An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Presentation Secondary School
Ballyphehane, Cork
Roll number: 62693K

Date of inspection: 28 January 2011
REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Presentation 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 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 the subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Presentation Secondary School is an all-girls school. Classes in first year are provided with five English lessons each week. Classes in second year and in third year are provided with four English lessons per week. The school is encouraged to expand the number of English lessons in second year and in third year to meet the optimal arrangement whereby students would be provided with one contact point with the subject each week. Such an approach would be of particular benefit in supporting students’ literacy development in the junior cycle. The inevitable constraints of the timetable process are, however, recognised in highlighting this area. Students in Transition Year (TY) are provided with four English lessons per week, while students in fifth year and in sixth year have five English lessons per week. This is good provision. Students in English and Communications in the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme are provided with three English lessons per week. This is adequate provision. Overall, timetabled provision for English is good.

The school has varied its practice with regard to the creation of class groups in English. Setting now obtains in first year where previously a mixed-ability system was in operation. This was done in order to cater for a very wide range of ability levels which was apparent in assessment tests conducted prior to entry. The use of concurrent timetabling allows students to move easily between classes should this prove necessary. This is positive. Selection of levels for the Junior Certificate examination is made at the start of second year and students are encouraged to attempt the higher level course. It is suggested that the English department should consider a further delay in undertaking this process so that students have the opportunity to mature further, both cognitively and affectively, prior to making this choice. This may further enhance the number of students attempting the higher level course in the certificate examinations. The school is urged to maintain a vigilant stance towards the type of class organisation used in first year and in junior cycle so that it will best suit the needs of each cohort of students. Classes in TY are set for English and this has moved from a previous system where mixed ability class groups were utilised. Again, this arrangement should be carefully considered as TY may act as a very useful
point where students may be supported in advancing considerably in their engagement with and success in the subject. Classes in fifth year are set and this is appropriate.

The school library is well-maintained and extensive. A number of reading initiatives have been undertaken. At present, a paired reading initiative involving first-year and TY students has been organised. It is suggested that the creation of a paired-reading module in TY could be worthy of consideration in this context. Further information regarding possible reading initiatives may be found on the website of the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) website at [www.jcspliteracy.ie](http://www.jcspliteracy.ie). The website includes an evaluation report dealing with the JCSP Demonstration Library Project, which includes numerous ideas which could further enhance the school’s library, as well as its appeal to students.

There is very good provision for access to audio-visual resources and equipment. English teachers are provided with base classrooms which include information and communication technology (ICT). ICT was used regularly during the course of the evaluation to support students’ learning. A font has been selected to be used in teachers’ classroom practice. It is suggested that this very good approach should now be adopted as a whole-school policy which will provide significant support for students experiencing difficulties in literacy development. Teachers variously used visual supports such as clips from Youtube, downloaded audio recordings and graphic organisers. Beyond this, a storage facility for teachers’ resources has also been created and the ICT room has been used to support students’ writing and presentations. The English department is to be commended for grasping the opportunities afforded by ICT. It is suggested that a further support for students with difficulties in literacy development could be the scheduling of some English lessons in the ICT room. This would act as a motivational support, as well as affording these students the opportunity to produce high quality written work in presentable formats. A further possibility for English teachers to consider is the explicit modelling of reading and writing strategies such as questioning, clarifying, summarising, predicting, editing and revising through the use of the data projector and other elements of ICT.

A literacy policy has been developed. The school is to be strongly praised for its proactive approach to this area. It is recommended that consideration should now be given to the formation of a whole-school literacy committee to consolidate and further develop work already undertaken. Further work should include the collation of baseline data, as part of the school’s self-evaluation in this area. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-linked (SMART) targets should then be identified as part of an ongoing, medium-term action plan which pursues improvements in different areas of the school’s literacy provision. The committee can then provide inputs to the teaching staff at staff meetings and continuing professional development (CPD) sessions. Further resources to support the very good work being undertaken on a whole-school and a departmental basis in the area of literacy can be accessed at [www.jcspliteracy.ie](http://www.jcspliteracy.ie).

There is a subject-induction process for new and student teachers. Senior management and members of the English department are involved in this process. New teachers are included in departmental meetings. Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) students are provided with a contact teacher in the subject who works with them. It is suggested that a brief induction policy for English could now be developed which would consolidate and, if necessary, expand good practice in this area. This is particularly relevant in the context of maintaining and communicating the considerable good practice which is evident in the department’s approach to teaching the subject.

English teachers have engaged in whole-staff professional development opportunities, subject-specific CPD, as well as postgraduate studies relevant to the subject. It is suggested that the
formal return of any CPD to the subject department, as well as discussion regarding these experiences, should form a continuing element in the department’s approach to CPD. This is consistent with, and would support current established good practice in the school such as the sharing of resources and discussions at departmental meetings.

**PLANNING AND PREPARATION**

Subject co-ordinators for junior cycle and for senior cycle have been appointed on a rotational basis. Formal meetings of the English department take place once per term, along with ongoing informal meetings. In addition, a long planning meeting is held at the start of the school year. A comprehensive analysis of students’ results in the certificate examinations is undertaken annually. Minutes of subject department meetings are recorded. The recent focus of meetings has been on ICT needs in English, the development of time-linked common plans, textbooks and the organisation of class groups. All of this is very good practice.

A comprehensive subject plan has been developed. The subject plan includes syllabus documents, relevant circulars from the Department of Education and Skills, English departmental policy documents and subject resources. All of this is worthwhile and it is suggested that the Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate publication *Looking at English: Teaching and Learning English in Post-Primary Schools* could usefully be added to these resources.

Common, time-linked plans have been developed. Significant work has gone into the creation of these useful documents. As a further development of this good work, it is recommended that the current time-linked common plans should be further developed to incorporate clear, syllabus-based learning goals. In particular, a strong focus on specific literacy skills being developed as part of the study of texts should be of benefit. This will support the assessment of students’ progress, while also allowing freedom to teachers in choosing texts for their own particular class group. In addition, it is recommended that an integrated approach to language and literature should be delineated as a key element in individual and departmental planning.

Given the very good work which has already been accomplished in the area of departmental planning, it is recommended that the English department should, following the further development of common plans, move to adopt a teaching-and-learning focus in English over the medium term. In the context of this evaluation, either e-learning or co-operative learning could prove useful areas to explore. Aside from this, one area which may be worthy of exploration in the future is links with first-year students’ experiences in primary school. Curriculum documents and guidelines which would support English teachers in making these links are available on the website [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie).

Texts are varied at senior cycle. Three novels are studied during students’ junior cycle. This is good practice. There is some variation of texts used in junior cycle. Teachers are encouraged to keep the choice of texts in junior cycle under review, to ensure that texts suit class contexts and students’ interests.

A subject-specific English TY programme has been developed. This suggests that English in TY is approached in an imaginative and worthwhile manner. As a further development of this good work, and as with other yearly plans, the TY plan should now move to incorporate clear learning goals which will serve to maintain teachers’ and students’ awareness of the continuing development of students’ literacy skills. The adoption of a subject-specific portfolio which students would develop during the year, incorporating a number of major genre exercises, is
recommended. This portfolio could then form an important part of students’ overall assessments at both the Christmas and summer tests. In addition, it would serve to focus students on the drafting and redrafting process and on the continuing development of their writing skills.

There are good links between the English department and the special educational needs department. These links are further supported through a crossover of personnel between the two departments. Clear procedures to identify students with difficulties in literacy development have been created. At present support for students is provided through a withdrawal model. Team-teaching has been undertaken in English in the recent past and English teachers are encouraged to participate in the continued development of this model of support. The e-learning area of the website of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) at www.sess.ie contains useful resources regarding this model. Students are retested at regular intervals to measure progress in their literacy development. This is good practice.

The school has a small number of students with English as an additional language (EAL). The English as an Additional Language Post-Primary Assessment Kit is used to assess students’ English language proficiency and their progress. This is good practice. The school is encouraged to continue to build capacity in this area. Material to support EAL students may be found on the NCCA Action website at www.action.ncca.ie in the relevant section.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed during the evaluation. Lessons began in a number of ways which included the taking of the roll, recapitulation of work previously undertaken and the setting out of key vocabulary on the blackboard. All of this was worthwhile. Objectives of lessons were clear in all cases and teachers employed very good practice where the pattern or learning goal for each lesson was delineated clearly at the outset. This provided a clear view of the planned outcomes for students while also highlighting their role in their own learning. Teachers’ preparedness for lessons was clear in all cases and there were frequent examples of the accumulation of considerable resources by teachers to support students’ learning. Lessons were well-planned and clearly structured.

A wide range of resources was used to support teaching and learning in English lessons. These included ICT, photocopied resources, a compact disc player and the whiteboard. Students’ use of ICT for their own writing was observed and this was worthwhile. The use of a dictionary and thesaurus was also observed during English lessons. The use of such texts will support students’ interest in words while also highlighting the importance of imagination and specificity in their choice of language.

Activities centred upon students’ skills in literacy featured regularly in lessons and there were numerous examples of good practice in this area. In one lesson, the use of a data projector in combination with a portable keyboard so that students could model the drafting and redrafting process was a worthwhile approach. A very good feature here was the requirement of students that they would provide reasons for their adjustments alongside each of the changes they made. In other lessons, the playing of a song and of an advertisement on a CD player and the data projector respectively, worked well and it was suggested that the use of a guided reading approach to the pieces during the lesson could have provided appropriate scaffolding for some of the activities undertaken by students. The encouragement of students to present material that had a personal connection to themselves during one lesson was very worthwhile, emphasising the affective element of songs and literature appropriately. This was also reflected in another lesson which
encouraged students to write about their response to the reading of a poem. This was further supported through the presentation of images which groups were to discuss in connection with the text being examined. The use of a famous eulogy as a model for students’ writing was another example of very good practice, leading to the development of an appropriate writing frame for students’ subsequent exercises and supporting an integrated approach to the novel being studied.

Pair work and group work were used regularly. The use of a data projector in combination with closely organised group work where roles were assigned to each student was a good example of this approach. Material set out on the data projector scaffolded work to be undertaken by each group. This was good practice and these types of co-operative learning strategies should be used across the department, with students being assigned clear roles in groups to which they have been assigned. Approaches such as placemat, envoy and jigsaw, among others, will support the development of students’ listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Lessons were universally conducted in a well-ordered learning environment. Teachers were affirming of students’ efforts and a very good relationship was evident between teachers and students. Students’ learning was evident in all lessons. This was variously displayed through the engagement of students with exercises set, good quality feedback from students, note-making on the part of students and the standard of engagement by students with written work.

A print-rich environment was frequently in evidence in teachers’ base classrooms. Such an approach serves to provide purpose and audience for students’ written work, while also highlighting the importance of the drafting and redrafting process for students. Variously, work by students in different genres, keywords, newspapers, character diagrams and teachers’ resources were displayed and this is good practice. Print-rich environments should continue to be developed and this approach should be noted as policy and practice in the English subject plan.

**ASSESSMENT**

Homework was regularly assigned and monitored. There was frequent evidence of comment-based assessment. This is good practice. As a further extension of current practice, it is suggested that clear rubrics should be set for students’ written exercises as an aid to their achieving the learning goals which have been targeted. In addition, such an approach would facilitate the use of peer-assessment and self-assessment which are consistent with the principles of assessment for learning.

The use of graduated questions and summary exercises was evident in students’ written work, alongside some use of an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses. While acknowledging the validity of the former strategies, it is recommended that the use of an integrated strategy should be adopted more widely by English teachers in the setting of homework exercises. The wider use of an integrated strategy 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 may then inform students’ homework.

Formal house examinations are organised at Christmas and summer. In addition, mock examinations are provided in early spring for students who will be participating in the certificate examinations. Class tests are organised by teachers for all classes at the October and February midterm breaks. Common assessments are organised where practicable, as is consistent with good practice. These arrangements are appropriately comprehensive. Reports regarding students’ progress are sent to their parents at Christmas and the end of the academic year. Parent-teacher
meetings are organised once per year for each year group. The use of a journal, which incorporates teachers’ comments, also facilitates communication between the school and students’ homes.

**SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- A very good standard of teaching and learning was observed.
- The school library is well maintained and a number of reading initiatives have been undertaken.
- There is very good provision for access to audio-visual resources and equipment in English.
- A whole-school literacy policy has been developed.
- A comprehensive subject plan has been developed.
- There are good links between the English and special educational needs departments.
- Classroom management and relationships between teachers and students were very good.
- A print-rich environment was frequently in evidence in teacher base rooms.

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

- A whole-school literacy committee should be formed to consolidate and further develop work already being undertaken in this area.
- The current time-linked common plans should be further developed to incorporate clear syllabus-based learning goals.
- Individual and subject planning should incorporate an integrated approach to the language and literature elements of the syllabuses.
- The subject department should adopt a teaching-and learning focus in the medium term.

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.

*Published, March 2012*
Appendix

School response to the report

Submitted by the Board of Management
Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management and staff were very satisfied with this report, believing it reflected a true and accurate view of the quality of teaching and learning in the school.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

- A whole school literacy committee has been formed.
- Every subject area has developed literacy strategies
- Ongoing work on hand to further develop an integrated approach to literacy in the school.