Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Mhuire
Mullingar, Co. Westmeath
Roll number: 63270K

Date of inspection: 25 March 2010
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Mhuire, Mullingar, carried out 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 examined students’ work. The inspector also reviewed school planning documentation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Mhuire provides English in the Junior Certificate (JC) programme, Transition Year (TY) programme and Leaving Certificate (LC) programme.

Whole-school support is good across a number of areas. Timetabling allocation is very good in the senior cycle, with five lessons in TY, and six in each of LC years one and two. In the junior cycle, there are four lessons in each year and consideration should be given to increasing this to five in order to develop core skills and provide a secure foundation for English in the senior cycle. Distribution of lessons across the week is good in all cases except for fifth year. This should be reviewed in next year’s timetable. Students should have contact with English on each day of the week. Resources provided for the subject are good. Many teachers are classroom based and rooms are generally equipped with good information and communication technology (ICT) and audio-visual equipment and there is adequate storage space. The school also has a designated library with a good stock of subject-related books and it is commendable that new additions to the library are flagged on notices prominently displayed near the school entrance point.

It is very commendable that classes are organised in a mixed-ability setting in first and second year and this setting is observed to some extent in third year. Access to higher level is good. Higher-level uptake is good and above national norms in both the junior and senior cycles and this is very positive. Target setting and action planning should take place to increase uptake further, especially in the junior cycle. The number of students in some classes is low and this creates very favourable learning conditions. In the senior cycle, students are streamed into higher and ordinary level classes for English. It is commendable that, in addition to JC results, consultation with students and teachers is included, allowing a flexible approach. Students with additional needs are withdrawn for extra tuition, usually during RE class. However, in a senior cycle class visited, it was reported that one student was withdrawn from English. This option might be considered on a very occasional basis to address a specific issue that could not otherwise have been dealt with through normal classroom teaching. In all cases there should be close liaison between the class teacher and the learning-support teacher.
Attendance during the evaluation seemed to be good overall but since individual teacher records for each class were not presented to the inspector, it was not possible to detect any patterns for specific class groups. In some senior classes visited, a large number of absences were attributed to a planned work-experience programme, but in another, a significant absence rate was not explained. Teachers were observed calling the roll in lessons observed indicating that monitoring is taking place and this is laudable.

The team of teachers is appropriately qualified and gender balanced. Deployment is not entirely satisfactory, however. The current team is very large relative to school numbers and, apart from repeat classes, no one teacher has more than three English classes. This should be reviewed: a smaller team with more subject contact is desirable to deepen both experience and expertise in the teaching of English across all programmes. Each teacher should be deployed in both senior and junior cycle English. For a number of years, the teachers of senior-cycle English have been apportioning different aspects of the syllabus to individual teachers. It is understood that this practice is being discontinued and is currently not operative in the top stream in sixth year but is in all other classes. The school is commended for discontinuing this arrangement for the following reasons: it reduces individual teacher accountability for learning and assessment of outcomes since no one teacher has responsibility for student achievement across the syllabus in any particular class group; it does not facilitate the integration of language and literature; it does not easily promote transferred learning or reinforcement of earlier learning. Evidence gathered during the evaluation reinforces this finding. Where inexperienced teachers are deployed in English, a subject-specific support and induction programme should be put in place: an experienced teacher of the subject should be assigned as mentor on an ongoing basis and with a clearly defined role to support the inexperienced teacher. This should help to maintain consistently high quality teaching into the future and ensure that students are not disadvantaged in the necessary transition process.

The level of engagement with continuing professional development (CPD), in areas specific to the teaching of mainstream English (for example, courses attended through the support services, engagement with professional associations), is not recorded in the English folder. However, it is reported that the department is involved with the subject association. It is recommended that the teachers of English undertake regular reviews of their individual development needs in relation to the teaching of the subject. The team should identify common areas that require targeting, should maintain a record of CPD engagement, and should develop a mechanism for feeding back to the English department. Department meetings should be used for sharing and disseminating the very good practice that is currently in evidence in classes visited.

It is very commendable that reading for pleasure is encouraged and it is the English department’s policy to encourage all students to read for five minutes at the start of lessons. During the course of the inspection, the policy was implemented in some lessons observed. In one instance, it is commendable that students were reading their own choice of text as distinct from the class novel and this is in line with the spirit of the department’s policy.

TY students have engaged in the Poetry Aloud competition hosted by the National Library of Ireland and one student was a semi-finalist in the intermediate category. It is also understood that students engage in debating as part of their TY programme in English, and have participated in competitions. Such activities are highly commended, since they afford students the opportunity to learn in sites outside the traditional classroom setting and develop a range of important personal skills and competences that may not be measured in state examinations.
PLANNING AND PREPARATION

In Coláiste Mhuire, structures for department planning are in place. It is reported that meetings take place about three times a year on average. It is recommended that meetings take place on a more regular basis to enable meaningful collaborative planning and the school should undertake to facilitate this. The role of co-ordinator rotates and it is creditable that responsibility is thus distributed. It involves the recording of minutes of meetings and dissemination of information and is, in effect, an administrative role. The school’s management should reconceptualise the role of subject department co-ordinator as a leader of learning for both subject teachers and students. Administrative tasks could, perhaps, be done more efficiently through electronic means allowing more time for pedagogical discussion. The school’s management could consider arranging appropriate leadership training for all subject co-ordinators as part of its overall CPD strategy. Some department meetings appear to have been documented but there is no consistency. A record of all meetings should be maintained in order to inform planning and to facilitate the monitoring of progress.

The current plan comprises very brief yearly schemes of work for all years except TY (a separate document) and records the titles of texts; it is not a recognisable plan in the full sense of the word. The folder also contains an earlier document based on the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) template that requires considerable updating and review. It is recommended that planning for English be thoroughly reviewed. The junior cycle plan should be redrafted on the model of the rebalanced English syllabus available on the NCCA website. This approach should also be adopted in planning for the TY and LC programmes so that there is a clear emphasis on long-term and short-term learning outcomes. In tandem with this, individual teacher planning should indicate the learning to be achieved by students. The following are specific areas for development in the plan for English: action planning, based on targets set that are informed by data analysis; teaching methods and strategies that promote active learning, co-operative learning and independent learning; differentiation for teaching subject content and for assessment; a policy on the induction and mentoring of new teachers of English; a CPD policy; and strategies for the integration of language and literature across all programmes. The quality of liaison between the English department and teams that support students with additional educational needs or other subject areas is not clear from documentation and this is a further area for development.

The TY English plan offers a varied experience of English to students. One module involves active participation in drama to include workshops and the development of their own creative material. Another module focuses on writing that involves production of a newsletter. There are also poetry, fiction and film modules. The experiential emphasis of the programme is commended. The TY plan should be integrated into the plan for English. Assessment methods within the TY programme should be clearly documented.

As part of their planning and review practices and as a preliminary to addressing the issues raised in this report, the English teaching team and the school’s senior management should consult Looking at English, a report from the Inspectorate on the teaching and learning of English in post-primary schools. Particular attention should be paid to the report’s recommendations and to the exemplars of good practice it contains.
TEACHING AND LEARNING

While no individual teacher’s plans were presented during the inspection, there was evidence of conscientious preparation of resources and lesson planning in classes visited. The resources were appropriate to the class level in all cases. In particular, the use of ICT resources to assist learning is very highly commended. Good slide presentations supported lessons and an MP3 player allowed sound to complement visual imagery in a language lesson. The board was used very well in lessons, for example, to structure information through the use of a graphic organiser and to take feedback from students. In one instance, the teacher used coloured markers on the board to emphasise key points and this was a considerable help to visual learners. A minority of teachers announced the theme of the class at the start of the lesson or summarised work already done in order to prepare for new learning and this is commended. The pace of lessons was good in general; however, a couple of lessons featured either too much content or too fast a pace for the groups in question and these lessons should be reviewed. To direct student learning and afford an opportunity for assessment of learning at the end, it is recommended that the learning intention and planned learning outcomes be written on the board at the start of all lessons.

Standard seating arrangements were used in most cases and a more creative approach was taken in one. Varied seating arrangements should be considered from time to time, as appropriate, for example, to facilitate group and project work. However, it is acknowledged that in a small number of cases, this may not be possible due to unique conditions. In such instances, room swaps should be considered in order to vary learning opportunities.

A minority of teachers took advantage of the classroom space to create a stimulating environment for the subject and this is highly commended. The classroom walls were under utilised as an additional learning resource in some lessons observed, although their use for other subjects was noted. Where a classroom is assigned to a number of teachers, storage and wall space should be shared equally.

Subject content was appropriate in almost all cases. In one case however, content was addressed too late in the academic year and at a level that was inappropriate for the class in question. The division of the syllabus among teachers, referred to above, appears to have been a contributory factor. The lesson was not placed in a meaningful syllabus context and this contributed to a lack of student engagement and undermined the learning atmosphere in the classroom. The syllabus should be revisited and there should be clear liaison between all subject teachers to ensure consistency in the delivery of the syllabus.

Methods used were appropriate to the class level in almost all cases. Very good practice was noted in some. A good variety of activities was planned in order to reinforce learning in the best lessons observed. Whole-class activity was followed by individual tasks with feedback in a whole-class setting that evoked good responses. The TY drama class was very student centred and students enacted their own work. Action was interspersed with discussion. There is scope for the development of co-operative learning through group and pair work in lessons since, apart from the TY drama class, these strategies were not used in lessons observed. In a language lesson, students were explicitly encouraged to think for themselves and to use a more creative and expressive vocabulary in their writing and this exercise is very commendable. Practical writing tips were also provided in another lesson. Questioning strategy was used for a variety of purposes and to good effect in most classes. Closed questioning was generally used to elicit factual information. Higher-order questioning was also used and this is commended. Care should be taken, however, to allow sufficient time for students to formulate their responses. While a balance
between global and individual questioning was maintained in some classes, in others there was an over reliance on general questions addressed to the class as a whole. Consequently, some students made no oral contribution at all to class. It is very commendable that students were affirmed and encouraged in their answering in classes visited. The quality of interactions was good in many lessons. In one instance, teaching strategies did not take cognisance of the ability range of students, level of student interest and stage of the academic year. In some lessons, students were assigned individual tasks that allowed the teacher to circulate and assist, and this is very positive since students received individual attention.

In a lesson observed, the integration of language and literature is highly commended: for example students used Patrick Kavanagh’s poetry as a springboard for their own writing. Good practice should be shared in this regard. While attention to language development and to accuracy of writing is good in many lessons, it is noted that students’ grammar and spelling errors are not always highlighted in some samples of assessed homework. While this may be a deliberate policy in some instances, and for specific and good reasons, care should be taken to ensure that students are aware of their mechanical errors and that strategies to address them are devised.

Teacher modelling of language use was good on the whole in lessons observed, but instances of mispronunciation or misuse of words was also in evidence in a couple of classes visited. Great caution must be observed on the part of teachers to ensure that errors are not embedded in student learning. In one lesson, the level of teacher communication was too advanced for the class in question and did not engage students. It is commendable that there is a specific focus on oral communication skills in the TY programme for English. Interaction with the inspector indicated that the TY students have derived considerable benefit from their programme and believed that their personal confidence had been enhanced through their learning experience. The articulate and reflective nature of their oral responses corroborated this finding. This focus should be emulated in all programmes.

Student achievement is lower that might be expected in the JC and LC programmes. This is particularly notable in the top grades at higher and ordinary levels in both programmes. The failure rate is a matter of considerable concern. It is very strongly recommended that the department carry out a thorough review of achievement in English in all programmes and classes, that target setting take place to raise standards and that expectations of achievement be clearly communicated to all students at all levels. The discontinuation of the policy of distributing the teaching of the senior cycle syllabus and the introduction of TY may begin to impact positively on senior cycle achievement levels in the medium to long term. However, every aspect of the teaching and learning of English needs to be examined as this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

**ASSESSMENT**

There is little information recorded in English documents examined to indicate the variety and purpose of assessment methods used and standards expected from both students and teachers. It is recommended that the whole area of assessment be reviewed in the plan for English. The department should share the good practice that currently exists and agree and then document clear and specific guidelines, for both teacher assessment and student presentation of written work, in the plan for English. There should be documented assessment criteria and these should be clearly linked to the programme of work and learning outcomes outlined in the English plan.
There was commendable emphasis on assessment for learning in many lessons observed. For example, information gathered from copybooks was used to identify and remediate common errors in a whole-class session. Questioning and monitoring in class was also used to correct errors and direct learning. The quality of teacher assessment of written homework varied. In samples seen, very good practice was noted where learning was directed through teachers’ annotations and comments, and this should be a model for all. Very positive affirmation of students’ efforts was observed in some samples and this is highly commended. It is commendable that high standards of presentation were expected in some cases. However, there was also evidence of very low expectations in a minority of cases, with poorly presented work and little evidence of monitoring. Based on evidence from students’ journals and copybook samples, homework appears to be regularly set and homework was set in all classes visited during the evaluation. Homework also appears to be regularly assessed. It is very commendable that, in a lesson observed, students were held accountable for work not done and notes from parents were required. This confirms that high expectations were set and copybook samples seen verify that these standards are met.

It is reported that continuous assessment is used in TY. Summative assessment takes place every ten weeks on average for the other programmes. It is commendable that there is some common assessment for in-house examinations but there are no documented details of assessment criteria. Individual teachers appear to collaborate in the setting of papers based on some samples presented by the school during the evaluation. It is recommended that common papers be set for all year groups in first and second year with differentiation integrated into the assessment instrument. In third year and in the LC programme, common levels should have common papers. Common papers help to ensure consistency of syllabus delivery.

When designing in-house test instruments, the team should aim for a consistent format that models good presentation. Copies of in-house examinations should be kept in the English folder along with analyses of outcomes. Alternatively, assessment instruments could be maintained in an electronic English folder. Senior management carries out an analysis of certificate examination outcomes but it is not clear how this analysis is used to improve learning in the classroom. The department should set targets and design implementation strategies based on such data.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:
- Uptake of and access to higher level is generally good.
- Allocation of lesson time in the senior cycle is very good and resources are generally good.
- The department has a reading policy that is implemented in lessons.
- Use of resources in lessons is good and use of ICT in lessons is very good.
- Lessons were well prepared in all cases and content was good in most cases.
- There was evidence of good practice in relation to assessment for learning in a number of lessons.
- A good range of learning activities was used in some lessons.
- Students were positively affirmed by their teachers.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• Lower achievement than might be expected in the JC and LC programmes must be reviewed as a matter of urgency and action planning should take place to improve attainment. High expectation of achievement should be clearly communicated to students at all levels and in all programmes.
• The team of English teachers should be reduced in number. Fewer teachers should have more contact with English across all programmes in order to deepen experience and expertise.
• Planning for English should be thoroughly reviewed.
• The English department should identify and address its CPD needs and meetings should be more regular and be used to disseminate existing good practice.
• The school should reconceptualise the role of subject department co-ordinator as a leader of learning for both subject teachers and students and could consider arranging appropriate leadership training for all subject co-ordinators as part of its overall continuing professional development (CPD) strategy, with the goal of achieving school improvement.
• Where inexperienced teachers are deployed in English, a subject-specific support and induction programme should be put in place.
• To direct student learning and afford an opportunity for assessment of learning at the end of lessons, it is recommended that the learning intention and planned learning outcomes be written on the board at the start of all lessons.
• The department should review assessment policy and practice. Guidelines, procedures, methods and criteria should be documented in the plan for English.

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

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