An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Coláiste Iósaef
Kilmallock, County Limerick
Roll number: 76070A

Date of inspection: 19 November 2010

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Coláiste Iósaef, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspector interacted with students and teachers, examined students' work, and had discussions with the teachers. The inspector reviewed school planning documentation and teachers' written preparation. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal and subject teachers. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the report, and the response of the board will be found in the appendix of this report.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Coláiste Iósaef participates in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), the Department's action plan for educational inclusion, and in the School Completion Programme (SCP). It introduced the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) in 2008 and Transition Year (TY) in 2009. School management is commended for keeping the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme running, despite modest uptake this year.

The timetabling of English is very good in all years and programmes. The fact that this provision has been maintained in a year when extra class groups have had to be added in first, second, Transition, and fifth year, due to the announced closure of a neighbouring second-level school, is a significant achievement by senior management.

Students are placed in mixed-ability classes in first and second year, thus encouraging high expectations. A fifth-year mixed-level class was also provided in 2010/11, to accommodate an overflow of candidates wishing to do higher-level English and this student-centred arrangement is commended. Concurrent timetabling arrangements for English appropriately enable students to move between classes as necessary. Senior management and the teachers of English have discussed the possibility of engaging in modular delivery of particular aspects of the English course with some year groups. The trialling of such arrangements is encouraged. Self-evaluation data on student and teacher reactions to, and learning from, such experiments should then be used to further develop the delivery of the subject.

At the time of the evaluation, there were five teachers of English with varying amounts of class contact with the subject. Senior management's stated commitment to creating a core team of teachers of English, with significant class contact with the subject, is commended.

There is a good range of audio-visual (AV) and information and communication technology (ICT) resources available to support the teaching and learning of English. School management pays subscriptions to specific websites to support the teaching and learning of the subject and makes funds for the purchase of resources available on request. A book rental scheme, covering most of the textbook needs of year groups, is operated by the parents' association. It is very good practice that a shared-folder of teacher resources has been established on the school's ICT network. Finally, a number of teachers benefit from the school's policy of teacher-based classrooms. It is recommended that the department discuss possible room-sharing arrangements with newer teachers of English, to promote efficient sharing of teaching resources and of the stock of personal reading texts that are currently located in those classrooms.

A considerable amount of time and effort is invested in deepening school understanding of the prior learning and skills of incoming students. The home-school-community liaison co-ordinator and a resource teacher visit all primary schools to gather background information on the incoming first years. The school principal's individual interviews of all incoming students and the administration and analysis of cognitive aptitude assessments both support the process of planning for students' needs. School management is highly commended for facilitating flexible customised support of particular students through team-teaching arrangements and through the creation of smaller support classes. There is good liaison between mainstream and support teachers, aided by the fact that one of the mainstream English teachers also has a qualification in special educational needs support.

Personal reading is promoted by the school in a number of ways. Students are sometimes taken to the local public library by individual teachers of English. High-interest, low-reading age readers and some audio Readalong packs have been purchased for struggling and reluctant readers. All students are required to purchase their own dictionary. Some reading stock is located in class libraries and some Reading Challenges have been engaged in with particular class groups. It is recommended that a meeting of all teachers involved in reading-promotion initiatives be organised; gathering together teachers of English and others involved in this work through JCSP, SCP, DEIS, and home-school-community liaison; where information and insights can be shared and greater co-ordination achieved. Uploading documents describing these reading-promotion activities on the school's intranet would support long-term internal communication on this issue.

The English department should also agree how it will further motivate students' personal reading in a collective manner. Starting points might include dedicating one lesson of first-year English per fortnight to personal reading and the use of a response journal; organising school library stock into book-boxes catering for ranges of interest and ability for in-class usage with different year groups; including the explicit teaching of dictionary skills and skimming and scanning techniques in its first-year programme for English; and mainstreaming successful initiatives currently being used with particular students to ensure that all students can benefit from them. Additional strategies can be accessed through the School Library Association of Ireland, the UK School Library Association, and The JCSP Demonstration Library Project, http://www.jcspliteracy.ie/about_project.php.

Senior management leads continuing professional development (CPD) relevant to the subject through a Learning School project focused on helping students improve their learning-to-learn skills. Teachers are actively encouraged to attend CPD activities by senior management, and are financially supported where possible. There is a wealth of individual expertise among the five teachers of English, including experience in correcting scripts for the State Examinations Commission, involvement with regional groups of teachers of English, service in other schools or in other jurisdictions, and specialist training in the support of students with additional educational

needs. Over the coming years, subject department planning meetings and informal sharing should help translate the strong capacity in the English department into further improvements in the delivery of the subject.

Subject-specific teacher induction in English is supported by a staff handbook, the subject department plan, and the appointment of a staff mentor. The new principal has also introduced a programme whereby student teachers are formally mentored by an established staff member who sits in and feeds back to the student teacher on two or three lessons, using provided templates. It was reported that this assessment for learning approach is aimed at supporting the student teacher while also affording the established staff member an opportunity to see different teaching methodologies. Again, this initiative is highly commended for the benefits it should bring to the school's culture of learning over the coming years.

Co-curricular and extracurricular activities, such as trips to theatrical productions, public speaking and debating, drama workshops, a TY e-magazine, working with visiting poets and writers, and the staging of a school musical support the teaching and learning of the subject. The commitment and enthusiasm of teachers of English, evident in these activities, is highly commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

While progress has been made in subject department planning for English in the school, this is an area where there is still scope for development. It is appropriate that the role of subject department co-ordinator is rotated. To date, teachers of English have met formally bi-annually and informally from time to time. However, given the rapid increase in the number of teachers in the department, more frequent subject department meetings will be essential, to ensure the delivery of an incrementally-planned and consistently-delivered experience of English for students.

At the beginning of each subject department meeting, time should be specifically allocated for a "show and tell" input, where individuals would be asked to present an effective resource or strategy they use in their practice or to share insights they have gained from a professional development course or from further study. Some members of the department were not in a position to avail of the Teaching English Support Service (TESS) in-service provided with the introduction of the new Leaving Certificate English syllabus a few years ago. It is suggested that in-house discussions on the main methodological and assessment innovations contained in that syllabus be organised by the department, as part of its subject department meetings.

Strengths of the subject department plan include carefully-chosen departmental objectives for the subject and evidence of varied text choices for senior cycle study. In particular, the student-centred statement of priorities for first year English in the plan is commended. The teachers of English should now turn that statement into a learning-outcomes focused termly programme of work for first-year English, fleshing out its stated objectives of thematic unit planning to address the four language skills. It is suggested that the department deepen its understanding of the knowledge and skills being taught to students in primary school senior English lessons in order to enhance its provision for bridging students' learning on the transfer to post-primary English syllabi. In developing programmes of work, teachers should refer to the draft rebalanced Junior Certificate English syllabus, available at http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Post-Primary_Education/Junior_Cycle/Syllabus_change/English/English.html.

Over the coming years, learning-outcomes focused termly programmes of work should be developed for all year groups. Such yearly programmes of work should also reference DEIS baseline data, targets and strategies, including JCSP initiatives. It was reported that students are given a condensed version of the TY programme of work at the start of the year including details of all key assignments. This practice is commended for encouraging students to take more responsibility for their learning.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning outcomes were communicated to students at the outset of all lessons. Good practice was evident where teachers wrote these outcomes on the whiteboard or projected them using ICT, discussed them with students at the beginning of lessons, and returned to them at the end of lessons to check students' learning and to identify areas for consolidation. Where teachers had differentiated learning outcomes for students with additional educational needs and for students preparing for different examination levels, this was commendable. JCSP targets offer one model of how learning outcomes can be articulated.

Props, newspapers, whiteboards, writing frames, PowerPoint presentations, a screened documentary, teaching charts, student work on walls, and exemplar answers were used to enhance learning in classes visited. Building on this foundation, and given the variety of learning styles and of student ability in the school, it is recommended that more audio recordings for teaching drama, poetry, and speeches; more graphic organisers and writing frames; and greater in-class use of websites and internet clips be incorporated into the teaching of English. The compilation of booklets to support students' study of lengthy texts is also encouraged, to provide unitary revision aids and to help students who have been absent catch up with work missed. Sourcing Readalong CDs or graphic novels to complement these study booklets would also support students needing multi-sensory approaches to learning.

Generally, the quality of teaching and learning observed ranged from good to very good. Among the teaching strategies observed were question and answer, team teaching, the activation of students' relevant prior knowledge and experience before teaching new material, pair and group work, free writing, role play, and the use of ICT to provide relevant cultural context and to teach factual information. Evidence was also gathered that some teachers engage in modelling to help students improve their comprehension strategies, teach strategies to help students organise their ideas, and use creative interventions by asking students to compose a diary entry, letter, or dialogue about featured characters in studied texts. The teachers of English should now formally share these methodologies to ensure that all students benefit from them.

One recommendation for pedagogical development is offered: focus on incrementally developing students' writing skills from first to sixth year. Creative interventions should be more consistently set as writing assignments to reinforce the teaching of texts. A consistent departmental approach should be taken to equipping students with banks of keywords to draw on for specific writing purposes, to the recording of keywords in specific notebooks, and to the use of spelling challenges based on those keywords. The department should agree a minimum number of substantial writing tasks to be set for each year group. Finally, there should be greater use of ICT to support the process approach to writing. See resources such as http://www.jcspliteracy.ie/ and http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/.

Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all lessons. Most students were engaged in their learning in the lessons observed. In one lesson, confusion caused by the planning of too many activities for the allocated time, impeded student engagement. Students were familiar with key concepts in media studies and with plot details, characters and relationships in studied texts. Some good quality responses from students indicated that higher-order thinking was being fostered in a number of classes. However, with regard to the teaching of poetry, students in a number of junior classes would have benefitted from teachers introducing poetic techniques to them in a staged manner over the three-year cycle. Those students also needed to be directed to move beyond identification of techniques to debating their purpose and effect and to incorporating them into their writing.

ASSESSMENT

Good practice was evident where specific formative feedback had been provided on written assignments, where exemplars of student work were shared and discussed with classes, where criteria for assessment had been shared with students, and where those criteria were being used to mark substantial pieces of writing. Where weaknesses were occasionally observed, considerable variation was noted in the type and depth of monitoring, and in the feedback being given on students' homework.

Three aspects of assessment need to be developed by the department. First, it is suggested that the department agree a common position on awarding some marks towards end-of-term results for tasks linked to the agreed learning outcomes for different year groups. Tasks could include a cumulative average for composition work, folder-maintenance, quotation tests, oral presentations, and project-work. Second, it is recommended that a preferred style of written formative feedback on student work be discussed. Third, it is recommended that teachers further develop their diagnostic use of assessments. For instance, teachers are advised to assign class time early in the first term of every year for students to produce a substantial personal writing sample. Analysing and recording the recurring errors in each student's work would give teachers a good benchmark for planning for the development of the various skills.

Achievement in certificate examinations across all subjects is analysed by the principal. It was reported that those results are used as a means of identifying needs for teacher professional development and to inform DEIS and JCSP planning.

Students in first, second, and fifth year sit house examinations at Christmas and summer. Their results are then communicated to parents through written reports. Students in third and sixth year sit house examinations in November and mock examinations in the early spring. JCSP postcards are also occasionally used to report students' progress to parents.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- School management is commended for its timetable provision for the subject, for its commitment to keeping the LCA programme running, and for facilitating flexible customised support of particular students.

- High aspirations are promoted by placing first and second-year students in mixed-ability classes and by encouraging senior-cycle students to study English at the highest level.
- There is good liaison between the subject department and teachers supporting students with additional educational needs.
- Senior management's leadership of learning, combined with the wealth of individual expertise among the teachers of English, constitute strong supports to subject delivery.
- English-related co-curricular and extracurricular activities are commendably organised for students in support of their learning.
- A subject department co-ordinator is in place and a subject department plan, including programmes of work for all year groups, has been produced.
- A wide range of resources was used by teachers in the lessons observed.
- Evidence of the use of a number of varied teaching strategies was gathered during the evaluation.
- The quality of teaching and learning observed generally ranged from good to very good.
- Good interpersonal relations between teachers and students were evident in all classrooms visited and discipline was maintained in all lessons.
- Most students were engaged in their learning in the lessons observed.
- Evidence of good assessment practices being used by individual teachers was gathered during the evaluation.

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

- Termly programmes of work that focus on learning outcomes and that reference DEIS targets and strategies should be developed for all year groups.
- Over the coming years, the English department should formally pool its teaching strategies and resources, with the incremental development of students' writing skills as a specific focus.
- The English department should develop a common approach to assessment, as advised in this report.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the teachers of English and with the principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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Appendix

SCHOOL RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

Submitted by the Board of Management

Area 1 Observations on the content of the inspection report

The Board of Management of Colaiste Iósaef wishes to thank the inspectorate for the courteous and professional manner in which the inspection was conducted and the manner feedback was afforded on areas of learning for the English Department.

The Board welcomes the very positive findings in the report and is particularly pleased that the high quality of teaching, learning and curriculum development in the English department has been recognised.

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

Since the inspection the First Year English programme has been reviewed and one class per week is dedicated to literacy and arranged on a streamed ability level to encourage appropriate levels of student improvement.

In addition, changes have been made to the Internet Access settings which allow the teaching staff to access educational content on You Tube, BBC Skillswise and other similar sites.

A review has also been done of term targets by the English Departments, which also incorporates the use of term exams and a writing journal as percentages of the overall end of year English subject grade.