Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Bríde
Enniscorthy, County Wexford
Roll number: 63570W

Date of inspection: 4 February 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Bríde, Enniscorthy, 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 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Four lessons per week are allocated to English in each year of the junior cycle, an adequate though not generous provision. Lessons vary in duration from thirty-five to forty-five minutes. This means that, depending on the day and time of lessons, different class groups in the same year could have significant variations in their class contact time for English. While lesson length is a whole-school issue, a specific concern with regard to English is the allocation of time in first year. Optimal provision for English is a lesson per day, and this is particularly applicable to first year. It is the foundation year of the post-primary English curriculum, during which students can best acquire a solid grounding in language and literature skills. Therefore the possibility of allocating a fifth lesson to English in first year should be explored.

The school’s timetable provision for English in fifth and sixth year is optimal. The provision of concurrent timetabling for English in fifth and sixth year facilitates movement of students between classes. The opportunities it also provides for shared whole-year activities and greater collaboration among the teachers involved could profitably be explored further.

The school runs an optional Transition Year (TY) programme, and two lessons of English per week are allocated to it. A minimum of three lessons per week is recommended, so that the aims of the programme regarding opportunities for independent learning, remediation and maturation of students can be adequately met in the area of English. Students’ access to TY also merits some thought. At present, places are offered to a maximum of forty-eight students although the demand this year is considerably greater. The school should consider how it might increase the numbers in TY, since there is a high level of interest, the programme has much to offer students, and the basis on which to select students can give rise to many difficulties.

The methods of class formation are generally satisfactory. Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups on entry to first year and remain in these base class groups for English, with one exception described below. TY groups are of mixed ability for English, and Leaving Certificate
English class groups are formed on the basis of the level at which students intend to take the examination.

First-year students who are identified as having literacy and numeracy difficulties are placed in one of two base class groups, which are timetabled concurrently for English and Mathematics. These students are then withdrawn from the mainstream English lesson and are taught as a discrete group in a resource classroom. School management expressed satisfaction with this arrangement, the aim of which is to ensure that these students succeed at Junior Certificate English; almost all these students take the examination successfully at ordinary level. While the supportive intention of this system is clear, it may be timely to consider whether it offers these students the best possible experience of the Junior Certificate English syllabus. The English teaching team and school management should examine more integrated approaches, including in-class support through team teaching and differentiation strategies within the mainstream classroom. As a general principle, literacy development should be seen as a whole-school issue of relevance to all subjects, while English lessons should focus on the skills and knowledge areas described in the relevant syllabus documents.

Ten teachers form the English teaching team in the school, and most are subject specialists. As far as possible, teachers should be registered specialists in the subject. Only four teachers take both junior and senior cycle class groups and teach English to three class groups or more. In the interests of strengthening the view of English as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth, teachers should be assigned to both junior and senior class groups wherever possible. Teachers in fifth and sixth year rotate the teaching of class groups of different levels, and this practice supports the development of a range of teaching skills.

The majority of teachers of English have their own base classrooms. In some cases, these have been very well developed as resources for the teaching and learning of English. The practice of displaying recent examples of students’ work was especially noted, and should be followed where possible, as it constitutes a form of publication and acknowledgement of effort, and encourages students to take pride in their work. Where a print-rich environment had been created, teachers used relevant displays during the lesson, a valuable form of reinforcement. Audiovisual equipment is available in a number of classrooms, and was used in some of the lessons observed. Information and communication technology (ICT) was used to create some resources used in lessons but was not otherwise used to assist teaching and learning in the classroom. This is an area for development.

Good progress has been made to address a recommendation in a previous report regarding the school library. A designated space has been given to the creation of a reference and lending library. Students may visit the library during English and other subjects as part of class work, and can borrow from it twice a week at lunchtime. The present stock is attractive and varied and reflects very good stewardship and use of funds. It would be worthwhile to consider ways of increasing students’ browsing and borrowing time, as fostering the habit of private reading for pleasure provides students with a lifelong resource. Co-curricular and extracurricular activities that extend students’ experience of English are very well catered for.

**Planning and Preparation**

An English planning folder was made available during the evaluation, comprising the subject plan, a record of subject department meetings, and lists of resources available to support teaching and learning. An electronic copy of the plan is available on the school network, making it easy to
refer to and adjust. The present subject plan is based on the syllabuses and contains broad statements of aims and objectives. In some cases, learning outcomes have been stated in terms of specific skills, and the plan also gives some timeframes and some context factors that have an impact on programme planning. The plan is general in nature and contains outline year plans rather than detailed schemes of work. It is therefore best seen as analogous to the permanent section of the school plan, setting out policy and practice in the teaching and learning of English.

To complement this document, it is recommended that the teaching team collaboratively develop common, skills-based programmes of work. These could for example indicate a core programme for each year of the junior cycle, while leaving room for some choice and variation. The emphasis in this work should be on developing clear statements of the skills and knowledge appropriate to each year, expressed in terms of what students must, could and should be able to do. These outcomes can then be linked to the most effective materials and methods for achieving them, and the most appropriate forms of assessment to indicate students’ progress. This approach should help to ensure that planning remains a real process, reflecting and informing classroom practice.

The TY English plan gives a brief overview of aims and content, which is then developed in teachers’ individual plans. One of the programme aims stated in the plan is the development of students’ responsibility for their own learning, and the practice observed was consistent with this aim. However, the material and approaches indicated in the plan have a stronger Leaving Certificate focus than is desirable. It is therefore recommended that the TY plan be reviewed and that explicit reference to Leaving Certificate material be removed. The focus on creative writing and on media, facilitated by guest workshops, is commended. It is suggested that a programme of assignments covering a range of skills be devised, agreed, included in the plan and given to all TY students at the beginning of the year.

Minutes of meetings record decisions on organisational matters and resources, and work on the subject plan. Work to be done between meetings is taken on by individual volunteers. There is no co-ordinator of English. Given the size of the English teaching team and the fact that all students take the subject, better structures to support collaborative planning would be beneficial. It is strongly recommended that the teaching team discuss and establish the role of co-ordinator, as part of a whole-school approach to consistent subject planning practices. The focus of the role should be on subject development planning, as outlined above, and the sharing and strengthening of the good teaching and learning practices noted in the English classrooms visited during the inspection. This will require further development of the collaborative practices currently in place. It would be worthwhile to agree a system of rotation of the role, affording all members of the teaching team an opportunity for professional development.

The English planning folder shows that the teachers of English reflect on their practice, for example through the detailed account of actions following a subject inspection in 2005. As ICT becomes more integrated into teaching and learning processes in the school, the teachers of English could engage in further action planning on how best to exploit its huge potential in the English classroom. The innovative practices that some members of the department are encountering through the TL21 project could also be incorporated in the plan over time.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes in the school and involving almost all members of the English teaching team. The quality of teaching in the lessons observed was good overall, and a number of instances of innovative and
accomplished teaching were noted. Teachers were generally open to suggestions for improvement and willing to consider new approaches where relevant. Students were observed to work diligently and for the most part showed an interest in the subject and in making progress with it. While they were at times rather silent, they engaged in class activity and many students made perceptive and thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Lessons were well paced and covered a substantial amount of material. Good preparation meant that activities and topics were well sequenced and effectively managed. Prior learning was reinforced and used well to make links with new material. Forward movement was maintained, even where teachers moderated pace to ensure that students had time to absorb and consider new material. Where a participative approach was chosen, for example with students acting out a short scene themselves, the activity was well organised and directed, and the students’ desire to co-operate and make it work was used to good effect. Given this context, teachers are encouraged to plan lessons that give students regular opportunities to be active in their own learning.

Resources were chosen and prepared with a clear learning purpose in mind, although the range of resources observed was quite limited. The board was used very effectively in many lessons to record points made in class discussion and arrange them in a clear sequence and to reinforce new vocabulary and key terms. The good practice of teacher writing leading to student writing was noted, and worked especially well where teacher and students worked together to describe certain characters and actions. This helpfully modelled for students the process of composing a response to a text, integrating language and literature, and emphasising key aspects of genre. Helpful handouts had also been prepared; those that provided templates to assist students in organising their own responses were particularly appropriate to the skills identified in the syllabuses. Some audio resources were used effectively to elicit students’ responses. The greater use of high-quality audio recordings in the teaching of drama, especially Shakespearean drama, is recommended, as hearing the script delivered by professional actors directs students’ attention to issues of performance and interpretation, which are central to the genre.

The lessons observed covered poetry, drama, fiction, the comparative study, print and electronic media, and writing skills. Teachers deployed a range of teaching and learning methods, including teacher exposition, directed class discussion, questioning, and pair and group work. When discussing aspects of communication through drama and media, teachers often displayed practical as well as theoretical knowledge of the particular genre, offering students a valuable insight through their own experience. This was particularly effective when it encouraged students to ask questions and make their own observations. A good range of question types was used for various purposes: targeted questions to involve all students and check their grasp and recall; open questions to encourage students to express a view; and higher-order questions that challenged students’ first thoughts and encouraged them to consider complex issues more thoughtfully. Teachers are encouraged to ensure that all valid responses are affirmed, while continuing to require good standards of accuracy and supporting evidence from students.

Pair and group work was used as a means of encouraging students to explore a topic and to share ideas. Groups were monitored effectively, and teachers focused on students who might need further direction. At times, however, the purpose and focus of the task had not been established clearly enough in advance. Students worked purposefully in their groups, and were generally more confident in reporting their views to the whole class, having had an opportunity to voice them in their groups. Further development of co-operative and discovery learning is recommended, as a means of building on the good practice observed and utilising students’ capacity to work productively together.
In all cases, teachers communicated an enthusiasm for the subject and a belief in its importance and relevance. The focus on connecting material and concepts to students’ lives was a strength of the practice observed. Well-directed class discussion as a precursor to students’ written work was an effective means of reminding students of what they already knew about a particular topic, and made it more likely that they would produce substantial written work. It would be a worthwhile exercise for the teaching team to discuss ways to encourage students of all abilities to approach reading and writing tasks with the greatest possible sense of confidence and empowerment. Despite a certain level of shyness, students displayed an ability to recall and explain prior learning, to listen attentively, to work co-operatively, and to ask and respond to a range of questions. In interactions with the inspector, they volunteered responses and gave their views, showing a pleasing level of engagement with many of the studied texts. There was a warm rapport between teachers and students, and also a sense of enjoyment and fun in a number of the lessons observed, which complemented the atmosphere of purposeful learning and engagement. Students’ levels of attainment in the certificate examinations in English are very satisfactory.

ASSESSMENT

Effective monitoring of students’ participation in class was noted, and questioning was used to ascertain understanding and to indicate areas that required further explanation or reinforcement. Some lessons began with an oral review of homework, and teachers also orally corrected persistent errors, using the board where necessary. A helpful focus on organising and structuring responses was noted with examination classes, and teachers gave pointers on improving the quality of answering to the whole class, referring to assignments that students had completed.

The English plan contains a very good section on homework. It emphasises the importance of purposeful work and of students learning to be their own proof-readers and critics. Students’ copybooks and folders contained substantial assignments, particularly in fifth and sixth year, and some excellent work was noted. The marking criteria were used in the case of Leaving Certificate work. Helpful written feedback was also given. Various methods of marking and commenting were seen on junior cycle work, and greater use of comment-only marking, with a focus on affirming progress and identifying specific areas for improvement, is recommended.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school’s timetable provision for English in fifth and sixth year is optimal.
- Co-curricular and extracurricular activities that extend students’ experience of English are very well catered for.
- The English planning folder shows that the teachers of English reflect on their practice.
- The quality of teaching in the lessons observed was good overall, and a number of instances of innovative and accomplished teaching were noted. The focus on connecting material and concepts to students’ lives was a strength of the practice observed.
- Students’ copybooks and folders contained substantial assignments, particularly in fifth and sixth year, and some excellent work was noted.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:
• The possibility of allocating a fifth lesson to English in first year and a third lesson in TY should be explored.
• The English teaching team and school management should examine more integrated approaches to supporting students with literacy difficulties.
• ICT to assist teaching and learning in the classroom is an area for development.
• The teaching team should collaboratively develop common, skills-based programmes of work. The TY plan should be reviewed and explicit reference to Leaving Certificate material be removed.
• The teaching team should discuss and establish the role of co-ordinator, as part of a whole-school approach to consistent subject planning practices. The focus of the role should be on subject development planning.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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