An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna

Department of Education and Skills

Subject Inspection of English
REPORT

Scoil Mhuire
Carrick-on Suir
County Tipperary
Roll number: 65280A

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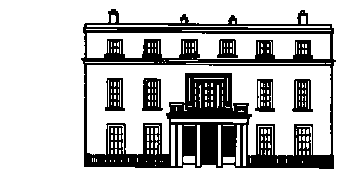

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Scoil Mhuire, Carrick-on-Suir, conducted as part of a whole-school evaluation. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning in English and makes recommendations for the further development of the teaching of this subject in the school. The evaluation was conducted over 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, deputy principal and subject teachers.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

The 2009/10 school timetable makes excellent provision for English in each year of the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes. English is timetabled every day in these programmes, and sixth-year Leaving Certificate classes have a double lesson each Wednesday. The provision of four lessons in the Transition Year (TY) programme is generous, but these are timetabled over three consecutive days, and a better distribution is recommended. English is timetabled concurrently in all years except first year, principally as a means of allowing student transfer between higher and ordinary level class groups. Concurrent timetabling is not easy to achieve and its provision is commended. However, it is presently being underused. All the possibilities it offers for collaboration among the English teaching team in subject planning and delivery should be explored fully and put into practice where deemed beneficial. The creation and delivery of modular courses, for example within TY, was one possibility discussed.

Eight teachers are involved in the delivery of English in the school. Of these, three teach English to one class group only, and just one teaches English to more than three class groups. While all teachers visited showed a high level of commitment to the subject, it is nevertheless suggested that senior management aim towards a more consolidated delivery of English with a somewhat smaller team. This pattern of deployment would better support a view of the subject as a continuum of knowledge and skills development from first year to sixth and it would also make greater collaboration more practicable. It is commendable that the teachers taking more than one class group teach English in both the junior and senior cycle, and that they teach both higher and ordinary level groups. These patterns of deployment should be maintained, along with the greatest possible continuity of teaching throughout each cycle.

First-year students are placed on entry into class groups formed so as to create a good social and educational mix. The English teaching team was unaware of the basis of class formation, and the fact that it is carefully planned rather than random should be communicated clearly to the whole staff. Students are then set for English into higher and ordinary level class groups at the beginning of second year, based on the first-year summer tests. The likelihood that this practice may create an examination focus in both teachers and students at too early a stage in the junior cycle was

discussed with the teaching team during the evaluation, as was the fact that students should be given sufficient time to show their potential at what is a significant developmental stage. It is strongly recommended that the teaching team, along with senior management, reconsider the present practice. Their receptiveness to the idea of deferring the formation of higher and ordinary level classes until the beginning of third year is commended. However, the implications for teaching and learning practices should be thoroughly discussed in advance of any change to the present system. The formation of mixed-ability classes in TY and of higher and ordinary level groups in fifth and sixth year is consistent with good practice in these programmes. The school at present offers the LCA programme every second year, and the LCA students taking English and Communication spoke very positively about their experience of the course.

Most teachers of English are based in their own classrooms, and these have been generally very well developed as stimulating learning environments. Current students' work, visual texts including theatre and film posters and stills, key-word and grammar charts and a range of illustrative material were displayed and were used effectively in teaching and learning. Audiovisual equipment and information and communication technology (ICT) are available to teachers of English, either in classrooms or through a booking system. Books, DVDs and other resources are stored in accessible locations and are inventoried. It is suggested that the stock of audio recordings, particularly recent dramatised recordings of Shakespeare, be increased. The school library is open each day and initiatives including a book club encourage students to read privately for pleasure.

The teaching team and senior management are aware of the value of continuing professional development (CPD). Teachers have attended in-service courses in Waterford Education Centre and other venues, organised by the support services and by the subject association, now the Irish National Organisation for Teachers of English (INOTE). Continuing involvement with CPD, for example in the area of differentiation in the English classroom, is encouraged.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

There is no tradition of having a subject co-ordinator or convenor of English, although there was evidence of a collegial approach and a willingness to share resources and discuss teaching and learning practices. The English planning folder made available contained an outline plan based on the relevant syllabuses, along with the syllabuses themselves, Department circulars, and inventories of resources. It also held some records of meetings over the last three years, mostly dealing with choices of texts, assessments, and student placement. Notwithstanding the good relations and shared interest in the subject and its delivery evident within the English teaching team, subject planning should now be regarded as a priority area for development. The planning approach advocated here is one that informs and reflects on teaching and learning practices and strengthens collaboration. While it should result in a more comprehensive written plan for the subject, this should not be seen as its objective. The process of planning rather than the production of a plan should be the focus. Agreeing a rota of co-ordinators with perhaps a two-year term and a job description that emphasises subject development would be a good initial step.

The subject plan seen during the evaluation lacked detail and had not been updated recently. However, it was clear that teachers had mapped out individual programmes of work for their class groups. Teachers reported that some decisions on texts involve consultation and agreement, but that they generally select texts independently. The Junior and Leaving Certificate English courses allow considerable choice, and teachers should continue to choose texts to suit the needs of specific class groups. However, decisions with regard to course content should be made following

discussion and agreement in relation to the skills and knowledge that students should acquire in the English classroom. This approach to planning places a focus on the development of skills, and requires teachers to consider the most effective teaching and learning methods to achieve these learning outcomes, along with appropriate forms of assessment. It is recommended therefore that the English team engage in a greater level of collaborative planning with a primary emphasis on skills rather than on course content.

Although there was no comprehensive subject plan for junior cycle English, there was evidence that many class groups were following a substantial programme including a wide range of poetry; drama including Shakespearean drama, film and media studies, and a range of fiction including challenging novels and short stories. A themed approach to texts in different genres and the integration of language and literature were evident in the individual programmes planned. The possibility that the division into higher and ordinary level groups might be deferred until the end of second year has considerable implications for the second-year programme, and a review of the current course plans to identify what is working best, and should be retained, will be necessary. The programme planned for Leaving Certificate English is appropriate to the respective levels, but it would be beneficial to aim for a greater level of commonality to assist students changing levels.

The TY English plan identifies aims and objectives and indicates the content to be covered in a wide variety of genres and language areas. It is a substantial programme of work and includes a range of teaching and learning methods and different types of assessment. Some of the aims stated in the plan are very similar to those in the Leaving Certificate syllabus. While this is not inappropriate, the plan's reliance to some extent on Leaving Certificate material is questionable, for example in its reference to 'the study of three poets common to ordinary and higher level'. It is recommended that the TY English plan be reviewed with this observation in mind, and that material drawn from the vast range of texts not on the Leaving Certificate course be substituted. The plan for LCA English and Communication was not in the English folder at the time of the inspection, but there was evidence of appropriate planning for the programme. Since a number of students progress to LCA from the junior cycle and TY, the LCA programme should be discussed with the whole English teaching team in the interests of ensuring continuity in skills development between other programmes and LCA.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Ten lessons were observed during the evaluation, covering all years, levels and programmes with the exception of TY and involving all but one of the English teaching team. The teaching observed was of a good quality overall, and reflected thorough lesson preparation and knowledge of the subject. Highly effective practice was noted in a number of lessons, where the approaches used enabled students to respond to texts and engage with tasks productively and reflectively. However, students were often very silent or reluctant to participate in class discussion, although there was good evidence from their work in class and from their folders and copybooks of satisfactory progress in their learning and, in many cases, of enjoyment and interest. Therefore an overarching recommendation for the English teaching team is to investigate and implement methods that will encourage students to engage more actively in their own learning and to express personal responses more confidently.

The topics covered in the lessons observed included language skills, poetry, drama, film, the comparative study, and the reading and interpretation of visual texts. A range of resources, some standard and some less common, had been prepared and were used effectively to explore the

various topics. Worksheets were used flexibly, for example as a pre-reading exercise before watching a film sequence, and then to gather more detailed comments after the viewing. A junior cycle class studying O'Casey listened to a rare audio-recording and followed the text, thereby helping the students to think of the play on the stage as well as the page. Follow-on exercises that encourage students to visualise scenes in some detail would complement this approach. A senior cycle class listened to Luke Kelly's rendition of 'On Raglan Road', which led the students to ponder the poem's emotional colour. Excellent use was made of the data projector to show large, clear images. An LCA group looking at images of fashion and music icons engaged in a good discussion about confidence and self-expression as a lead-in to interview preparation. A picture by Whistler was analysed at a surface and then symbolic level in a very impressive exercise in 'reading' by a junior cycle class. This approach develops highly transferable skills of analysis and inference. More widespread use of the data projector to display both print and visual texts as a means of skills development is encouraged.

Lessons were generally well structured and, where necessary, links with prior learning were made at the outset. However, a clearer statement at the beginning of each lesson outlining the topic, the learning outcome and the planned activities would help to engage all students and prompt them to take a more active part in their own learning. An effective staged approach to learning was noted in a number of lessons. One simple and successful strategy involved pre-written points on the board that were covered and then revealed in sequence as the lesson progressed. Further value could be added to this strategy by revealing the heading only and asking students to guess the points, and this would work well both as an introductory and a revision exercise. A junior cycle revision lesson on poetry was well structured to enable students to link poems under thematic headings, moving from the obvious to the more subtle. Such approaches consolidated and affirmed learning. It would be helpful if all teachers adopted the good practice, noted in a number of lessons, of concluding the lesson with a brief recapping of the main points covered.

All teachers used questioning as the principal means of initiating and maintaining class discussion of a topic, and also as a means of checking on students' recall and understanding. A number of effective strategies were observed, including both prompting and follow-on questions that assisted students to make links with prior learning and to articulate their views more clearly. On occasion however, students were given insufficient time to respond to questions that required more thought and analysis, perhaps because their silence was seen as signalling a lack of understanding or engagement. It is recommended that students be made aware of the difference between quiz-type questions for rapid response and those where a more considered response is required. In the latter case, a hands-down policy should be adopted. In one lesson, students were asked to prepare questions themselves so they could 'interview' a character from a text. This imaginative approach also provides a good context for exploring the importance of follow-on questions in eliciting a full response. Assessment for learning practices, including questioning strategies, are described on the NCCA and SLSS web sites and may prove helpful.

Pair and group work took place in five of the lessons observed. Its further use and development is encouraged, since it was noted that many students were hesitant about participating in the whole-class discussion that teachers' questions sought to stimulate. The 'think, pair, share' approach, which moves from individual work to one-to-one discussion and then to whole-class activity, can be helpful in building students' confidence and willingness to enter discussion because they have had time to prepare a contribution. Good practice was noted where groups of no more than three were formed, and where very clear instructions and a time frame were given at the outset. In a few instances, groups were somewhat unclear as to the outcome required, and all aspects of the task should be thoroughly explained in advance. The teaching team is advised to investigate co-operative learning strategies, which support productive group work and discovery learning.

Students worked diligently in an atmosphere that was supportive and affirming. They were well organised for work, had all the necessary materials with them and were generally attentive and on task throughout lessons. Students' work in class and interaction with the inspector indicated a good level of learning. Where students engaged in discussion and responded to questions on likes and dislikes, they were able to support their views and demonstrate a good grasp of the material.

ASSESSMENT

Teachers monitored students' work and participation in class, positioning themselves where they could oversee work, note rates of response, and offer assistance to individual students or groups. Targeted questions were used to assess students' understanding, and teachers went back over material where questions suggested that students were still having difficulty. Feedback to the class following pair or group work allowed the teacher to gauge the level of understanding of the material, and also contributed to learning as students were asked to note down any new points arising from others' work. Where a range of interpretations was possible, these were affirmed, and teachers generally remained open to all possible responses. To encourage the development of students' own informed personal response, teachers should ensure that they accept all valid views and should signal clearly the difference between an unsound response and one they do not personally share.

A substantial number of folders, copybooks and assignments were inspected during the evaluation. These reflected regular setting, correcting and annotation of written work, including extended compositions and essays. This very good practice is warmly commended. The very structured approach taken encouraged students to organise their work carefully, so that work on various areas of the course was completed and stored in separate sections or copybooks, adding up in many instances to an impressive and accessible body of material. Since the inspection took place in May, it was possible to see that a substantial year's work was nearing completion, and that teachers had very good records of students' progress and attainment throughout the year.

It was reported that all first year students will take a common paper in the summer examinations. This change in practice is commended, whether or not it is used as a means of placing students in second year, as it supports an agreed, skills-based approach to the delivery of the subject.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school timetable makes excellent provision for English in each year of the Junior Certificate, Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes.
- A collegial approach and a willingness to share resources and to discuss teaching and learning practices were evident within the English teaching team.
- Highly effective practice was noted in a number of lessons, where the approaches used enabled students to respond to texts and engage with tasks productively and reflectively.
- Students' copybooks and folders reflected regular setting, correcting and annotation of written work, including extended compositions and essays.

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

- The teaching team and senior management should strongly consider deferring the division of students into higher and ordinary level groups until the end of second year.
- Subject planning should be regarded as a priority area for development, and the recommendations under planning and preparation should be addressed promptly.
- The English teaching team should investigate and implement methods that will encourage students to engage more actively in their own learning and to express personal responses more confidently.

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

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