



Looking at
English

Teaching & Learning English
in Post-Primary Schools



INSPECTORATE



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1 Introduction

1.1 Background to this report

This composite report is the product of an analysis and synthesis of inspection reports on the teaching and learning of English in seventy-five post-primary schools. The inspections were carried out between January 2005 and May 2006. The sample of seventy-five schools represents more than 10 per cent of the total number and includes schools in all sectors: voluntary secondary schools (41), vocational schools and community colleges (20), and community and comprehensive schools (14). The sample also reflects the range of school types and school settings, including both single-sex and co-educational schools, urban, suburban and rural schools, and schools ranging in size from fewer than a hundred to more than a thousand students.

Six inspectors of English were involved in carrying out the inspections throughout the country, visiting 483 classes¹ taught by 426 teachers. The classes visited ranged from first year to sixth year and from foundation level in the junior cycle to higher level in the Leaving Certificate. The inspections included observation of teaching and learning in the following programmes: Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate (Established) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme, Leaving Certificate (Applied), Junior Certificate School Programme, and Transition Year Programme.

¹ The term “class” denotes a group of students. The term “lesson” denotes a period of tuition.

1.2 Purpose of this report

This report presents findings based on observations of practice in schools and classrooms. Its purpose is to make a positive contribution to the teaching and learning of English, and it is therefore intended to be of particular relevance to teachers of English and to school managements. Its aims are fourfold:

- ⌘ to inform and encourage professional dialogue
- ⌘ to assist schools and subject departments in the process of self-review
- ⌘ to suggest areas for improvement
- ⌘ to share exemplars of good practice.

1.3 Structure of this report

The structure of this report follows the format of the subject inspection reports in English, on which it is based and by which it is informed. It is hoped that the familiarity of this format will help to make the report accessible and clear. The four areas covered are provision and whole-school support for English, planning and preparation, teaching and learning, and assessment and achievement. Sub-headings have been added to provide greater focus. Exemplars of good practice in each area have been placed at the end of the relevant chapter. The report concludes with a summary of best practice and areas for development identified in the report. Appended is a list of useful web sites. Where a web site is referred to in the body of the report, readers should consult this list for a brief description of the site contents, and the address.

Subject inspection reports are evidence-based and are informed by a variety of activities:

- ⌘ meetings with the principal or deputy principal (or both)
- ⌘ meetings with the teachers of English
- ⌘ meetings with learning-support and language-support teachers

- ⌘ feedback to individual teachers and to the subject department
- ⌘ observation of teaching and learning
- ⌘ interaction with students
- ⌘ review of students' work
- ⌘ review of relevant school and subject documents
- ⌘ review of relevant data from the State Examinations Commission.

1.4 Rationale of this report

Each person lives in the midst of language.²

English is a core subject in all post-primary schools and is regarded as a compulsory subject for all students. The skills learned in English have an application throughout the curriculum and beyond it into the world of adult life and work. Both the present Junior Certificate English syllabus (introduced in 1989) and the present Leaving Certificate syllabus (introduced in 1999) acknowledge the central role played by speaking, listening, reading and writing in the learning and thinking processes. The introduction to the Leaving Certificate syllabus makes explicit links between its aims and those of the Junior Certificate syllabus.

This syllabus builds on the aims of the Junior Certificate English syllabus, which emphasise the development of a range of literacy and oral skills in a variety of domains, personal, social and cultural. In the Leaving Certificate course, students will be encouraged to develop a more sophisticated range of skills and concepts.

² *Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*, p. 2.

Three other programmes come within the scope of this report: the Junior Certificate School programme (JCSP), introduced in 1996; the Transition Year programme, introduced in 1984 and mainstreamed in 1994; and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (LCA), introduced in 1995. Each is aimed at a particular cohort of students and has specific objectives appropriate to these, but all share an emphasis on the development of language skills, from the basic literacy of reading and writing to the critical literacy required for analysing and interpreting texts.

The recommendations on timetabling and the deployment of teachers in this report are informed by the aims of the relevant syllabuses and reflect the central role of language in the learning life of our students. The importance accorded to the acquisition and development of skills in the relevant syllabus and programme documents informs the recommendations in this report on planning, teaching and learning, and assessment.

2 Provision and whole-school support for English

2.1 Timetabling

The school timetable is the first source of information on the most basic aspect of provision for English, namely the number and distribution of English lessons for each class. The optimal situation is for students to have an English lesson on each of the five days of the week, to enable them to develop the necessary skills and competences and to provide them with regular reinforcement of these.

All seventy-five schools timetabled five English lessons a week for fifth and sixth year; in a significant minority of schools six English lessons per week were timetabled for one or both of these years. The distribution of lessons for these years was also generally very good, although five lessons were timetabled over four days in a few instances.

Although a majority of schools timetabled five lessons a week for third year, provision in the junior cycle was, in general, considerably poorer than in the senior cycle. All years in the junior cycle were allocated only four lessons a week in more than a quarter of the schools. It was noted with particular concern that first-year classes fared worst, with only four English lessons a week in the majority of schools and only three lessons a week in a few instances. In addition, a poor distribution of lessons was much more common in the junior cycle than in the senior cycle, with the week's English lessons timetabled on three consecutive days in the worst cases. These findings, when read in conjunction with those on the deployment of teachers (see section 2.2 below), suggest that the provision for first-year English is not given high priority in many schools. This report stresses that the optimal situation described in the first paragraph above applies equally to first-year classes.

A further significant inference may be drawn from these findings. The fact that provision is poorest in first year and best in third year suggests that the timetabling for English is strongly focused on preparation for certificate examinations and therefore on the delivery of content rather than on the development of skills. (Further implications of this greater emphasis on content than on skills are discussed in sections 3 and 4 below.)

Timetabling provision for JCSP, transition year and LCA was also examined for this report. JCSP is available at present in 150 schools (13 in this sample), and timetable provision was very good, with at least five lessons a week and additional timetabled literacy support. There was considerable variation in the timetabling of English in transition year, now running in 550 schools (57 in this sample). Most schools provided at least three lessons a week of core English, although the numbers ranged from an inadequate two in a few instances to a very generous five in a significant minority of schools. A number of schools offered separate transition-year modules in related areas, such as drama and film; this is fully in keeping with the spirit of the programme but does not eliminate the need for core English provision. LCA is offered in 294 schools (31 in this sample). Provision for English and Communications in LCA was generally less satisfactory, with only half the schools providing the optimal four lessons a week. (The timetabling guidelines given on the LCA web site should be consulted for more detailed recommendations.)

Concurrent timetabling for English involves the timetabling of English lessons at the same time for all classes in a year group. It is a valuable practice, as it not only facilitates the movement of students between levels but also creates opportunities for inter-class and whole-year activities and for team teaching. However, concurrence makes considerable demands on timetabling and should therefore be used to the full. The concurrent timetabling of English within fifth and sixth year was widespread but was often used only to allow movement between levels. All the uses of concurrence mentioned above apply equally to the junior cycle, yet concurrence was rare in first year and occurred in fewer than half

the schools in second and third year. Concurrence is also recommended in transition year, as it opens up opportunities for whole-year activities and the team-teaching of modules. It should be noted that concurrence is unlikely to be exploited fully unless it is the focus of careful collaborative planning.

2.2 Deployment of teachers

Most schools reported that teachers were deployed across a range of programmes and levels. However, it was clear that in many instances teachers were teaching in the junior cycle but not the senior cycle, or *vice versa*, or took only higher-level or only ordinary-level classes. Good deployment of teachers should serve to broaden and deepen the pool of expertise and experience within the subject department and should offer teachers opportunities and challenges to extend their range. Therefore, a well-planned rotation of teachers so that they encounter students across the spectrum of years, levels and programmes represents best practice and is strongly recommended by the inspectors of English.

It follows from this that teachers of English should have a substantial timetable commitment to the subject. However, in a significant number of schools some of those teaching English took only one class group and therefore had a teaching load for English of no more than four or five lessons per week. Timetabling constraints, staff changes and the demands made by teachers' other subjects inevitably have a bearing on deployment. Nonetheless, timetabling teachers to take English with only one class group should be avoided where possible. The inspectors particularly noted the high incidence of this practice in first-year classes as a cause for concern. Given the significance of first year for the teaching and learning of essential skills, it is recommended that teachers taking first-years for English also take other year groups and have a broad involvement with the subject. Continuity of teacher from one year to the next within a cycle or programme is generally desirable and should be kept in mind in planning both at the whole-school level and the subject department level.

Schools throughout the country have seen an increase in the numbers of international students who are entitled to language support. The aim of language support is to provide specific tuition in English for speakers of other languages.³ While a number of schools were offering structured language support to international students through teachers who have some training in the area, there was a lack of coherence in the provision and delivery of this support in many other instances. All schools with students requiring language support should liaise with Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT), which has a specific remit to assist language-support teachers through the provision of training and resource materials. School managements should ensure that there is as much continuity as possible in the deployment of language-support teachers, so that skills developed through training are used effectively.

2.3 Formation of classes and placement of students

Mixed ability is a method of class formation that entails the distribution of students of all levels of ability across all class groups. More than half the schools used this method for first-year class formation, and of these the majority continued mixed ability into second year. Where a school used mixed ability in first year and not in second year the usual reason was that students were being set into higher-level and ordinary-level groups at that point. It is recommended that decisions in relation to level, and the rearranging of class groups that may arise from these decisions, be deferred until the end of second year at least. This policy gives more time to students when they are going through an important phase of development and encourages them to have the highest realistic expectations.

In *banding*, a number of class groups are formed within ability bands. Banding operated in the junior cycle in a minority of schools, most of which had a large enrolment with a very wide spread of ability. A number of reports noted the effective use of banding to support both very able and very weak students.

³ EFL (English as a foreign language) is not the appropriate term to use for language support. ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) and ESL (English as a second language) are more accurate terms, and ESL is the one most widely used internationally.

Streaming, in which students are placed in a particular ability group for all subjects, was observed in a few schools in the junior cycle. The reports on these schools recommend a move to banding for schools with a large enrolment or to mixed ability for smaller schools, given the negative effect of streaming on students' expectations and development of potential.

In accordance with the spirit and the aims of the Transition Year programme, all transition-year classes should be of mixed ability, and this practice was followed in almost all the schools offering the programme. In most schools, fifth-year and sixth-year classes were set for English and were usually designated as higher and ordinary level, though there were also mixed-level classes. In general, students' placement in fifth year was determined by Junior Certificate results and by the students' own wishes. (The use of school assessment to determine placement is discussed in section 5.5 below.)

2.4 Resources

Traditionally, English has been regarded as a "resource-light" subject, which can be taught anywhere. Given syllabus changes and the introduction of new programmes, this is no longer a tenable view, if indeed it ever was.

There are certain basic requirements for all rooms in which English is taught:

- a good-sized board with a high-quality writing surface
- students' seating sufficiently flexible to facilitate pair and group work
- display spaces for students' work and for relevant illustrative material.

A number of the classrooms visited fell below even this basic level of provision; yet the classroom in which English is taught should be a resource in itself, an environment rich in print and also conducive to the study of the spoken word and visual texts. Therefore, the schools that exemplified best practice were those where, in the English classrooms,

- books, including dictionaries, were on display and in use
 - audio equipment (cassette or CD player) was available and used appropriately
 - a television of adequate screen size, with video or DVD player, was available and used appropriately.
- (The appropriate use of this equipment is dealt with in section 4.)

The variety of functions and the good picture quality available with DVD make this a more useful format for film in the classroom. Where audiovisual equipment is shared and centrally stored, an agreed booking procedure should be followed.

The majority of schools operate teacher-based rooms. In the schools in this sample that had teacher-based rooms, most teachers of English had their own rooms, with the general exception of newer teachers or those not on full hours. It would be helpful if teachers without a room of their own could take their classes in the same room every day, in order to develop it as a resource and to establish a routine for access to materials and equipment. Shared resources for the English department should be kept in an accessible storage area or room.

Although the inspectors of English have seen some very good libraries in schools in all sectors, a significant minority of schools have no library, and fewer than a third of those that have are making optimal use of it. Where rooms that were once libraries are now being used for other purposes, the school management usually cited under-use of the library as a reason for the change.

Schools with a successful library had in common

- ⌘ a commitment to the library on the part of the management and members of staff
- ⌘ a designated member of staff, teaching or non-teaching, who acted as librarian
- ⌘ provision for the updating of stock and the maintenance of a wide selection of books
- ⌘ the promotion of the library as a source of reading for pleasure
- ⌘ the promotion of the library in all subject areas as a place for research
- ⌘ good opportunities for students to have access to the library
- ⌘ a number of computers with internet access in the library.

Book boxes and classroom libraries were used to foster the reading habit in a number of schools, especially where there was no library or where students' reading needed particular encouragement. Even where school libraries are flourishing, such initiatives extend the reading opportunities for students. In addition, these collections of books can be tailored to the needs of particular classes. Teachers are commended for the efforts they make to instil a love of reading, and school managements should be active in supporting their efforts. In developing the use of the library and in promoting reading in schools, the attention of all concerned is directed to the Department's circular CL M16/99, "Guidelines for reading in second-level schools."

The availability of information and communications technology (ICT) in schools has had a discernible impact on how teachers research and prepare lessons and materials. Worksheets, templates and resource notes are increasingly produced on computer, aiding legibility and ease of use. Teachers are also increasingly using the internet for their own research and for material to download for class use. Guiding students to useful web sites and instructing them in the appropriate use of material obtained on the internet should now be seen as part of the teacher's role. In particular, issues of plagiarism and the proper acknowledgement of sources should be dealt with in the school's policy on acceptable internet use.

While only a small number of schools had an annual budget for English, most teachers reported positive responses to requests for resources. In a significant number of instances, teachers were purchasing resources themselves. While a certain amount of individual purchasing may be inevitable, and may be preferred by some teachers, the building up of shared resources available to all in the English department is an essential component of good subject department planning and should be supported by school managements.

2.5 Continuing professional development

It is reported that continuing professional development (CPD) is being facilitated and encouraged in the majority of schools, although the evidence from discussion and documents suggests that participation in subject-specific CPD varied not only from school to school but also from teacher to teacher. In most instances, school development planning has played a significant part in identifying and meeting whole-school CPD needs, and staff development days have dealt with such issues as mixed-ability teaching and special needs. It should be borne in mind that good subject planning includes the identification of subject-specific CPD needs. Best practice was observed where teachers of English had strong links with local education centres and teachers' professional networks, subject associations, and the Second-Level Support Service. It is recommended that this good practice be adopted in all schools. Greater use of the internet by teachers of English to meet CPD needs is also encouraged.

2.6 Co-curricular activities

Co-curricular activities are those that extend and reinforce the learning outcomes of the various syllabuses and programmes and that go beyond conventional classroom activities. In the case of English this covers an enormous range, and almost all schools provide co-curricular activities to varying degrees. Theatre trips, debating, public speaking and writing competitions featured most prominently, while the

production of the school play or of a magazine or yearbook was also widespread practice. Participation in the Writers in Schools scheme and links with local libraries, writers, arts groups, arts festivals and radio stations are less common, although some very good instances of collaboration with outside agencies have been reported. These are areas that could be further explored by many schools. This report commends the facilitation of such activities and the efforts made to ensure that they are purposeful and productive for the participating students.

Exemplars of good practice in provision and whole-school support for English

The following descriptions of good practice are selected from the seventy-five individual reports on which this composite report is based.

The school management is to be commended for facilitating four or five formal meetings per year for subject departments. The learning support team has structured meeting time with the principal and deputy principal every week, and close liaison between the learning support team and the English department was evident. Minutes of English department meetings are kept, in which decisions and plans are recorded. These meetings promoted team building, collaborative planning and decision-making. Teachers are also facilitated to attend in-service and to pursue further qualifications, for instance the post-graduate diploma in special educational needs.

The English department identified as a serious concern the need to tackle the literacy needs of students and made submissions to the board of management in this regard. The provision of a fifth English class in first year was a key proposal and its implementation has allowed a particular focus on teaching basic language skills to all first year students. Other strategies put in place include the development of a paired reading programme for first year students and an emphasis on students' reading as a key component in the junior cycle programme.

The school has an exceptional library which the English department uses to promote literacy and a love of reading amongst the student body. Student book reviews are currently displayed in the library, ensuring that peer evaluations of texts are widely available. First year students are inducted into the library and are made members. Other year groups are also given membership. The library is available for use by students all day.

The school maintains close links with the local public library service and has an institutional membership under which it can borrow up to two hundred items at a time. This serves to enhance the range of materials available and also facilitates individual book requests from teachers or students.

The English department has built up a substantial collection of films on video and DVD which is stored securely in the school library where it is readily available for use by English teachers. There is also a substantial array of audiotapes, along with an assortment of teaching resource packs, kept in the English department locker. The careful collection and storage of all of these resources is exemplary.

All classrooms in the school have a television and video. Access to audio-visual equipment for English teachers is excellent. This is very positive, given the importance of the study of film in the current Leaving Certificate syllabus. It is worth noting that the original initiative towards this provision was at the suggestion of the students' council.

The English department has engaged with ICT as a useful tool in the teaching of English. English teachers have built up a significant bank of web-based resources on the staffroom computer. Student work done using word processing packages was also in evidence.

The school is currently involved in a project concerning the development of software to be used to enhance teaching and learning in a range of subjects. A number of English lesson programmes have recently been created as part of this project.

Management is proactive in facilitating CPD. There has been whole-staff training in the area of mixed ability teaching in the recent past. Staff members are notified regarding courses in the local Education Centre through the staff notice-board. Information on relevant courses is also given to the subject coordinator and staff members are encouraged to attend.

3 Planning and preparation

3.1 The English department

During the period surveyed in this report the inspectors of English have noted an increasingly structured approach to subject planning. The most obvious manifestation of this was the significant increase in the number of planning documents available. However, because planning should be seen as a process rather than a product, this report looks first at the way in which the teachers of English create and evaluate these plans before considering the written plans themselves.

Good planning for the teaching and learning of English requires a high level of collaboration among all the teachers of the subject, a schedule of meetings that facilitates both forward planning and review, and a focus on the aims and learning outcomes or skills appropriate to students and programmes.

Although in a few instances levels of co-operation and even communication between teachers were very low, and in many more instances the traditional view of the teacher as solo practitioner remained strong, co-operative work practices existed among the teachers of English in most schools. Discussions on such issues as the selection of texts and the placement of students took place as the need arose, and teachers are to be commended for the good levels of collegiality, involving practical and moral support, that were evident in many schools. However, informal co-operation is not a secure enough basis for building good planning practices that will be of enduring benefit to teachers and students.

The incidence of strong subject department structures is rising. The good English departments encountered during the inspections were marked by many or all of the following characteristics:

- ⌘ a participative approach to planning for English
- ⌘ the sharing of resources and of expertise, particularly in teaching strategies
- ⌘ the facilitation and promotion of good practice by an active co-ordinator (or rotating co-ordinators)
- ⌘ regular meetings, both formally scheduled and as issues arise, with agendas and records of decisions taken
- ⌘ effective systems of communication within the department, with learning-support teachers, and with the management
- ⌘ the distribution of routine tasks, such as setting papers and preparing resources to avoid the duplication of work
- ⌘ an active approach to CPD (as outlined in section 2.5).

Fewer than one in three of the schools inspected had all these features. Where a strong English department structure existed, the benefits were clear in the co-ordinated delivery of the subject throughout the school, the shared work load, and the good lines of communication with the school management and with related areas such as learning support. It is heartening, therefore, to note the greater movement towards the formation of English departments and the increasing recognition in schools of their role in lessening the burden of planning and preparation for the individual teacher and in strengthening the delivery of the subject.

In creating a strong and supportive subject department structure, the school's senior management and teachers of English should bear the following points in mind. The English department should have timetabled meetings at least three times in the academic year, with a formal agenda and minutes. The purpose of these meetings is to agree future plans and to review existing ones, both of which are continuous processes. The role and the responsibilities of the co-ordinator should be agreed as part

of the English plan and should concentrate on organising and facilitating collaborative practices, including the sharing of information, tasks, resources, and expertise.

3.2 The plan for English

The increase in the volume of planning documents available has already been noted and is commended. Plans inspected ranged from the rudimentary to the comprehensive; most were at an early stage of development. The most basic consisted of content to be covered, usually through the naming of texts. Where other aspects of the syllabus were mentioned it was in very general terms, for example “Comprehension”. More developed plans referred to texts and linked them with tasks. They also listed available resources, placed the work to be done within a clear time scale, and outlined methods of assessment, adding considerably to their usefulness.

However, a weakness was often found in otherwise substantial plans in the area of planned learning outcomes. References to aims and objectives were frequently too general to be of much practical use. In other words, they lacked a focus on the specific skills to be acquired by students in each class or year group. It should be particularly noted, therefore, that best practice was observed where plans

- were designed to achieve the aims and objectives of the relevant syllabus or programme
- referred specifically to skills and learning outcomes, linking them appropriately to texts
- suggested appropriate methods and constructive modes of assessment for these skills
- demonstrated an integrated approach to language and literature by making explicit links between the texts that students were reading and the development of students’ writing.

A comprehensive plan should therefore show a progressive building of skills from first to sixth year. At a more basic level, it should prevent the unnecessary repetition of material and texts.

Other useful components of comprehensive plans included a description of the co-ordinator's role, records of tasks allocated, the school's and the department's homework policy, relevant syllabus documents, the Department's circulars, and chief examiners' reports. The practice of using the subject plan as a focus for department meetings was also noted and is commended. The amendments to the plan that may result from decisions taken at these meetings should be seen as an indication that the process of subject planning and the process of review and evaluation within a subject department are complementary. Every teacher of English should have either a printed copy of the plan or easy access to an electronic version of it.

Where teachers engaged fully with the process of subject planning it had immediate practical benefits and played a valuable role in professional development. Of some concern, therefore, is the finding that the production of planning documents was occasionally seen as an end in itself, detached from the realities of teaching and learning. The view that the plan is a one-off task and can be consigned to a shelf once completed is neither an intended nor a desirable outcome of subject planning.

English departments should review their planning documents in the light of these observations. It is hoped that the significant minority of schools where subject plans for English have not yet been developed will find them a guide and an encouragement.

3.3 Individual planning

In most schools, good individual planning was undertaken by many teachers. Best practice was seen where individual plans complemented the planning done by the department as a whole, for example where individual teachers planned a specific approach to a common text or topic to suit the particular classes they were teaching. Whether or not there was an agreed subject plan, individual plans consisted of more or less detailed schemes of work and were usually time-specific, often being written in diary

fashion. Just as with the subject plan, the best individual schemes of work concentrated on objectives and learning outcomes and included assignments to be given to students that clearly related to these outcomes.

The preparation by individual teachers of resources to be used in lessons on particular writers, texts and topics was also widespread. These included documentary film clips, photographs shown on overhead or data projectors, photocopied articles, and, on occasion, actual objects. The practice of sharing the resources prepared by individual teachers among all members of the English teaching team on a reciprocal basis is to be encouraged.

3.4 Programme planning

Planning for English within the JCSP was good in the majority of schools offering the programme. It was clear that the relevant teachers in these schools were familiar with the range of JCSP support materials available and had incorporated them in their planning. Typically, the good planning observed was marked by

- a clear emphasis on the needs of this student cohort
- an appropriate use of target statements
- an imaginative and stimulating choice of material.

Where planning was poor there was little sense of the gradual building of skills and competence, and the range of material chosen was limited and unexciting. It is recommended that all those involved in the teaching of English within the JCSP familiarise themselves with the support materials and publications on the JCSP web site.

The good transition-year English programmes observed offered participants

- active and student-centred learning experiences, including cross-curricular work
- exposure to a range of texts from many genres
- experience of different modes of assessment, including assessment of oral presentations and project work
- opportunities to develop the skills and competence required in the senior cycle.

In relation to the last point above, where Leaving Certificate material is included in the transition-year programme it should be handled in a significantly different way and one that is appropriate to the objectives of the transition year, for example a performance of a play rather than an academic reading of it.

Transition-year English programmes were often not specific enough in relation to the development of writing skills. It is recommended that clear objectives for students' writing be stated in the programme plan, and that these be seen as a bridge between Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate learning outcomes. All transition-year students should have a copy of the programme, including the methods of assessment, thus giving them a measure of responsibility for their own progress. English departments in schools offering transition year would benefit from consulting the brief and helpful document *Writing the Transition Year Programme*.⁴ This will provide a useful check-list for schools that have a detailed written programme and will give the necessary framework to those that have not.

⁴ Produced jointly by the Transition Year Curriculum Support Service and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science.

The LCA English and Communications programme combines prescribed activities and assignments with opportunities for teachers' and students' choice of texts and materials. Good programme planning in this area was characterised by

- a structure that emphasised the building of skills, thus increasing students' confidence and self-esteem
- a range of suitably challenging materials, including substantial creative texts in a variety of genres
- a choice of materials and methods designed to connect with and enrich the students' own experience.

Poor planning and a limited or unsuitable choice of material led to low student motivation. It is therefore strongly recommended that the LCA English and Communications programme be informed by the collective expertise of the English department and that the department build up specific resources both of materials and methods so as to deliver the programme successfully.

3.5 Choice of texts

The choice of texts has a significant effect on the quality of the learning experience for students and on the level of their engagement with it. This point has already been made in section 3.4 in relation to text choices within the programmes dealt with there; it applies equally to the choice of texts in the whole of the junior cycle and within the established Leaving Certificate syllabus.

With specific reference to the junior cycle, the texts chosen in all genres were frequently from a very small and predictable pool. In a significant minority of schools, students read only one novel over the three years of the course, and had a very limited exposure to poetry. A further concern was the poor exposure to drama among ordinary-level students, with film completely replacing rather than complementing the study of a play.

Both the Junior Certificate syllabus and the teachers' guidelines emphasise the importance of students' experience of a diversity of texts. It is therefore strongly recommended that at least one appropriately challenging and stimulating novel be read in each junior-cycle year. In the choosing of first-year novels, best practice was observed where teachers liaised with feeder primary schools to avoid choosing novels already covered. The study of a play should be an integral part of the course; and students should encounter a range of poems appropriate to their developing skills and maturity over the course of the three years. The pool of texts should also be changed and added to regularly.

English textbooks of the anthology or compendium type were widely used. These should not be seen as forming the plan for English in the junior cycle, nor should they be the only resource available for the teaching of poetry and language skills in particular. The availability of audiotapes as an adjunct to the reading of novels and especially of plays was noted, and commended as good planning of resources, in a number of schools.

In general, the range and variety of texts chosen was greater at the Leaving Certificate level than in the junior cycle. English departments are to be commended where they have moved away from the more familiar texts and made choices on the basis of what is likely to work best for their students. Good practice was observed in schools where choice of text was managed so as to allow students to change level where necessary. This involved collaborative planning in the choice of accessible common texts and in some instances using the ordinary-level single text as a comparative text at the higher level. English departments should avoid choosing texts for the senior cycle that have already been studied in the junior cycle.

The choice of texts within the Leaving Certificate programme must be made in compliance with the relevant lists of prescribed material which are issued to schools annually and are on the department's web site. The chief examiners' reports for Leaving Certificate English at both levels in 2005 referred to a small number of instances where candidates had studied texts not on the course, with serious consequences for them in loss of marks.

3.6 Planning for literacy support

In most schools, liaison between teachers of English and learning-support teachers was good. The practice of giving this liaison a structure through formal meeting times between the English department and learning-support teachers is to be commended and should be extended to improve the provision and delivery of literacy support. Many of the schools where significant numbers of students have literacy difficulties were addressing this through the adoption of a whole-school literacy policy, including information and training sessions for the whole staff from the learning-support co-ordinator and external learning-support trainers. The very good work being done by schools in this area has been warmly commended in many English inspection reports. Where schools had embraced a whole-school approach to literacy development there was very good support for less able students in building their vocabulary and language skills in a structured manner. In schools where such an approach has yet to be implemented, the progress of these students was less certain, and this is a cause for concern. The facilitation by school managements of staff development in the area of literacy support is to be commended, and this practice should be extended.

Exemplars of good practice in planning and preparation

The following descriptions of good practice are selected from the seventy-five individual reports on which this composite report is based.

There is a subject coordinator for English and the English department meets on a regular basis. These meetings occur both in time allocated by the principal for department planning meetings and at other times arranged by the department itself. Minutes of these meetings are kept, particularly decisions relating to common plans for the term. These arrangements speak to a high level of dedication on the part of teachers and the existence of a collaborative culture within the English department.

English in this school benefits from a strong department structure and a well-established culture of subject planning, involving both forward planning and review. Meetings are held regularly, with one at the beginning of the academic year and at least one per term thereafter. Minutes are taken and these assist in continuity and in tracking progress on various matters arising. Meetings over the last year have dealt with timetabling, text choices, co-curricular activities and student placement. Good reflective practices are given a formal framework at these meetings as teachers discuss what has worked and what has not.

In one English department visited, action planning was taking place. One of the documents provided by the department during the subject inspection was an analysis in relation to the teaching and learning of English of “what is working well,” “what is not working,” ‘areas in need of development’ and “contextual factors.”

The English programme is planned collaboratively and agreed schemes of work are drawn up and then distributed by the co-ordinator. Change and flexibility are emphasised from the beginning, suggesting that programme planning is quite properly viewed as a supportive framework rather than a straitjacket. It is commendable that the plan gives a number of desired learning outcomes for each year in the various syllabus areas.

The Transition Year English programme is module-based. Students complete three modules on poetry/short story/radio, drama/film and creative writing/novel and are tested at the end of each module by a written examination and project. Poetry writing, drama readings, media studies, oral presentations, theatre and cinema visits, visiting writers and individual reading are promoted. Some class groups have completed an anthology of their own poetry and written a radio script. The texts selected for study for Transition Year, while of the same standard as Leaving Certificate texts, are chosen so that there will be no overlap with the Leaving Certificate course.

Plans for Communications Skills in the LCA class focused on providing students with opportunities to study language use in a variety of real communicative contexts. The activity-based focus of the work planned and the support available to help students to complete key assignments ensured that the particular needs of this group were being addressed.

Individual teacher plans identified specific learning targets in each of the domains: oral language, reading and writing. The best of these plans included information about the challenges faced by individual students in a class group and a record of their achievement in in-class assessments.

There are very good links between the English department and the learning support department. Formal meetings are held three times a year and there are informal meetings twice weekly to plan and evaluate students' progress. In a recent development, all subject departments have devised glossaries giving the meanings and applications of subject-specific terms to assist learning-support and resource teachers in their work with students.

4 Teaching and learning

4.1 Lesson structure

A reliable indicator of a well-structured lesson is the communication to students of the purpose of the lesson at the outset. Where clear statements about the content of the lesson were made at the beginning, they were effective in establishing a sense of direction. Even better, but less common, was the practice of stating the purpose of the lesson in terms of learning activities and objectives. This approach was observed to engage and focus students' attention, thus assisting good classroom management. Best practice was observed where these objectives were used in the summing up at the end of the lesson, reinforcing the sense of the lesson as a learning unit. This is the recommended practice. Where there was no explicit statement of lesson content a sense of purpose was established if the class was able to engage swiftly with the work planned for the lesson. Where no sense of purpose was evident, this reflected poor lesson planning.

The pacing of lessons was often well judged, with a good balance between the need to maintain interest and a sense of forward movement on the one hand and the need to ensure that enough time was given for new material to be understood on the other. Individual lesson content was generally well judged in relation to the time available. Poor judgement of time occasionally led to inadequate recapitulation or to the hasty setting of homework at the end of the lesson. Less commonly, too little material or too few activities had been planned, resulting in dead time at the end of the lesson. Pacing often appeared too slow where a lesson lacked variety in content or in method of teaching; good planning is required to avoid the disengagement by students that this causes. Some very good practice was observed in junior-cycle classes where lessons were divided into two or three topic areas that were clearly linked either to previous work or to another topic in the same lesson. The good practice of linking lessons with prior learning was widespread.

4.2 Use of resources

Many of the resources commonly available in classrooms are so familiar as to be somewhat undervalued and therefore used less well than they could be. In particular, use of the board varied widely in quality. Best practice was observed where the well-organised use of the board served many functions:

- ⌘ naming the topic or topics for the lesson
- ⌘ recording in sequence the points arising out of whole-class discussion or group work
- ⌘ listing key words or points as part of pre-reading or pre-writing activities
- ⌘ working out problems in punctuation, spelling, and sentence structure
- ⌘ displaying correct spelling and punctuation
- ⌘ setting homework and other assignments.

Dividing the board so as to create a margin where spellings and new vocabulary were recorded separately is a commendable strategy that should be more widely used. Overhead projectors were used less widely but often to good effect, especially where a piece of text to be studied had been copied onto acetate and was then worked on or annotated during the lesson. A collection of such acetates is a useful addition to the English department's resources. It is imperative that all writing on the board or overhead projector be accurate and legible and that it serve students as a model for organising their own ideas before writing.

Visual texts, both film and still images, presented their own challenges. Although the still images chosen for class study were often multi-layered and subtle, the sometimes poor quality of the photocopies used made attention to detail very difficult. Images were not always subjected to a sufficiently rigorous analysis, nor was the opportunity to teach the specific vocabulary required always taken. A collection of still images colour-copied onto acetate or downloaded and shown on data projector would greatly assist visual analysis and the teaching and learning of terminology in this area. The study of film was generally more focused, especially in the Leaving Certificate programme, although poor preparation in

relation to the cueing and timing of film sequences shown in class was occasionally observed. In general, it should be recognised that the use of resources for teaching visual texts requires careful planning and preparation and that the perception that these texts are easy for students is false. The most recent reports on performance in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate examinations make instructive reading on this issue, and it is recommended that English departments study them carefully. Visually rich classrooms, with displays of posters and photographs, were seen to be a very useful resource, and this is an area for development in many schools.

The use of audiotapes and CDs was less widespread than it should be, given the wealth of resources available in these formats. Some very good practice was observed in relation to novels on tape, with students reading along silently, and it is recommended that this practice be used where appropriate, either to assist students' understanding or to draw their attention to key moments. Poetry and songs on tape were also used effectively. Audio resources are especially applicable to drama; where used, they clearly added to students' engagement with and understanding of the play. Audiotapes are particularly recommended for the teaching of Shakespearean drama, where the complexities of the language may mean that students find the reading of parts too daunting. Audiotapes also provide an excellent resource for teasing out issues of characterisation and interpretation. It is regrettable that in many classrooms the study of drama has become a study of the film of the play, which may differ substantially from the original text. On the other hand, listening to the play on audiotape focuses attention on words and tone, and provides space for the imagination in relation to action and gesture.

Section 3.5 cautioned against the use of the anthology-style textbook as the year plan in the junior cycle. While such textbooks were seen to provide stimulating and enjoyable material, two specific causes for concern also arose. The first was the extent to which, following a lively reading and discussion of a text from the anthology, homework was assigned from the questions in the textbook, whether or not they truly reflected and captured the issues dealt with in the preceding discussion. A more selective use of textbook assignments is therefore recommended. The second concern arose where language skills, in

particular grammar and syntax, were treated as a separate issue in textbooks. In practice this led to the teaching of language skills in isolation, whereas they should be grounded in the texts the students are reading. (These points are further considered in section 4.4.)

The practice of taking English classes to the computer room was observed in a few schools but is much less widespread than is desirable. The process of drafting and editing which is essential to the development of students' writing skills can be carried out in an efficient and engaging way on word-processor.⁵ Work on sentence structure, paragraphing and layout can be done particularly effectively, and the grammar, spelling and word-counting tools, carefully used, aid the development of proof-reading skills. (Uses of ICT are further discussed in section 4.4.)

4.3 Methods and strategies used

The inspectors of English observed the use of a wide range of teaching strategies. The effectiveness of these strategies varied, sometimes because of the nature of the student cohort and sometimes because of the level of preparation by the teacher. However, the most effective strategies were those that demanded the active participation of students, whether as engaged listeners, responsive readers, or purposeful writers.

The dominance of teacher talk, whether providing information and opinion or questioning students, was a strikingly consistent finding in inspections of English. As a teaching style this relies heavily on the ability of students to be an audience—literally a group of listeners. Where students could process the spoken word in an active and engaged way, and were confident enough to express their own sometimes dissenting views, this method worked well. However, even in these circumstances some variety in teaching methods is desirable. It must be said that too often the unvarying use of this teaching style led to passivity and disengagement on the part of students.

⁵ See *Leaving Certificate Draft Guidelines*, p. 9–11.

Where particularly good practice to secure students' participation was seen it was clear that there had been thorough planning and preparation and that the teacher exercised a firm yet friendly control. It was notable that pair and group work was successful where students had clear instructions before beginning the task and knew the purpose of their work, the time allotted, and the end result required. This was tested in a real sense when the pair or group had to report on their findings to the whole class, and this is recommended as an appropriate conclusion to such work. It is also recommended that students work in groups of no more than three, initially at least, and that the teacher control the formation of the groups.

Questioning was the most widely used of the teaching methods observed, but the purpose, context and style of questioning were often not considered carefully enough. In many instances questioning largely concentrated on testing the recall of facts or basic comprehension, leading at times to chorus answering unless questions were directed at named students. Another common phenomenon observed was where the question sought a response to more complex issues, for example the mood or tone of a poem, but students were not given enough time to respond thoughtfully. Where this occurred, the work of expanding the response was actually done by the teacher, not the students. At its best, however, questioning was flexible and dynamic, in that it was appropriately applied to many different purposes and contributed greatly to lively and productive teaching and learning. Questioning was used particularly effectively to help students see links between new material and prior learning and to push them towards more precise thinking and expression. It is recommended that the style and pace of questioning be varied according to its specific purpose and that students be made aware of the different types of questions. When used to check students' recall or grasp of facts, questioning should be directed at named students, not at the whole class. Higher-order questions, intended to encourage students to grapple with more complex material and to develop an informed personal opinion on it, should be open to a wide range of responses, and students must be given enough time to articulate such responses themselves.

While many teachers commented to the inspectors on the wide range of ability in most class groups, there was little evidence of differentiation⁶ in the teaching methods observed. The most common practice was that teachers organised class work so that more able students could work independently, leaving the teacher free to give assistance where required. Rarely was the teacher's interaction with the class differentiated so as to ensure that all students had an opportunity to answer a question or to make a contribution at a level that was appropriate for them. However, some very good practice was observed where worksheets or other structured assignments began at a very manageable level and continued to more complex tasks, with useful prompts or writing frames to enable all students to develop their responses. It is recommended that English departments take an active approach to continuing professional development in the area of differentiation.

4.4 Development of skills

The emphasis on the acquisition and development of skills in the syllabuses and programmes dealt with in this report has been mentioned in the introduction (See section 1.4). While good practice in this regard was observed in many schools, areas for improvement were also identified. The findings and recommendations given here relate to vocabulary-building and the development of expressive language, competence in the accurate and appropriate use of language, and the expansion of reading and writing skills across a range of genres.

Many teachers were adept at introducing sophisticated vocabulary to their students by using it in class discussion in such a way that the context or the use of a simpler synonym provided the necessary gloss. Best practice was observed where students were then encouraged to make these words their own by using them in their own speaking and writing. Use of the board to reinforce the acquisition of new vocabulary is recommended, as is a greater use of dictionaries in the classroom. Very good practice was observed where teachers modelled the use of dictionaries by consulting them in class themselves and demonstrating their importance for vocabulary-building.

⁶ The varying of material and methodology in a lesson so that students of all ability levels are engaged in learning.

While the parallel translation of sophisticated vocabulary was seen to provide a useful bridge by which students could acquire a richer language themselves, this should not be confused with the undesirable practice of substituting paraphrase for the original text. This happened most often in the study of poetry, where attention to the patterns and resonances of the actual words on the page is really essential. Another difficulty in the study of poetry occurred where the investigation of figurative language frequently concentrated too much on terms and definitions rather than on effect or purpose. It should be remembered that it is useful for students to master the terminology only insofar as it assists their understanding of and response to the poem. It is not an end in itself.

It has already been noted that in many instances where lively class discussion was observed, students were encouraged to express their views and were assisted towards a more focused and articulate personal response through good and challenging questions posed by the teacher. The expressive skills developed in such interchanges need to be carried through to writing tasks that will consolidate the work done orally. Where this happened, clear links between oral and written questions, and a consistent use of focused class discussion as a pre-writing exercise, resulted in good and substantial written work from students. This is commended as very good practice. Another good strategy for building their expressive skills was observed where students were given opportunities to make oral presentations to the class. This happened less frequently than is desirable and was seen most often in transition year and LCA. This good practice should be extended to all years and programmes.

An integrated approach to the teaching of language and literature is explicitly advocated in the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate English syllabuses.⁷ While this was implemented in a majority of schools, areas for development were also identified. In many instances, students were given writing tasks in specific genres (diary, letter, newspaper article, etc.) which were based on characters and situations in a play or novel that they were studying. This is good practice. However, they should also be given good models of the specific genres of writing to guide them in creating the appropriate structure and register for their own compositions. It should be noted that the most recent chief examiners' reports for Junior

⁷ *Junior Certificate English Syllabus*, p. 5; *Leaving Certificate English Syllabus*, p. 4.

Certificate and Leaving Certificate English recommend the use of exemplars to assist in the development of writing skills in various genres and styles.⁸

Integrating the teaching of language and literature would also assist in developing the accuracy and maturity of students' spoken and written language and should be used much more widely than it is at present. In particular, aspects of sentence and paragraph structure are best learned from the study of exemplars drawn from the texts that students are reading, so that the emphasis is on the application of these skills for real-life purposes. Where creative modelling or imitation was used to lead students towards more accomplished writing there was clear evidence of its effectiveness, and a more widespread use of this method is urged. In general, a more structured and incremental approach to the development of writing skills is necessary, and the recommendations in this regard already made in section 3 in relation to subject planning should follow through into classroom practice.

Accuracy in language and register will not be achieved without planning, drafting, rewriting, and editing. As these are actual stages in the real-life writing and publishing process, they should be directed towards a similar end in the school setting to encourage students to take the necessary pains to attain a worthy finished product. In a number of schools, selected samples of students' finished work were published in the form of classroom displays, corridor or library display for an open day or parents' night, a space on the school web site, or a newsletter or magazine. This very good practice should be a feature in all schools. The use of ICT to teach editing skills was observed to be effective but not widespread, and its greater use for this purpose is recommended.

Findings and recommendations on the encouragement of personal reading have been given in section 2, and concerns about the narrow range of prescribed reading were expressed in section 3. Wide reading in a variety of genres is a stated syllabus and programme aim, and the relevance of these points to the development of reading skills is clear. A minimalist approach to prescribed reading was a negative finding in a minority of English inspection reports. In particular, the practice of reducing the comparative study

⁸ *Junior Certificate English Report*, 2003, p. 50; *Leaving Certificate English Report*, 2005, p. 45.

for ordinary-level students to one written text and a film is an unnecessary and unacceptable minimising of the course. On the other hand, teachers were commended for the efforts made in many schools to offer all students a rich and varied experience of texts in a range of genres.

Pre-reading strategies served a useful purpose in arousing students' interest. These included inviting students to predict the story from the cover picture or blurb, and introducing concepts and vocabulary to attune students to the world of the text. The explicit teaching of such reading skills as skimming and scanning was also observed and commended.

4.5 Evidence of learning

In responses to questioning by the teacher and in interaction with the inspectors, students demonstrated a familiarity with the content of their courses in the majority of instances and generally revealed good recall of texts studied. However, they were not always aware of the need to support their views with reasoned argument. There were fewer competent responses to questions requiring a grasp of concepts, and a greater emphasis on higher-order questioning is recommended.

Students were for the most part willing to participate in class activity and in doing so demonstrated a positive attitude to learning. Instances of serious disengagement were uncommon. For the most part also students were organised and purposeful in their work, willing to address themselves to the task, and happy to ask for assistance or clarification. Where they were poorly prepared for class, for example not having the necessary books or copybooks with them, it appeared that they did not think that any sanctions would be applied. A firm whole-school policy should be adopted to deal with this issue where it arises.

Good practice was observed where students' folders, copybooks and notes provided clear evidence of their progress. This also suggested a sense of shared responsibility for their own learning, which is a very desirable attitude to inculcate in students. Reviewing written work to eliminate errors in punctuation and spelling is a skill that must be explained and modelled by the teacher, but the aim of this process is to enable students to be their own proof-readers. Poor attitudes to written work and the maintenance of copybooks and folders were observed in a few instances, and these should not go unchecked. Specifically, students must know that certain minimal standards of presentation are required.

Students were generally learning at an appropriate pace and level. Where this was not the case they were being insufficiently challenged, and it should be pointed out that this was more likely to occur in classes perceived to be of lower ability. The level of students' work and engagement was higher where expectations of them were also appropriately high.

4.6 Classroom management and atmosphere

The physical space was generally well managed so as to promote learning in an orderly and stimulating environment, and some very good examples of this were seen. Exceptions to this were seen where desks and chairs were either completely immovable or else appeared to be placed at random and where little effort had been made to make the room itself print-rich or visually interesting. Seating arrangements and classroom displays should maximise the potential for students' learning. The displaying of work should be done as a matter of course to celebrate and reward students' efforts.

The management of students was generally good, with many instances of a friendly yet respectful rapport between students and teachers. Seating plans and the movement of the teacher around the classroom were noted as practices contributing to good control and interaction. The movement of the teacher around the room was seen to be particularly effective in promoting students' engagement and alertness, and in facilitating differentiated learning. It is therefore recommended. In almost all instances,

interventions by the teacher both to deal with issues of behaviour and to assist specific students in difficulty were handled with commendable sensitivity and assurance.

The role of appropriate lesson content and pacing in maintaining students' involvement and co-operation was clearly observed, and there was particularly strong evidence of this in schools where a positive and active whole-school approach had been taken to deal with challenging behaviour. This approach was praised in a number of English inspection reports, and its more widespread adoption is recommended. There were strongly positive findings on the level of encouragement given to students, and teachers are to be commended on the very high level of care and interest generally shown in their interaction with the students.

Enthusiasm among teachers of English for their subject and their work was encountered often, though not universally, and was communicated strongly to students in a variety of ways that reflected teachers' individual personalities. An obvious connection could be seen between the teacher's level of enthusiasm and the students' enjoyment of the subject. It is clearly good practice, therefore, for teachers of English to provide assistance and affirmation to each other, and for school managements to support them so that their enthusiasm is fostered and maintained.

Exemplars of good practice in teaching and learning

The following descriptions of good practice are selected from the seventy-five individual reports on which this composite report is based.

There was an exemplary level of student participation in the lessons. This was facilitated by skilful questioning techniques which not only succeeded in involving all the students in the class, but also generated interesting discussions. Such participation and discussion suggested high levels of student attention, engagement and confidence in expressing their opinions.

In a school where many students had serious literacy problems, a very good single poetry lesson with a fifth-year group was observed. The teacher introduced and read the poem, then the class read it silently. Student A and Student B then read the poem and the teacher affirmed their different interpretations. Student C was nominated to say what the poem was about, and then a class discussion followed, with the board used to organise in spidergram form the points made in five key areas which the students were familiar with from earlier experience of this method. This structured approach enabled the students to respond to the teacher's final questions on the theme of the poem, bringing the whole exercise to a well-rounded conclusion.

In a junior cycle class the playing of an audio recording of a Séamus Heaney poetry reading captured students' attention, while simultaneously achieving the aim of highlighting the sounds in the poem. In the same class photographs were used to link the poem to students' own life experiences.

To introduce the students to Robert Frost's life and work, the teacher downloaded high quality images from the internet and used these to generate interest. The students were clearly impressed at photographs of Frost at John F. Kennedy's inauguration, and with shots of the New England landscape which provided the setting for many of his poems. These were projected via data projector onto a large screen.

Effective use of pair work was seen when a class group was divided into two halves. Each half had to search in pairs for various examples of cultural context in two different comparative texts. The pairs then had to feed back their information to the whole class so that comparisons between texts could be made and good discussion was generated. The students were then given a further specific task based on the two texts to consolidate learning. In this way students were learning independently and there was whole-class involvement.

Questioning was exemplary in its content and style. For example, a mixture of global and individual questions was asked to ensure that all students were on track and teachers pushed all students to develop their answers and to give an evidence base for what they were saying. In addition, skilful questioning drew students out and encouraged them to think more clearly about their texts. All students were included in questioning, and it is commendable that the most challenging students were asked questions specifically to keep them on track.

Teachers were particularly skilful in encouraging students to move beyond simple recall to develop their answers and to “think in paragraphs.” This oral work in class is a very good foundation for students’ writing. In one lesson, the teacher made many useful references to students’ own written work, both to illustrate the point being discussed and to demonstrate how students could develop and improve their writing.

Differentiation in the area of questioning was evident in that all students were included and targeted, but the questions were graded to suit the ability level of students. Attention was also discreetly paid to the less able students during pair and group work.

Good integration of language and literature was observed. Students were invited to write a letter from the point of view of a character in a play and to write a newspaper article based on events in a play. This very good practice provides for teaching a number of aspects of the course simultaneously and allows students to write from a certain point of view and try to capture the emotions of characters studied. In addition, these teachers created links between the texts being studied and the present day in order for students to be more aware of the setting and context of texts and to be able to empathise more clearly with characters.

In one school participating in the JCSP demonstration library project, JCSP students were writing book reviews. The student who wrote the best review was allowed to type it during their designated library period (where he or she received some guidance) and the review was then prominently displayed on a special notice board.

Students were given highlighter pens to colour-code the text they were reading under various headings. This was an excellent way of giving concrete expression to the process of analysis.

Each student kept a folder of written work. The emphasis was on craft and process. Students kept copies of the various drafts of their writing task, for example a poem, and kept the drafts on file so that they could then observe the differences between the first and final version. The work was done on computers and the hard copies kept in the folder.

5 Assessment and achievement

5.1 Assessment in the classroom

While popular attention is overwhelmingly focused on terminal summative assessment, and in particular on the state examinations, assessment is of course a continuous activity and an integral part of students' learning. The most frequently used methods of assessment in the classroom were

- questioning of named students to test understanding and recall,
- monitoring the progress of students doing writing or group assignments in class
- oral and visual checking of homework
- observation of students' level of engagement with class work.

The need for a greater use of more challenging questions has already been stated. While oral checking of homework is adequate and helpful for very short or factual tasks, it is recommended that thorough checking of substantial assignments be done outside the classroom. (See section 5.2 below.) It is important that the setting and testing of spellings be done in a systematic way which will assist poor spellers to see helpful patterns. That being said, the emphasis on accurate spelling is to be encouraged.

Assessment for learning is the process of using assessment not to test what students have learned but to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there. A positive observation in inspections of English was that assessment for learning is becoming more widespread and better understood. It is recommended that schools consult the relevant material published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and available on their web site.

5.2 Homework

Considerable variations in practice regarding homework were observed. These variations related to the frequency with which work was set and marked, the thoroughness of marking, the adequacy and promptness of feedback to students, and the care with which homework was done and kept. Homework was set regularly in the majority of instances. The marking of homework ranged from a bare tick on the page to specific and detailed comment and correction. Clearly the latter approach has the combined virtues of assisting students' progress and validating the efforts they are making. Substantial homework should therefore be marked with helpful and appropriately critical comment. The revision skills referred to in section 4.5 come into play here also. Once students have been taught the basic rules of punctuation and the correction of common errors they should be required to revise and correct their work carefully before submitting it, a practice that is best begun in first year. Students in third year and in the senior cycle should be expected to read over their work with particular care in order to eliminate any errors they commonly make.

Homework will be of a higher quality if it follows through from class work, and care should be taken to set homework that reflects class activity and discussion and consolidates learning. Of particular concern is the fact that the extended composition is not featuring as it should in homework. Such creative work is the desired outcome of the approach to writing advocated in section 4.4, and students should be given regular opportunities to practise these skills. Some very good practice was observed where students carefully maintained folders containing their work, enabling them to develop a sense of their progress and assisting them with revision.

5.3 Assessment of incoming students

Both standardised diagnostic tests and entrance tests devised by the school were used frequently to assess incoming students. In relation to the former, most tests used in schools are not norm-referenced to the Irish school population. Therefore, it is recommended that caution be exercised when using data constructed from them on reading ages and general ability levels, especially for the purpose of placing students or withdrawing them from mainstream classes. Students identified by these as requiring remediation should be monitored and re-tested regularly by the learning-support teacher. In addition, diagnostic tests should be administered appropriately by trained personnel for the purpose of assisting students' progress. School managements and guidance counsellors will find a list of commonly used tests and guidelines on their use in circular M32/06, *Grants towards the cost of test materials for learning support and guidance*.

Where schools devised their own entrance tests, usually in English, Irish, and mathematics, those responsible for the English test are advised to familiarise themselves with the primary curriculum for English to assist them in designing appropriate assessments.

5.4 Summative assessment and school examinations

Almost all schools hold school examinations at Christmas and at the end of the academic year, the latter being generally more formal. A significant finding was that common assessment at the end of first and second year occurred in fewer than half the schools included in this report. This is understandable where schools operate a banding system, as described and approved in section 2.3. However, it is unsatisfactory where classes are of mixed ability and suggests a poor level of co-operation and planning. The absence of common assessment is particularly unacceptable where decisions on students' placement in second or third year are made on the basis of examination performance at the end of first or second year. Where this practice obtained, English inspection reports strongly recommended that it be replaced with

common assessment. Where students are set in fifth year it is recommended that their placement be confirmed by a common assessment early in the year. This has the added bonus of assisting students who have an unrealistic sense of the level of work required for higher-level English to make an informed and timely decision about the level best suited to them. The appropriate preparation of common papers, together with the necessary agreed marking schemes, should be included in subject planning. It should be noted that such a system permits flexibility in the choice of texts, because open or alternative questions can be set in these areas.

An important aspect of preparation for examinations, and indeed of assessment for learning, is the sharing of assessment criteria with students. Again this practice was found in a minority of schools. At the simplest level, first-year students should know in advance what marks will be awarded in different sections of the paper and what approaches to answering will be best rewarded, and this practice should be followed and developed in subsequent years. In the senior cycle, students should be conversant with the criteria of assessment used in the marking of Leaving Certificate English. Introducing these only at the stage of mock examinations militates against their usefulness to students. In this regard, teachers are reminded of the very useful document *Assessment Advice to Students*, issued by the Inspectorate at the time of the introduction of the present Leaving Certificate English syllabus and available on the web site of the Teaching English Support Service (TESS).

Where students were granted reasonable accommodations by the State Examinations Commission in the form of scribes or readers, schools sometimes provided similar arrangements for school and mock examinations. This is commendable practice and should be adopted as far as possible. In a number of schools where students were to take state examinations on tape or by voice-activated computer their examination preparation included practice with these media. This requires the co-operation of all subject teachers and provides a very good indication of whole-school support for students with special needs.

5.5 Monitoring students' achievement

While it is the responsibility of the school management to maintain records of school examination results, it was expected that teachers would keep their own records of students' achievement in homework and other assignments, as well as school examinations. This was not always found to be the case. It is recommended that teachers of English maintain their own records in order to monitor students' progress and achievement effectively and thus be able to take remedial action where necessary. These records can be used to inform decisions on students' placement or on referral for learning support. Where good systems of tracking students' achievement existed they were also used appropriately to identify under-performance by able students and provided good evidence in discussions with the students themselves and with their parents.

Most schools carry out some analysis of students' performance in the state examinations in order to compare the results achieved with those expected, and to measure the students' achievements against national figures while taking account of school context factors. It was most commendable that a number of schools with a high intake of students with literacy difficulties were developing policies to encourage the raising of students' expectations and a consequent improvement in their attainment. The important role played by raising students' expectations was clear in these cases, but preceding this was a belief by the management and staff that students could indeed achieve more. Where such a belief in students' potential did not exist, a depressive effect on students' expectations and consequently on their achievement was observed. It is recommended, therefore, that English departments take an active approach to underachievement, especially where this leads students to choose a lower level than their abilities warrant.

Exemplars of good practice in assessment and achievement

The following descriptions of good practice are selected from the seventy-five individual reports on which this composite report is based.

Junior cycle students had built up an impressive repertoire of poetry. From early in first year, students learned short lyric poems by heart and wrote them out in class. The students checked their own work to make sure it was word perfect and the teacher monitored this activity by circulating in class and by taking up poetry copies from time to time.

The school's homework policy is being implemented effectively in English. Students record homework in their journals, and each year is given a guideline as to how much time should be spent on homework. English homework is monitored regularly and teachers write developmental comments as well as grades, a helpful practice. In the lessons observed, time was given to explaining homework and to ensuring that students understood the work and its purpose.

The motivation of students is given a high priority and practical steps are taken to ensure that all students have a sense of making progress. As an instance of this, students are given assistance to develop an organised approach to their work through the use of folders and designated copies for different areas of the course. This is good practice, particularly where students might not have a sense of how to build up their own work into a resource for their own revision and exam preparation.

Students receiving literacy support are assessed regularly to ensure that the programme planned for them is meeting their needs. These students are encouraged and supported to achieve at the highest standard possible; for example, every effort is made to keep the numbers taking the Foundation Level paper to a minimum. This is commendable.

An excellent once-a-term newsletter gives relevant information and advice to parents about subjects, options, levels and so on. The first newsletter for the current academic year encouraged parents to ensure that their child was taking Junior Certificate subjects at the highest level possible rather than choosing an easy option. This clear communication of the school's policy to promote the highest possible achievement is commendable.

A Leaving Certificate class was engaged in a useful exercise of self-review in which they read their "mock" scripts while referring to the document *Assessment Advice for Students*.

6 Summary of best practice and areas for development

The main findings and recommendations of this composite report are presented here as statements of best practice and of areas for development.

This report concludes that best practice in the teaching and learning of English occurs where

- ⌘ students have an English lesson every day
- ⌘ teachers teach classes across a range of years, levels, and programmes
- ⌘ class formation and students' placement promote the progress of all students
- ⌘ English is taught in well-equipped rooms
- ⌘ the school library is well maintained and its use is promoted
- ⌘ there is an English department with a strong and supportive structure
- ⌘ subject planning for English is organised, continuous, and concentrated on learning outcomes
- ⌘ individual planning complements collaborative planning
- ⌘ lessons are well structured and purposeful
- ⌘ classroom equipment and resources are used effectively
- ⌘ a wide range of methods is used to engage and challenge students
- ⌘ the development of the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing is at the heart of teaching and learning
- ⌘ students are engaged in and have a sense of responsibility for their own learning
- ⌘ the classroom is a place where productive work is done in an atmosphere of co-operation and respect

- ⌘ assessment practices that assist students' progress are used
- ⌘ common assessments with agreed marking schemes are used wherever practicable
- ⌘ students are encouraged and expected to achieve at the highest level of which they are capable.

This report finds scope for development in the teaching and learning of English where

- ⌘ timetabling for English is inadequate in the number or distribution of lessons
- ⌘ teachers teach a limited range of years, levels, or programmes
- ⌘ students are rigidly streamed or divided too early into ability groups
- ⌘ classroom resources for English are inadequate or poorly used
- ⌘ the school has no library, or the library is poorly maintained and underused
- ⌘ there is no structured English department
- ⌘ collaborative and continuous subject planning is not yet happening
- ⌘ the purpose and structure of individual lessons have not been adequately planned
- ⌘ the equipment and resources available are underused or poorly used
- ⌘ the teaching methods employed are unvaried and this leads to passivity on the part of students
- ⌘ inadequate attention is paid in planning and teaching to the development of all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing
- ⌘ students are not sufficiently challenged in their learning
- ⌘ the classroom atmosphere is not conducive to productive work
- ⌘ assessment practices do not help students to become better learners
- ⌘ common assessment practices have not yet been developed
- ⌘ expectations of students are low, and achievement is below their ability.

Useful web sites

www.education.ie

The web site of the Department of Education and Science contains information on syllabuses and programmes, as well as circulars giving details of prescribed texts and other relevant circulars, including CL M16/99, "Guidelines for Reading in Second-Level Schools."

www.examinations.ie

The web site of the State Examinations Commission contains the chief examiners' reports for the Junior Certificate examination, 2003, and the Leaving Certificate examination, 2005, as well as much other useful information.

www.ncca.ie

The web site of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment contains a wide range of publications and has a specific area on assessment for learning. Among the publications, the *Draft Guidelines on Language, Literature and Communication* for teachers of students with mild general learning disabilities contain practical suggestions to facilitate differentiated learning.

www.slss.ie

The web site of the Second-Level Support Service contains information on support and in-service development for teachers and schools. It also contains links to sites for various programmes, including JCSP, transition year, and LCA. (See also www.jcsp.ie and www.lca.ie.) The JCSP site is particularly useful for schools developing libraries (see *Room for Reading*, the report on the Demonstration Library Project) and for schools working on whole-school approaches to literacy development (see *Between the Lines*)

www.tess.ie

The web site of the Teaching English Support Service is now managed by the Second-Level Support Service. It gives access to a range of very useful materials, including all the official documents and support materials relating to the Leaving Certificate English syllabus. The magazine *Teaching English*, which is sent to all schools, is available on line also.

www.sdpi.ie

The web site of the School Development Planning Initiative contains helpful support for subject departments and subject planning.

www.sess.ie

The web site of the Special Education Support Service contains information on courses relating to such areas as students' behaviour and inclusion, some given in association with Profexcel. The SESS also offers support in the area of differentiated learning.

www.iilt.ie

The web site of Integrate Ireland Language and Training gives details of its support services for learners and teachers of English for speakers of other languages.

www.cdvec.ie

The web site of the City of Dublin VEC contains a link to their Curriculum Development Unit.

www.ncte.ie

The web site of the National Centre for Technology in Education contains information on in-service courses for developing the uses of information and communications technology in teaching and learning, with links through www.scoilnet.ie—the NCTE's site designed for ease of use by students—to a huge range of internet resources for English.

www.irishfilm.ie

The web site of the Irish Film Institute contains a link to its educational programme, with details of screenings and study guides available for Junior Certificate, transition year and Leaving Certificate film studies.

www.poetryireland.ie

The web site of Poetry Ireland contains details of the Writers in Schools scheme, Writers in Schools residence schemes, competitions for students, and in-service courses.

www.childrensbooksireland.com

The web site of Children's Books Ireland contains information on publications and events, and good links to other relevant sites.

www.vtc.ngfl.gov.uk

The web site of the Virtual Teachers' Centre contains a huge number of resources.

www.literacytrust.org.uk

The web site of the British national reading campaign contains many resources and links.