Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Ursuline Secondary School
Blackrock, Cork
Roll number: 62650P

Date of inspection: 20 October 2010
REPORT ON THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Ursuline Secondary 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 three 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 was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report; a response was not received from the board.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Ursuline Secondary School is an all-girls school and participates in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme. Classes in each year group in junior cycle are provided with four English lessons each week. This is adequate provision. It is recommended that the school should examine ways in which it can expand its current allocation for junior cycle English classes. Such an examination and realignment of provision would be consistent with recommendations in the Inspectorate publication Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools. This report highlights the optimal number of English lessons per week as encompassing at least one contact point with the subject each day. This recommendation is important when considered in the light of the school’s current DEIS literacy targets and has particular relevance in the case of students participating in the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP). Transition Year (TY) classes are provided with three English lessons per week which is adequate provision. English classes in fifth year and in sixth year are provided with five English lessons per week. This is good provision. The LCA1 class has three lessons in English and Communications each week, which is adequate provision. English lessons in all year groups are timetabled concurrently. This is very good practice, facilitating student movement between levels and classes when it is necessary.

Classes in junior cycle are of mixed ability. In core subjects, a smaller class group is formed for students participating in JCSP after first year. Students are selected for the JCSP class on the basis of assessments conducted prior to their entry in first year, assessments in September of first year, teacher observation and identified difficulties in literacy and numeracy. Students are assigned to levels towards the end of second year. The English department is encouraged to delay the assigning of students to specific levels for as long as possible in order to maximise students’ aspiration towards the study of higher level English. English classes in TY, fifth year and in sixth year are divided into higher level and ordinary level class groups. This is appropriate.
English teachers are assigned base rooms. This is positive. Audio-visual equipment is available to English teachers through a trolley system which allows audio-visual units to be transported between classrooms. These arrangements are adequate. The anticipated expansion in the availability of information and communication technology (ICT) across the school building will, however, further improve these arrangements in the near future. This is worthwhile, given the central role film plays in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus, as well as the impact audio-visual resources can make when used judiciously in junior cycle classes.

There is a school library which has been enhanced recently through the purchase of new furniture and texts. A retired teacher has agreed to take up the position of librarian in a voluntary capacity in the near future. The school anticipates that electronic and audio books will also be purchased. JCSP posters are displayed in the library and a number of beanbags have been purchased as an additional enticement for reluctant readers. ICT equipment is also available and this is linked to the internet. An electronic cataloguing system operates in the library. A number of reading initiatives have been undertaken, including ‘One Book, One Mahon’ which operates in both primary and secondary schools in the area. The home-school-community- liaison co-ordinator has played a prominent role in this development. All of this is positive. A further possibility which might be explored as a variation of, or replacement for, other reading initiatives currently undertaken is a paired-reading programme involving TY students and students in first year with difficulties in literacy development. It is positive to note that paired reading between students and parents is encouraged. Testing of students’ reading skills both before and after reading initiatives is another development which should be considered. Further ideas for the development of school libraries can be accessed through an evaluation report of the JCSP Demonstration Library Project which is available at www.jcspliteracy.ie.

The latter suggestion may be of particular relevance in the context of the school’s DEIS baseline data and targets in the area of literacy. The school has established baseline data consisting of students’ assessments and a number of initiatives are underway to support student literacy. It is appropriate that further developments in the area of baseline data and target-setting should now be undertaken. A very useful resource for this endeavour is the publication Resources for Developing a School-Wide Literacy Plan which is available at www.jcspliteracy.ie. It is important that the targets set, arising from data collated, should be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, time-linked) and that staff be kept informed of advances which have been made. Central to the further progressing of the school’s engagement with whole-school literacy support is the formation of a DEIS literacy committee. An element of this committee’s work should incorporate the creation of a whole-school literacy plan. While a representative from the English department and the special educational needs department on such a committee would be appropriate, representatives from a number of other departments in the school should also be included. This committee would serve to focus efforts on an ongoing basis and revisit achievements and challenges at staff meetings. The whole staff should be involved in support of students’ literacy, as set out in the whole-school-literacy plan. Resources to support literacy, such as subject-specific keywords and writing frames are available at www.elsp.ie or through the inclusion area of the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie. The inclusion of a range of baseline data connected to DEIS planning in the English departmental plan is good practice. The retention of data collated in connection with DEIS should continue. Finally, in-service education in the area of whole-school literacy is available through the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).
The school has an ICT room. In addition, there are a number of mobile data projectors and laptop computers which teachers may access, as well as a multimedia room. Computers and a printer are provided in the staffroom, as well as the aforementioned ICT equipment in the school library. Beyond this, as part of the SmartSchools initiative the school anticipates that there will be considerable expansion of ICT equipment into many more classrooms. The use of ICT to support student learning was observed during the evaluation. ICT is used as part of the LCA programme and senior cycle students also use e-mail when communicating some of the material they have produced. The use of ICT by students in some year groups is worthwhile and teachers are encouraged to grasp opportunities for students to access additional support in their written work through the use of this resource. In particular, the development of links between JCSP students’ ICT lessons and their work in English could usefully be explored as a further element in developing their technological literacy. Opportunities for teachers to share their practice and experiences through subject department and whole-staff meetings should also be grasped. It is suggested that, as part of its approach to the development of whole-school support for literacy, the school should adopt a ‘universal font’ to be utilised in all lessons when using data projectors. English teachers are encouraged to engage with the numerous opportunities afforded by ICT to support students’ learning in the subject.

A subject-induction programme for Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students is underway. A mentor teacher is assigned to students and supports them through team-teaching, providing demonstration lessons, along with classroom observation and feedback. In addition, the mentor is available to discuss work with the PGDE student and to offer advice and support, while also monitoring the setting and correction of tests and examinations. This programme is being conducted with the support of University College Cork (UCC). These arrangements are most worthwhile and information on the programme is included in the English subject plan. As an extension of this work it is suggested that an induction policy for both PGDE students and new teachers of English should also be developed and included in the subject plan.

English teachers have participated in continuing professional development (CPD) in a number of areas including the LCA, differentiation and DEIS planning. In addition, some postgraduate study has been undertaken within the department. The school is supportive of teachers’ CPD. Internal CPD has also been provided by a member of the English department. All of this is positive and the school should continue to access both external and, in particular, internal CPD wherever practicable.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Two subject co-ordinators have been appointed on a rotational basis. This rotational arrangement is good practice as it allows the development of experience of a leadership role across the subject department. Formal meetings of the English department take place at the beginning of the academic year and as an element of general staff meetings during the course of the year. Minutes of formal departmental meetings are maintained. It is suggested that, in future, ICT should be used to support the recording and storage of minutes. The recent focus of departmental meetings has been on reviewing current programmes of work, the assigning of groups and levels, the Junior Certificate results and the division of class groups.

A subject plan has been developed. The subject plan includes common plans and a range of resources and information relevant to the teaching and learning of English. These include syllabus documents and circulars from the Department of Education and Skills. It is suggested that two further documents could be usefully added to the subject plan. The teacher guidelines and
curriculum for English in primary school can be accessed at www.curriculumonline.ie and would provide a useful insight for teachers into the previous learning and experiences of students in first year. Indeed, contact with feeder schools on this point could be worth pursuing. In addition the Inspectorate publication *Looking at English* contains useful recommendations regarding the subject-planning process, along with other areas of good practice in schools. This document may be accessed through the Inspectorate publications area of the Department of Education and Skills website at www.education.ie. Beyond this, it is recommended that the current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, time-linked learning-goals. Such an approach will facilitate teachers in developing common assessments and will emphasise the importance of specific outcomes, particularly in the area of literacy.

It is further recommended that, once these common plans have been developed, the English department should adopt a teaching-and-learning focus as part of its subject departmental planning meetings. An appropriate area for exploration is the consolidation and advancement of strategies to support literacy development, in co-operation with DEIS planning. Strong self-evaluation strategies will be important for the department in engaging with this process which will benefit students with difficulties in literacy development and, indeed, all learners. The area of assessment for learning could also, ultimately, prove a worthwhile area for investigation over the medium term.

There is considerable variation of text choice in junior cycle and in senior cycle. Teachers display considerable engagement with text choice and this is good practice.

There is a subject-specific plan for English in the TY programme. Currently students are assigned to class groups in TY in accordance with their results in the Junior Certificate examination. The English department is encouraged to carefully examine the potential consequences of such an approach with regard to student aspirations in the Leaving Certificate examination. This analysis should be linked to considering the place of TY as a year where students may be provided with an opportunity to further develop their literacy skills to support participation in the higher level English course. In summary, it is suggested that mixed-ability class groups may be more in keeping with the spirit and aims of the TY programme. As with other yearly plans, the TY plan should be further developed to incorporate clear learning and literacy goals which are time-linked. Appropriate planning for English and Communications in the LCA programme was presented during the evaluation.

A special educational needs policy has been developed. In addition, a co-ordinator is in place who is qualified in this area. A number of modes of support are utilised for students with special educational needs, including team-teaching, which is appropriate. The special educational needs co-ordinator has provided professional development opportunities for the staff. This approach, whereby internal expertise is accessed to support CPD, is strongly encouraged. A register of students with special educational needs has been developed and suggestions to improve this document were provided during the evaluation. In particular, these centred around the manner in which the document could be used to communicate effectively with mainstream staff members. Retesting of students’ literacy is undertaken each year and this is good practice.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING**

A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed in lessons visited during the evaluation. Individual teacher planning was in evidence in all cases. Lessons began, variously, with the explicit delineation of the learning intention for the lesson, recapitulation exercises,
taking of the roll and, in one instance, an affirmation of students’ achievements following an awards night. All of this was worthwhile. In particular, the detailing of learning intentions at the outset of lessons is good practice and English teachers are encouraged to adopt this practice across the subject department.

A range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included the whiteboard, photocopied resources, DVD, dictionaries, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and a can of tuna fish. The use of dictionaries in one lesson to support student literacy was most appropriate and the department is encouraged to expand this practice, potentially incorporating the use of thesauruses as well. The latter texts will highlight for students the importance of precision and imagination in their use of language, while also supporting the expansion of their vocabulary. The use of a visual, concrete resource to evoke the experiences of trapped miners in Chile was also worthwhile. The continued development of such approaches, particularly with the use of ICT, is strongly advocated as a support for students’ learning.

A number of reading strategies were used over the course of the evaluation. In one instance a combination of teacher and student reading supported the initial exploration of a poem, with an appropriate emphasis being placed on students’ personal responses to the text. In two other lessons a guided reading approach was used in exploring a novel and a film. This was positive. In a number of lessons the possibility of adopting text-marking as a requirement of students when they were reading a text was suggested as a further strategy through which student engagement could be maximised. As an addition to these approaches to support students’ reading skills, English teachers are encouraged to consider the adoption of explicit teacher modelling of reading skills in their practice, where appropriate. The use of explicit modelling of writing skills, whereby texts were prepared by a teacher using ICT, and students would then adopt the same approach in their own writing, was a very positive element of classroom practice in the case of one teacher. The use of such a strategy in the teaching of writing skills is to be encouraged. In instances where students display difficulties in developing reading and writing skills, the expanded use of writing frames and other Directed Activities Related to Texts (DARTS) is strongly encouraged. Support in this latter area can be accessed on the website www.jcspliteracy.ie and developments should be linked to the whole-school-literacy policy discussed earlier in this report.

There was frequently a good emphasis on the analysis of writers’ use of language in English lessons. In one lesson, students were asked to choose images from a poem, while in another lesson, students’ attention was drawn to the use of sound in a poem, along with appeals to the other senses. Both of these approaches worked well.

Group work and pair work were used on numerous occasions during the evaluation. This worked best where students were assigned specific roles within each group and were subsequently asked to share their findings with the wider class group. The further incorporation of co-operative learning strategies into the work of the English department is encouraged, not only to ensure an appropriate balance between teacher and student talk, but also to support an integrated approach to developing students’ skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Strategies such as placemat, snowball and envoy may be of particular relevance in this area.

Good classroom management was evident in all cases. Teachers were affirming to students and good relationships between teachers and students were observed. A secure and safe learning environment was maintained in all lessons. Students displayed knowledge of work which had been undertaken when questioned.
Print-rich environments were being developed in teacher base-rooms. Good practice in this area included the display of keywords, students’ work, motivational posters and material relevant to the JCSP. All of this is worthwhile. The English department should continue to develop and expand the print-rich environment in all teacher base-rooms. In addition, this practice should be set down as policy and practice in the English subject plan. The creation of such learning environments in classrooms will aid not only students with difficulties in literacy development and students with English as an additional language, it will support all students in their study of English.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored in the classes observed during the course of the evaluation. In the case of English and Communications in the LCA, key assignments were assigned and stored appropriately. The use of comment-based assessment was observed frequently in students’ copybooks. Beyond this, in a number of instances, there were examples of students undertaking self-assessment, recording their achievements over the course of the year. Both of these approaches conform to the principles of assessment for learning and this is good practice. The use of the rubrics of the certificate examinations was also evident in one lesson. This was positive and it is suggested that, in order to further add to this strategy, the rubrics might be further broken down for students. This would aid them in utilising this information in either peer-assessment or self-assessment exercises should these be undertaken, while also further supporting their written work.

There was limited use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses in the homework assigned. In one lesson, a diary entry was set arising from students’ experiences of a poem dealing with the theme of war. Beyond this, the use of staged questions, questions from past certificate examinations and summary exercises were also in evidence. While acknowledging the validity of these strategies, it is recommended that the use of an integrated strategy should be more widely and consistently adopted on the part of English teachers. This strategy should be adopted in both individual and departmental planning approaches. The wider use of an integrated strategy when assigning homework should incorporate the exploration of a wide range of genres and language techniques. Texts should be used to model particular genres, language techniques and skills which then inform students’ homework. Where a particular genre is assigned for homework, rubrics could be set out for the completion of the homework exercise which direct students’ attention to the features of the genre which they will need to adhere to, as well as to particular language techniques that they may be required to include. This should be viewed as an opportunity to expand students’ macro-language and micro-language awareness, as outlined in the *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English: Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*. The use of an integrated strategy should be included as an element in both departmental and individual teacher planning.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and summer. Mock examinations are organised in early spring for students who will be participating in the certificate examinations in the summer. In-class assessments are undertaken in individual teachers’ classes throughout the year. In TY, three book reports are required to be completed over the course of the year which are then included as an element in students’ end-of-year assessment. This is worthwhile. Project work is also assigned during the course of TY. It is suggested that, as an extension of this practice, an English portfolio should be developed during TY and included as part of students’ assessment marks at both Christmas and summer. The portfolio should include a number of major genre exercises flowing from the literature that students encounter over the course of the year. In
particular, a drafting and redrafting process should be undertaken before students include their work in this ‘centre of excellence’. The inclusion of a representation of an ‘oral’ element of the portfolio should also be considered.

Where students have been assigned Reasonable Accommodations in the Certificate Examinations (RACE), the special educational needs co-ordinator provides input regarding the recognition of these arrangements in house examinations, where practicable and appropriate. This is positive.

Parent-teachers meetings are organised each year to facilitate communication between the school and students’ homes. Reports regarding students’ progress are sent to parents at Christmas, summer and, for those students who have participated, following the mock examinations. The home-school-community liaison co-ordinator is also involved in a number of literacy initiatives in co-operation with parents, as well as enhancing other home-school links. These arrangements are commendable.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- There was a very good standard of teaching and learning observed during the evaluation.
- English teachers are assigned base rooms. This is positive. Teachers have begun to develop print-rich environments in their rooms.
- There is a school library which supports the development of student literacy.
- The collation of DEIS baseline data and the setting of literacy targets has been undertaken.
- A subject plan has been developed which includes common plans.
- A subject induction programme for PGDE students is underway which incorporates team-teaching, classroom observation and mentoring.
- A teacher qualified in the area of special educational needs is in place and this teacher is a member of the English department.
- Group work and pair work were frequently used in English lessons.
- A number of reading strategies were used to support the development of students’ engagement with texts, including guided, silent and group reading.

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

- The current common plans should be further developed to incorporate skills-based, time-linked learning-goals.
- The school should examine ways in which it can expand its current allocation for junior cycle English classes.
- The English department should adopt a teaching-and-learning focus as part of its subject departmental planning meetings.
- The use of an integrated strategy towards the language and literature elements of the syllabuses should be more widely and consistently adopted on the part of English teachers.
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.