engage in a 'walking debate' regarding the morality or otherwise of the actions of the media during the Vietnam war. This worked well, encouraging students to engage in critical thinking, while simultaneously giving an opportunity for their personal responses to be heard. In another instance, the meaning of a piece was built up using a combination of student contributions and links to visual resources produced with the aid of ICT. Again, this was positive. Pair work and group work were also used in lessons and these were a very worthwhile means of pushing responsibility onto students and avoiding a passive approach to learning on their part. Where pair work or group work were used, teachers are encouraged to consider the type of activities being assigned as, on occasion, these were more suited to students working alone and did not necessarily encourage meaningful communication. In these instances, the thoughtful application of co-operative learning methodologies such as *placemat*, *envoy* and *jigsaw*, among others, is advocated. These strategies can also be used to add novelty and excitement to routine revision assignments during the course of lessons. In particular, English teachers are encouraged to maintain a keen awareness of the capacity of co-operative learning strategies to enhance the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, when utilised effectively.

A good relationship between teachers and students was evident in all classes visited during the evaluation. In all cases, teachers displayed good classroom management skills. In one lesson in particular, great skill was used in ensuring that students felt affirmed and that potentially difficult situations were avoided. Teachers were affirming of students' efforts in all cases. Student learning was evident in all lessons observed. Students worked diligently in lessons and displayed good understanding of material they had previously studied. In addition, when questioned, students answered well regarding the texts they were studying and, in many cases, displayed facility in discussing language devices utilised by the authors of these texts.

A print-rich environment has been developed in a number of teacher base-rooms. These rooms incorporated the display of, variously, graphic organisers, motivational posters, students' work in different genres, key quotes, visual resources and important English terms. The English department should actively pursue the further development of a print-rich environment in English base rooms. The development of a print-rich environment should be set down as policy and practice in the English subject plan. The pursuit of this aim is particularly worthwhile in the context of the continuing development of a whole-school literacy strategy. A print-rich environment will support students with difficulties in literacy development and EAL students in developing their literacy skills. Indeed all students will be supported by this strategy. Beyond this, the department should maximise the use of English base rooms wherever practicable. This will enhance English teachers' case to senior management for the assigning of further base rooms once the school has garnered additional space.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in the classes observed during the evaluation. There was evidence of the use of differentiated written homework being assigned in a number of classes. This included the use of writing frames and graphic organisers. This was positive and English teachers are encouraged to explore the use of DARTS as a means of providing additional support for some students when assigning homework. As highlighted in an earlier section, this approach will gel well with the department's current focus on whole-school literacy. Overall, there was clear evidence of the regular use of comment-based, formative assessment on the part of English teachers. This is good practice and conforms to the principles of assessment for learning. Teachers are encouraged to explore the use of peer-assessment and self-assessment as a further extension of this existing good practice.

There was limited use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the homework assigned. The use of staged questions and summary exercises were more frequently in evidence. While acknowledging the validity of these strategies, it is recommended that the use of an integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently adopted on the part of English teachers. This recommendation is made in conjunction with an earlier recommendation regarding teacher and departmental planning which is contained in this report. The wider use of an integrated strategy when assigning homework should incorporate the exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which draw students' attention to the features of the genre which they will need to adhere to, as well as to particular language techniques that they may be required to include. This should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students' macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Students in third year and in sixth year participate in mock examinations in early spring. While there is some use of common examinations, this is not generally the practice in the department. The use of common examinations in each year group should be adopted as policy and practice in the English department wherever practicable. The increased use of mixed-ability class groups in junior cycle, along with the further development of common plans, should facilitate this. The use of common examinations will allow for the comparison of students' performance across each year cohort, while simultaneously obviating the unnecessary duplication of work on the part of English teachers. Students' performance in the certificate examinations versus national norms are analysed by senior management and are discussed with the subject co-ordinator and within the subject department. This is good practice.

There is one parent-teacher meeting per year for each year group. Reports regarding students' progress are communicated to parents following the examinations at Christmas and at the end of the academic year. Reports regarding students' performance in the mock examinations are similarly communicated to students' parents. The student journal is also used to facilitate communication between the school and students' homes. These arrangements are appropriate.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall timetabled provision for English is very good.
- The English department is involved in a number of initiatives connected to its development of a whole-school literacy policy.
- There are very significant ICT facilities in the school which are currently being expanded. Members of the English department have incorporated the use of ICT in their practice.
- There are comprehensive induction arrangements on a whole-school basis. These include subject-specific procedures.
- A subject co-ordinator has been appointed. Significant work has been undertaken towards the development of a subject plan.
- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation
- Universally good relationships between teachers and students and very good classroom management were observed.
- There was a clear structure in all lessons.
- Pair work and group work were often used in lessons.

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

- The English department should focus on the further development of common yearly plans so that they incorporate clear learning goals which are skills-based and time-linked in all cases
- Individual teacher and departmental planning should incorporate an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses.
- The department should investigate the area of assessment for learning as a focus for the development of practice in the medium term.

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