An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Causeway Comprehensive School
County Kerry
Roll number: 70540E

Date of inspection: 10 December 2009
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Causeway Comprehensive 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 two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students’ work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers’ written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. 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

Causeway Comprehensive is a co-educational school. Classes in first year, second year and third year are provided with four lessons of English per week. This is adequate provision. It is recommended that the school should investigate the possibility of expanding this provision to five lessons per week, as is recommended in the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. This report was based on evaluations conducted in seventy-five post-primary schools and it is clear from its findings that the school is part of a minority of schools in providing only four lessons of English to all year groups in the junior cycle. Classes in Transition Year (TY) are provided with four lessons of English per week. This is good provision. Fifth-year and sixth-year classes have six English lessons per week. This is very good provision.

Classes in first year are of mixed ability. Students with difficulties in literacy development are identified through the use of standardised tests and liaison with their primary school teachers. In addition, subject teachers help in identifying students who may be in need of additional support. Classes in second year are banded, but movement between classes is facilitated through concurrent timetabling between some class groups. Students are assigned to levels in third year and here the same arrangements, with regard to movement between classes, obtain. The delay with regard to students choosing of levels until the third year of their junior cycle is appropriate. Classes in fifth year are of mixed ability, although some banding of class groups is utilised. Classes in sixth year are divided between higher level and ordinary level groups. The English department is cognisant of the need to keep these arrangements under review. Teachers of English are rotated between levels and cycles. This is good practice, ensuring the development of a strong skills base in the department.

There is a school library which is also used for storage of materials and for meetings. While there is limited accessibility to the library for students, Teachers of English have sought to provide library services through the development of book boxes. In addition, a number of reading initiatives are being undertaken. These include Reading Challenge, along with readalong books.
and some use of DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). Further ideas to promote reading among junior cycle students may be found on the web site www.jcspliteracy.ie which contains an evaluation report of the Junior Certificate School Programme Demonstration Library Project and its efforts in this area. In addition, whole-staff in-service training in the area of whole-school literacy has been undertaken and the school is moving towards the development of a whole-school literacy policy. This move is roundly endorsed and is very worthwhile.

A number of teachers of English have been assigned their own base-rooms and school management hopes to further expand the provision of base-rooms, where practicable. An English resource press has been developed in the library. It includes audio-visual resources, textbooks and other texts. A list of the resources stored in the press is easily accessible for members of the English department. This is positive.

Access to audio-visual equipment for teachers of English is facilitated through a trolley system. This is worthwhile. It is recommended that the school should move towards expanding the availability of audio-visual equipment throughout mainstream English classrooms. This could, potentially, be accomplished through current plans to increase the provision of data projectors throughout the school. The importance of the availability of audio-visual equipment in English classrooms is clear, given the centrality of film in the Leaving Certificate course. Beyond this, the usefulness of visual presentations in garnering the enthusiasm of students who may be less motivated by a purely verbal presentation should also be noted. During the evaluation, the use of information and communication technology (ICT) on the part of was observed and this was positive.

There is a good informal induction process. The subject department folder is viewed as an important element in this and this is highlighted in the subject plan. It is suggested that the incorporation of elements of classroom observation in this process would be of benefit, given the good practice already evident in the department. In order to consolidate the induction process it is suggested that this should be briefly outlined in the subject plan.

There is a strong commitment to professional development within the English department which is supported by the school. In particular, Teachers of English are involved in a community of practice organised by Kerry Education Service (KES). This is commendable. Teachers of English also maintain links with the relevant subject association, which is worthwhile.

**Planning and Preparation**

A subject co-ordinator has been appointed on a rotational basis. The role of the subject co-ordinator is clearly delineated in the English subject plan. There are regular formal departmental meetings as well as numerous informal meetings between members of the English department. Minutes are taken of formal meetings of the department. This is positive and it is suggested that this good practice should be further developed to incorporate the use of ICT. The recent focus of meetings in the English department has been on the accessing of curricular materials, the manner in which classes are arranged, students with special educational needs and the comparative study in the Leaving Certificate course.

A comprehensive English subject plan has been developed. This includes analysis of English results in the certificate examinations in comparison with national norms, syllabus documents, relevant Department circulars, reports from the Chief Examiner, material regarding students with special educational needs, lists of resources and material regarding teaching methodologies.
Common plans for each year group have been developed. These are time-linked and frequently incorporate a focus on the development of particular skills. As a means of building on this very good work, two suggestions regarding the further advancing of the common plans are offered. An increased focus on learning goals would be useful. This could be achieved by the incorporation of a learning goals column in the plans. A useful model for such an approach can be accessed through the Draft Rebalanced English Syllabus for junior cycle which is available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. Beyond this, the inclusion of specific reference to the use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses would be worthwhile. Such a planned strategy would focus on texts as models for the use of language techniques and particular genres. This would facilitate texts acting as springboards to the appropriate adoption of these by students themselves.

Teachers of English are involved in organising a range of extracurricular and co-curricular activities. These include public speaking, trips to the theatre and theatre workshops. Teachers’ efforts in these areas are applauded.

There is some variation of text choice in senior cycle. There is more limited variation of text choice in junior cycle, although the English department is keen to explore a wider selection of texts at this level. This is positive. Support in such an endeavour may be accessed on the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) at www.slss.ie or on the website www.childrensbooksireland.com which incorporates advice on a wide range of young adult fiction. Support from school management through the purchase of book sets will be necessary in this area, although the constraints of available resources must be acknowledged in this context. Currently the study of a novel in first year is optional. In order to ensure that a wide range of genres is studied in each year group, a uniform approach should be adopted across the department, ensuring that a novel is part of the first-year course.

There is a subject-specific TY English programme. This is appropriate. As a means of further developing the TY English programme, learning goals should be incorporated in the plan. A further possibility, which should be explored, is the development of an English-specific portfolio comprising a number of different genre exercises created by students over the course of their TY studies. This could serve as a ‘centre of excellence’ for students’ written work and would focus them on the drafting and redrafting process which is essential to all good writing. It should also feature as a key element in the overall assessment of students’ work at the end of each year.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. This is facilitated through some crossover of personnel between the two teams. Additional support for students with special educational needs is provided through withdrawal from mainstream classes and smaller class sizes in some year groups. The school has recently provided whole-staff in-service training in the area of team-teaching. The English department is encouraged to participate in this form of support, where practicable and appropriate, in the future. The English department has also included resources and advice regarding the support of students with special educational needs in mainstream classes. Information regarding students with special educational needs is provided for teachers at the beginning of the year and teachers are provided with further details if necessary.

There are a small number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). A number of the home languages of students are displayed around the school building. Training in this area was accessed by a member of staff in the last school year. Another member of staff is undertaking training this year in EAL. This is positive. The school is encouraged to continue to seek opportunities to build and retain capacity in this area. A useful resource in the area of EAL, for
both mainstream and support teachers, can be located at the website of the English Language Support Programme (ELSP) at www.elsp.ie.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Overall, a very high standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation. Lessons began in a variety of ways, with teachers recapitulating work previously undertaken, taking the roll or setting out background material dealing with the topic about to be explored. In all cases, learning objectives were set out clearly for students at the beginning of lessons. This is good practice as it alleviates student anxiety and will also provide a strong scaffold for student learning during the course of the lesson. In a number of cases, teachers noted the learning intention on the whiteboard to further extend support for students. Planning was evident in all cases and frequently this was of a very good standard. Pacing of lessons was good overall.

A wide and imaginative range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons observed. These included the whiteboard, a variety of texts, ICT, visual resources, compact disk recordings, photocopied resources and charts. In particular, the use of visual resources to aid students in accessing difficult literary texts is encouraged as this will serve those who respond well to visual, rather than purely verbal, presentations. The availability or use of dictionaries and thesauruses was evident in a number of lessons. This was worthwhile and it is good to note that the English department has recently ordered a set of student dictionaries to further support students’ awareness of the importance of imagination and precision in their use of language.

A strong feature in most English lessons was the use of active methodologies, group work and pair work. In one instance, students were placed in pairs and a graphic organiser was distributed to support them in the comparison of two poems. In another lesson, students were placed in groups to write sentences regarding particular characters and were exhorted to use particular language devices when creating their descriptions. A particularly strong feature of use of pair work and group work was the manner in which, in many cases, there was an emphasis placed on consolidating the good work achieved by students through use of the whiteboard. It is recommended that the very good work currently being undertaken in the area of group work and pair work should be further developed to incorporate specific methodologies which will focus such work on advancing the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as placemat, envoy and jigsaw could be useful in this context. Further resources relevant to this area can be accessed through the website of the Second Level Support Service (SLSS) at www.slss.ie or the website www.co-operation.org.

Reading and writing activities were often undertaken during lessons. In particular, the regular use of various DARTS (Directed Activities Related to Texts) on the part of was noted as very good practice. The playing of poet’s own readings of their poetry, pre-reading exercises, text-marking, teacher and student readings, prediction exercises, the use of visual resources, the use of ICT and sequencing activities were variously noted during the evaluation and were most positive. Very often, students were given opportunities and time to build their own responses to a particular text, thus ensuring that they engaged with texts on a personal level.

A wide range of genres was explored in the English lessons observed, including short stories. This was positive. Alongside this there was a very strong emphasis on the study of the manner in which writers used language. In one lesson, a poem by Eavan Boland was discussed. This led to the distribution of traditional marriage vows to the class group who were then exhorted to discuss
words and images that struck them as worthy of comment, linking these to the theme of the relevant poem. In another lesson, students were expected to note the use of punctuation by a poet and high expectations were displayed as the teacher asked students to explain why particular patterns were being chosen in the context of the poem’s subject matter. All of this was positive.

A good relationship between teachers and students was evident in English lessons. Teachers were affirming to students and displayed good classroom-management skills. Great sensitivity was shown on occasion, where students were guided towards refining their answers and humour was also used during lessons as an effective management tool. Students engaged in classwork diligently in all cases and frequently displayed enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, the subject.

In a number of instances the creation of a print-rich environment in English classrooms was noteworthy. Examples of good practice included the display of graphic organisers dealing with the work of Eavan Boland, along with keywords, student poetry and a ‘critics’ corner’. The English department is strongly encouraged to incorporate the creation of a print-rich environment in English base rooms as policy and practice in the departmental plan. The development of a print-rich environment will focus students on concepts such as drafting and redrafting, publication and audience, while also increasing their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy. A further possibility would be the development of an English notice board in the corridors of the school.

ASSESSMENT

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in those classes which were observed during the evaluation. Students’ folders were well-organised and used to good effect in a number of classes. Overall, comment-based, formative assessment was used by teachers, which is good practice. The further development of self-assessment and peer-assessment as tools in classroom practice may also be worthy of investigation in the future. In particular, connecting these strategies to the setting of specific language rubrics for writing exercises is worthy of consideration.

There was some evidence of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses being adopted in the assigning of homework to students. Beyond this, staged questions and summary exercises were assigned frequently in students’ homework. While recognising the value of these latter approaches, the English department is encouraged to expand its use of an integrated strategy and to increase the range of genres students engage with in this context. There were some examples of differentiated homework assignments being assigned, with genre transfer activities, illustrations and writing frames being utilised to support students’ learning. It is suggested that the noting of these and other DARTS activities in the English subject plan should be undertaken in order to focus members of the department on ways in which students’ literacy and engagement with texts may be enhanced through such approaches in the future.

There are a number of formal assessment arrangements. These include Christmas examinations and summer examinations. The latter are organised for those students who are not participating in the certificate examinations. Common assessments and common marking schemes are utilised for first-year and fifth-year students in the Christmas examinations. This practice is occasionally undertaken in other year groups as well. The further development of the common departmental plan should facilitate the spreading of this good practice across other year groups and examinations. Such an approach will facilitate a clear view of achievement across each year cohort. Mock examinations are organised in the spring for students who will be participating in the certificate examinations. Continual assessment is regularly used throughout the year.
There is one parent-teacher meeting held per year group each year. Reports regarding students’ progress are communicated to parents at Christmas, following the mock examinations and in the summer. These arrangements are worthwhile.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Overall, a very high standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation.
- Professional development in the area of whole-school literacy practices has been undertaken and the school has begun to move towards the development of a whole-school literacy policy.
- There is a strong commitment to professional development, which is supported by the school and Kerry Education Service.
- A comprehensive English subject plan has been developed.
- Base rooms have been assigned to a number of teachers of English.
- A wide range of genres was explored in English lessons.
- There was a strong focus on language in English lessons and this was echoed in the quality of students’ responses.
- A wide and imaginative range of resources, including ICT, was used in English lessons.
- A very strong feature of the English department’s practice is the use of comment-based assessment.
- Active methodologies were frequently observed and consolidated.
- The use of Directed Activities Related to Texts in a number of lessons was highly appropriate.

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

- The school should investigate the possibility of increasing the number of English lessons assigned to junior cycle classes.
- The school should explore the possibility of increasing access to audio-visual equipment for teachers of English, within the necessary constraints of available resources.
- The very positive focus on group work in classes should be further developed to incorporate methodologies explicitly linked to the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

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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