An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
DRAFT

Clonkeen College
Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 60092U

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REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Clonkeen College, conducted as part of a whole school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with 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, deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

English is a core subject in the junior and senior-cycle programmes offered in Clonkeen College. Four lessons per week are provided in both first year and second year, and five in third year. This provision gives weight to examination preparation, whereas the provision of five lessons in first year would place greater emphasis on a firm grounding in the key skills identified in the syllabus. For this reason, it would be worthwhile to consider the feasibility of increasing first-year provision. Where four lessons only are provided, it is preferable to timetable English on Monday and Friday so as to minimise the gap between lessons. English is delivered on a modular basis in the Transition Year (TY) programme, which is compulsory. Modules are of nine weeks’ duration and consist of either three or four lessons per week. This is good provision, and is augmented by additional English-related modules in drama and media studies. Fifth and sixth-year students have an English lesson per day, and this is optimal provision.

First-year students are placed in mixed-ability base class groups, and remain in these class groups for English throughout the junior cycle. Almost all students take Junior Certificate English at higher level. While the policy of maintaining mixed ability appears successful in encouraging students to take higher level, it requires vigilance with regard to students who may experience difficulty, and also requires a high level of co-operation between subject and support teachers. The mixed-ability formation continues in TY. In fifth year, two or three higher-level class groups and one ordinary-level class group are formed. Teachers advise students as to the appropriate level, taking past performance and application into account. If progress in TY is part of this process, it should be mentioned in the school policy on subject and level choice. Uptake of Leaving Certificate higher-level English is good.

Eight teachers are currently deployed to teach English in the school, a rather large number in a school of 516 students. Only two of the whole-time teachers have English as the main subject on their timetables, and three teachers take just one class group. The large numbers involved in delivering English mean that few teachers regularly teach the subject across the full range of programmes, years and levels. This pattern of deployment merits reconsideration, as it tends not to support the delivery of the English curriculum as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth. All teachers with a significant English teaching load should
have the opportunity to teach the subject to the full range of years, programmes and levels. A further consideration is that the size of the department, resulting from this dispersed deployment, creates practical difficulties for collaborative work and communication among all teachers of English, notwithstanding the discussions that Leaving Certificate teachers may have regarding text choices.

Classrooms are assigned to class groups rather than teachers and, while this minimises student movement between lessons, it limits the possibility of developing the classroom as a resource in itself for the teaching and learning of English. However, the visual enhancement of many classrooms through pictures and murals was striking. In some cases also, students’ written work was displayed and was referred to during lessons. The display of students’ work should be regarded as a form of publication, providing a real context for the redrafting of work, and encouraging high standards of presentation. The combined seats and desks in many rooms are difficult to move, making group work and activities involving movement less easy to manage, and reinforcing teacher-centred methods. Teachers of English could usefully discuss the layout of classroom most appropriate to the subject, and there would be great merit in making this a whole-school topic for teachers teaching in the general classrooms. An arrangement of desks and chairs that facilitates activity-based learning and student interaction could potentially increase students’ participation and engagement.

The school has embarked on a comprehensive programme of provision of information and communication technology (ICT). Mobile data projectors are currently available and in use. The current limited access to audiovisual equipment on the senior corridor should be addressed, as it would be desirable to have a means of showing films to more than one senior class at a time. There is no library at present in the school, although one is included in the planned building extension. Teachers of English make commendable efforts to foster the habit of private reading for pleasure through class libraries and occasional silent reading periods for first years.

The school supports initial teacher training. A student teacher is taking some English lessons in first and second year, although whole-time teachers remain assigned to these class groups. This is good practice, as it allows for ongoing mentoring and consultation as to suitable methods and materials. The school is also supportive of continuing professional development. A greater level of contact with the Irish National Organisation of Teachers of English (INOTE at www.inote.ie) is recommended, as the teachers of English have much to offer the professional dialogue facilitated by the subject association.

Co-curricular activities extending students’ experience of English flourish in the school. Drama, debating, public speaking, and ‘Poetry Aloud’ have a vibrant presence and are well supported.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

An English folder was presented during the evaluation, and it contained the current subject plan, records of meetings, the school’s special educational needs booklet, and syllabus documents and guidelines. Subject department meetings take place three times a year, and the records show that they may take place more often for specific purposes, for example the development of the subject plan in 2006. In general, meetings deal with organisational matters, including the acquisition of resources, and possible text choices are also discussed. The subject information form stated that there is no co-ordinator for English, but accompanying information described two teachers as joint co-ordinators. Since areas for development in subject department planning are identified in this report, it is strongly recommended that the English department discuss and agree the co-
ordinator role, ensuring that it encompasses subject development planning and the building and sharing of good practice. The agreed job description should be included in the subject plan, and it would be useful to agree also a method of rotation of the role, so that all teachers of English have the opportunity for professional development that subject co-ordination offers.

The English plan concisely sets out laudable aims for teaching and learning in the subject and endorses the aims of the English syllabuses. It includes year plans for each of the six years, giving the specific texts to be covered and referring in general terms to topics and skills, for example, reading comprehension. What it lacks are clear statements of learning outcomes founded on a staged approach to skills and knowledge development. Such an approach should be adopted. It should lead to a linking of the skills to be acquired with the methods and materials best suited to attaining these outcomes. It should then identify the forms of assessment that would most clearly indicate that students have attained the desired skills. While the respective syllabuses set out learning outcomes in broad statements, subject planning at school level has the opportunity to render these in specific terms suited to the student cohort and the school context, and also to exploit the talents and expertise of the teaching team.

The year plans indicate timeframes for the coverage of the planned courses, and reflect substantial programmes of work. Preparation for examinations features strongly in the third and sixth year plans. While the importance of Leaving Certificate attainment in English is clear, it is recommended that less emphasis be placed on specific and intensive preparation for the Junior Certificate. Since the Junior Certificate English examination largely concentrates on composing and comprehending skills with regard to unseen texts, it suits the skills-based approach recommended above, and exposure to a wide variety of texts and tasks.

Texts referred to in the year plans are generally suited to delivering the syllabus aims. Teachers are commended for including Shakespearean drama in the junior cycle programme. However, it is advisable to plan approaches and resources that bring out the plays’ dramatic and theatrical qualities, lifting them as much as possible from the page to the stage. The TY English programme covers poetry, fiction, drama and film studies. The thematic element in the planning of some modules has great potential for range and variety of texts. To exploit this, it would be helpful to involve all teachers of English in planning the TY programme, with reference to its importance for the continuing knowledge and skills development of students. For the comparative study element of the Leaving Certificate syllabus, it should be noted that three texts are required at both higher and ordinary level. The approach taken to the comparative study should aim to facilitate students’ personal response to the texts and widen their cultural experience, whereas the literary critical approach remains more appropriate to the study of the single text.

The subject plan for English should always be understood as a work in progress and not as an end in itself. The annual review of the plan is commended, and it would be useful to record any changes or developments and the reasons for these.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Eight lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes, and involving most members of the English teaching team. Teaching was authoritative and assured, and was most effective when teachers shared their enthusiasm for the subject with students and encouraged them to respond. Students worked diligently in lessons, read aloud competently, and were generally confident when answering questions or giving their views. Junior-cycle students were noticeably more vocal and responsive than students in the senior-cycle
lessons observed. This finding was discussed with teachers and with the teaching team as a whole. Teachers said that some class groups were naturally more silent, but also said that certificate examinations tended to create a dynamic where the teacher dispenses knowledge and students receive it. However, since so many students are demonstrably articulate and have very good debating skills, it is recommended that the English teaching team review the range of teaching methods employed and consider how they might encourage more active student participation in senior-cycle lessons.

Topics covered in junior-cycle lessons included poetry and fiction, in both cases admirably integrated with creative or functional writing tasks; reading comprehension based on a past examination paper; and Shakespearean drama. In the senior-cycle lessons observed, TY students were introduced to the chosen novel, and Leaving Certificate lessons focused on the comparative study involving film and fiction, and on the reading comprehension section of a past paper. The materials used were generally appropriate to the class group and the syllabus, and balanced accessibility and challenge. However, material from past examination papers should be used sparingly until students are well into the examination year, at which point it is useful to practise questions and work on technique.

ICT was used very well in a senior-cycle lesson where it assisted the in-depth analysis of a key moment in a film. In advance of the planned roll-out of ICT equipment, some teachers have transferred material to overhead projector acetates, a useful interim measure. Effective use of the board was also noted, for example in a junior-cycle lesson on Shakespearean drama to set out in a clear sequence the points made in classroom discussion.

Lessons were well structured and paced, covering a substantial amount of material in most cases. Lesson topic and purpose were usually stated clearly at the outset. Excellent practice in lesson sequencing was noted in a junior-cycle lesson where pre-reading tasks and reading of a poem were completed, and students then used the poem as a model for their own writing. In some instances, teachers were advised to avoid lengthy textual analysis when students were encountering a text for the first time, and to aim for a swift first reading so that students could then consider the text as a whole when developing their ideas on it.

Teacher exposition and analysis of texts, along with a variety of questioning, were the teaching methods that predominated. In discussing the texts, teachers demonstrated good analytical skills and displayed, at times, a range of reference that provided a rich resource for students. Indeed, senior-cycle students in particular should bear in mind the importance of good note-making as a component of active listening. Questions were often probing and encouraged students towards more thoughtful and reasoned responses. A ‘hands-up’ policy was generally followed, and the number of students volunteering to respond was notable. However, teachers should occasionally request that the whole class take time to think out a response without raising hands.

Some effective pair and group work was noted also, but sometimes students assigned to work in pairs actually worked independently. A well-managed ‘think, pair, share’ approach, that allows students to gather their thoughts before sharing them one-to-one and then more generally, could encourage less confident students to participate and would be a differentiation mechanism worth considering. Greater use of discovery learning approaches was also suggested during the evaluation, as a means of encouraging students to work through key concepts themselves. When investigating other teaching approaches, the teaching team might especially bear in mind the desirability of greater interaction between students.
Most students were attentive and worked purposefully in the lessons observed. Some very perceptive responses and observations were made and students readily asked questions themselves, sometimes simply to seek clarification but at times also to put forward a counter-argument or to suggest a different interpretation. Teachers’ use of higher-order questions and occasional playing of the devil’s advocate stimulated response especially from able students, whose grasp of concepts was often impressive. Writing tasks in class were done very purposefully, and it was noted that many students were able to produce substantial and well-composed written responses at impressive speed.

ASSESSMENT

There was good monitoring of students’ work and participation in most of the lessons observed. Targeted questions were used to check students’ understanding and to ensure that they remained focused on the work in hand. Teachers also gauged students’ grasp of ideas from purposeful and structured classroom discussion and modified their approach accordingly. Where classroom tasks were set, teachers circulated to monitor students’ work and to provide direction. At times, greater vigilance in ensuring that students were addressing the question correctly was indicated.

A number of students’ copybooks and folders were reviewed. These reflected a substantial volume of work and the regular setting of assignments. Credit is due to the teaching team for the emphasis placed on extended writing tasks, and the very good guidance given to students as to how to improve their work. Very full written feedback affirmed students’ efforts and also presented a challenge where appropriate, in the case of able students who had not yet realised their potential. Teachers appeared to know the students very well, and there was evidence that appropriately high expectations and standards are communicated to students.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The timetable makes good provision for English in the senior cycle.
- Co-curricular activities extending students’ experience of English flourish in the school.
- The English plan concisely sets out laudable aims for teaching and learning in the subject, and the year plans reflect substantial programmes of work.
- Teachers were authoritative and assured, and most effective when they shared their enthusiasm for the subject with students.
- Most students were attentive and worked purposefully in the lessons observed. Perceptive responses and observations were noted.

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

- The provision of an English lesson per day in first year should be considered.
- Efforts should be made to achieve a more concentrated deployment of teachers of English.
- A subject co-ordinator role should be established on a rotating basis, and planning with a focus on the development of skills should be progressed.
- Methods to encourage greater student interaction and participation should be investigated.
Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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