

An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Coláiste Éamann Rís
Callan, County Kilkenny
Roll number: 61510R**

Date of inspection: 21 January 2010



**A N R O I N N | D E P A R T M E N T O F
O I D E A C H A I S | E D U C A T I O N
A G U S S C I L E A N N A | A N D S K I L L S**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

THIS SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Éamann Rís, Callan, 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 one day 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.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Timetabling arrangements for English are generally good. Second, fifth and sixth year have a lesson per day, which is optimal provision. Four lessons are offered in first and third year. Where a lesson per day is not provided, it is preferable that English be timetabled on Monday and Friday so as to minimise the gap between lessons. It is recommended that the inclusion of a fifth lesson in first year be actively pursued. This would provide first-year students with the best opportunity to develop a firm foundation in the skills and knowledge on which the second-level syllabuses are based. Three lessons are provided for students in the Transition Year (TY) programme and, although this is not a generous allocation, a strong element of cross-curricular work means that students have good opportunities to develop key skills in English.

Two teachers form the English department in the school, and English is their main teaching subject. This concentrated deployment ensures continuity and consistency in the delivery of the subject, and is commended. English is timetabled concurrently within each year, and students are placed in either an upper or lower set for the subject. A higher-level and an ordinary-level class are formed in fifth and sixth year, and this is in line with good practice. The teachers of English rotate the teaching of the upper and lower sets, and of higher and ordinary level, and this is a good arrangement. Of recent years, the same teacher has taken TY English. School management should review this arrangement regularly, as it is good practice to have a full involvement of the teaching team in the planning and delivery of English in TY.

Placement of first-year students in ability groups for English is decided following Christmas tests. The former practice of setting first-year English in November was changed following a recommendation in a previous subject inspection report that ability setting be deferred, ideally until at least the end of first year. The rationale for the present arrangement is that students placed in the small lower group in the junior cycle make very good progress and feel more secure in this environment. It is certainly commendable that students in this group who are perceived to be able to take higher level English in the Junior Certificate are encouraged to do so. However, the

presence of such students in the lower group raises questions about the basis and timing of ability setting, especially given the relatively small number in each year. It would be wise to review the system of class formation in the junior cycle every year, and to consider alternative methods of support for students experiencing difficulty with English. The guiding principle must be that class placement should assist students to have the highest realistic expectations possible. Students for whom English is not a first language should be placed according to their general ability and not their present competence in English.

The teachers of English have their own base classrooms, and these have been developed into very attractive and stimulating environments. Posters, word charts and themed displays including students' work were prominent and were used effectively to reinforce learning during the lessons observed. Audiovisual resources are available to the department and can be easily shared as the English classrooms are side by side. The school has no separate library space, but one of the classrooms houses a library, with a good range of fiction and non-fiction titles. The teachers of English operate a lending system for students, and have good contacts with the county library service, which has lent or donated books over the years. The efforts made to encourage students to read for pleasure are warmly commended.

The teachers of English engage in continuing professional development (CPD) and school management supports this. They have attended courses on writers and writing and on pedagogies appropriate to specific student needs, including dyslexia. One of the team has completed an online course on assisting students with literacy difficulties. Whole-staff CPD on mixed-ability teaching was held in the last academic year. Teachers and management are commended on their commitment to CPD, and its benefits were observed during the evaluation.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Both teachers share the tasks associated with subject co-ordination. This is sensible, given the size of the English department and the fact that both teachers teach English from first to sixth year. Two or three formal meetings are held each year at which decisions on texts, class placement and other organisational matters are taken. These are recorded.

A planning folder and schemes of work from both teachers were made available during the inspection. The folder contained relevant Department circulars, syllabuses and guidelines, records of meetings, and a previous subject inspection report. Teachers agree a common programme for the first term of first year. Thereafter they plan separately the programme they feel will best suit their respective class groups. Teachers have drawn up comprehensive individual schemes of work. This should not however preclude the sharing of materials and approaches that have proved successful with similar groups. The fact that both teachers teach the range of levels should be capitalised on in the planning process. Greater use of information and communication technology (ICT) in planning is also encouraged, as this enhances the possibilities for collaborative work and for amending plans where necessary.

Planning in the junior cycle reflects the open nature of the syllabus in the range of texts that are chosen for study. The texts chosen are generally substantial and appropriately challenging, and in the planned programme new material is studied in each year, including third year. Care should be taken to ensure that the planned programme for students in the lower set emphasises the affective and creative aspects of English, in addition to the very good work planned and observed to develop accurate use of language. Students in first year select a novel from the library, and this

supports the practice of private reading. However, these students would be likely to benefit from the shared reading of a novel, and the English department should consider introducing this practice. The programme planned for fifth and sixth year is based on the syllabus aims and objectives and includes appropriate text choices.

The programme planned for the single TY group allows students to engage in active and practical learning in areas such as media studies, and to consider language and literature in a cross-curricular context through links with History, which is taught in TY by the same teacher. These approaches are in keeping with the Department's guidelines for the TY programme.

A single over-arching recommendation is made with regard to subject planning. The teaching team should focus on very specific learning outcomes for the range of class groups. It is helpful to write these as 'can do' statements; for example: "Students can write three accurate and clearly-linked paragraphs". A planning focus on such skills leads naturally to devising methods and approaches suitable for teaching and learning these skills, and then to the planning of appropriate assessment of students' competence. This approach to planning should make it a practical activity that has a beneficial impact on teaching and learning in the classroom.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Five lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years except fifth year, and all levels and programmes offered. A competent standard of teaching was noted in these lessons, reflecting the enthusiasm, knowledge and conscientiousness of the teaching team. Where areas for development were pointed out, teachers were receptive to suggestions made. Student learning and attainment varied, but students of all levels showed an awareness of making progress, and perceptive and knowledgeable contributions were noted in all lessons observed. A warm rapport between teachers and students was evident, and teachers are commended on the level of concern and good humour shown in classroom interactions.

Topics covered in the lessons visited included spelling, punctuation and word-attack skills; the novel and aspects of character and setting; print media and related styles of writing; and poetry. Where more than one topic was covered, the transition was generally well managed. In all lessons observed, planning was evident in the links made with prior learning, and a satisfactory amount of material was covered. However, care should be taken when a novel is being read in class to interrupt the reading as little as possible and to allow the text to speak for itself. Prior to reading, students could be alerted to certain significant events, so that their attention is focused. In this way, greater forward momentum can be created, and this tends to increase students' enjoyment of the story.

Classroom resources were used well. The board was used consistently and very effectively, providing helpful visual reinforcement of vocabulary and spelling, and also of key points made during class discussion or teacher exposition. Mind maps and writing frames were incorporated meaningfully into teaching and learning practices. Teachers modelled careful and accurate writing at all times, and the principle that teacher writing should lead to student writing was evident in the good note-making practices observed. An effective variation on note-making was seen in a junior cycle lesson on the novel in which students used pieces of fluorescent paper to record significant points, each piece representing a different topic. This was seen to be a helpful means of analysing and revising the novel. In a senior-cycle lesson, the criteria for assessment

used in Leaving Certificate English were displayed on a noticeboard and used to emphasise successful answering techniques.

Teaching methods observed were varied and were competently employed. Teachers endeavoured to choose methods that were appropriate to the group as well as the learning task, and clearly considered it important to know the students' learning styles and needs. In some lessons, activities were strongly teacher-directed, with an emphasis on students' practising and accurately reproducing vocabulary, punctuation and spelling. The teacher affirmed students' efforts and progress, and this created a positive dynamic in what might otherwise have been a mechanical exercise. In other lessons, teachers acted more as facilitators of students' learning. A junior-cycle group had done some independent research on the Ku Klux Klan as background to a novel, and students were enabled to share the results of their research, with the teacher at the board acting as recorder. TY students had worked in two groups to produce newspapers of different styles. In class, they presented their work and the teacher listened to their reflections on how the members of the group had carried out their roles. In both these cases, the emphasis on active learning and on learning from peers was productive and is commended. Some specific activities facilitating the inclusion of EAL students were suggested during the evaluation.

Questioning techniques observed ranged from the use of closed and directed questions to check on learning homework, to the use of more open and speculative questions to invite a range of student responses. Very good practice was noted where teachers invited and affirmed a range of opinions, and used follow-on questions effectively so that students had to support and justify their views. It is suggested that teachers discuss with students the difference between the quiz-type question testing recall and accuracy, and higher-order questions that demand a more thoughtful and detailed response. For the latter type of question, it is more appropriate not to have a hands-up drill, but to leave plenty of time for students. Good practice in this regard was observed where senior-cycle students were encouraged to "give it a moment" before offering comment on striking images in a poem. To extend the peer-learning activities mentioned above, teachers could also ask students to respond to questions from other members of the class, rather than automatically answering themselves.

Some excellent practice was observed with regard to developing in students an organised approach to their learning. This is further detailed in the next section. High standards were set for students' work, and the prevailing atmosphere in the English classroom was purposeful and productive. An upward trend in the uptake of higher-level English is evident in both junior and senior cycle, and this is very encouraging and affirming of the efforts of students and teachers.

ASSESSMENT

In the English classroom, teachers were very vigilant in their monitoring of students' participation and levels of attention. Students were kept on task with firm yet encouraging direction. Where students were working individually or in groups, teachers circulated to check on progress or to offer assistance where required. Students asked questions readily if they required further explanation, and teachers encouraged questions to gauge the students' comprehension of a topic or task.

A substantial amount of students' work in folders and copybooks was reviewed during the evaluation. Copybooks, including hardback copybooks, were used for different topics or sections of the course. A notable feature was the vocabulary copy in which new words with spellings,

meanings and exemplar sentences were noted. It was clear that students were encouraged and expected to maintain copybooks and folders carefully. It was emphasised to them that they were responsible for creating these resources for themselves, and this is exemplary practice. Teachers' monitoring of students' written work was of a very high standard, with very helpful and encouraging feedback noted for all substantial assignments.

The common assessment in English prepared for first-year students at Christmas is commended. The system of sharing the marking of the paper and agreeing a marking scheme represents very good practice. The paper devised examines both mechanics and creative writing. However, it is suggested that the reading element of the paper be increased, to place an appropriate emphasis on comprehension skills.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The teachers of English have their own base classrooms, and these have been developed into very attractive and stimulating environments.
- Teachers have drawn up comprehensive individual schemes of work.
- A competent standard of teaching was evident in the lessons observed, reflecting the enthusiasm, knowledge and conscientiousness of the teaching team.
- Teaching methods observed were varied and were competently employed.
- Some excellent practice was observed with regard to developing in students an organised approach to their learning.

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

- It is recommended that the inclusion of a fifth lesson in first year be actively pursued.
- The system of class formation in the junior cycle should be reviewed every year. Class placement should assist students to have the highest realistic expectations possible. Students for whom English is not a first language should be placed according to their general ability and not their present competence in English.
- The teaching team should focus on very specific learning outcomes for the range of class groups, and should work collaboratively in planning these.
- Questioning techniques employed should encompass both quiz-type questions and higher-order questions that demand a more thoughtful and detailed response.

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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