

**An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta
Department of Education and Science**

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**FCJ Secondary School
Bunclody, County Wexford
Roll number: 63550Q**

Date of inspection: 24 October 2008

[Subject provision and whole school support](#)
[Planning and preparation](#)
[Teaching and learning](#)
[Assessment](#)
[Summary of main findings and recommendations](#)

Report on the Quality of Learning and Teaching in English

This Subject Inspection report

This report has been written following a subject inspection in FCJ Secondary School Bunclody, 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 and subject teachers.

Subject Provision and Whole School Support

Provision for English on the school timetable is good, both in the number and distribution of lessons. A lesson per day represents the optimal number and distribution for English, and this is the general pattern of provision in the school. Four English lessons only are provided in second year; in this situation it is advisable to ensure that English is timetabled on both Monday and Friday in order to minimise the gap between lessons. Three English lessons are provided on the

Transition Year (TY) timetable. In itself, this is not a generous allocation but the school is commended for providing a weekly double lesson for public speaking, and for running a film studies module for each TY class group. By these means, aspects of oracy and visual literacy are addressed within the TY programme as a whole. The inclusion of both thirty-five minute and forty-minute lessons on the timetable gives rise to some level of inequality of provision. Care should be taken to ensure that classes in second year and TY, where less time is allocated to English, have equal provision as far as possible.

It has long been the practice in the junior cycle that one class group in each year constitutes the top stream for all core subjects, and all other class groups are of mixed ability. The effectiveness of this practice and the implications for all class groups should be considered in a whole-school context and also at subject department level. This year, one class in third year has been divided into two groups for English, as it was felt that the diverse needs of these students could best be addressed in this way. The English teaching team put forward this proposal and expressed their appreciation that management had facilitated its implementation. In the context of a periodic review of systems of class formation, the possibility of concurrent timetabling of English in third year to accommodate the creation of an ordinary-level class group could be investigated.

In the senior cycle, TY English classes are of mixed ability, in keeping with the spirit of the programme. On entering fifth year, students are set in ability groups for English, largely on the basis of Junior Certificate results. Higher and ordinary-level groups are formed, and movement from one class group to another is facilitated through concurrent timetabling and collaborative planning of programmes of work.

Eight teachers form the school's English teaching team and almost all have the subject to degree level. Each member of the team takes at least two class groups for English, and most take four or more, usually in both junior and senior cycle, with a system of rotation ensuring a combination of higher, ordinary and mixed-level groups. This pattern of deployment ensures a concentrated delivery of the subject and means that teachers have an experience of the subject across a variety of programmes, years and levels. This is commendable practice as it reinforces the team's sense of the subject as a continuum of skills and knowledge development from first to sixth year. As far as possible, teachers retain the same class group and this is also good practice.

Rooms are assigned to class groups rather than to teachers. Many of the rooms visited contained some displays of student work and illustrative material including subject-specific posters. In general, however, rooms were less print-rich and visually stimulating than is desirable, and this is an area for development to be considered at both subject department and whole-school level. The teaching team reported a very good level of support for the acquisition of resources, and a good system for access to audio-visual equipment is in place. The staff workroom houses a common store for film, audio and books. A recommendation that an electronic folder for English be developed and used to create and store teaching resources such as writing frames and templates, assessments and other materials was received enthusiastically by the team and should be progressed swiftly. Further expansion of the department's

audio resources is also recommended, with a particular emphasis on good recent dramatised recordings of Shakespeare's plays.

A large room houses the school library and this has great potential which should be developed. The stock of books includes classic and contemporary fiction, biographies, non-fiction books on topics likely to appeal to students, and a limited selection of reference works. Class libraries and in-class book clubs have also been developed, and these are praiseworthy initiatives. It may be useful to consult the web site of the Schools Library Association (www.slari.ie) to source ideas on the development of a vibrant school library and on material likely to appeal to reluctant readers. The school maintains good contact with the local branch of the county library, and this is commended.

The school has a strong tradition of staging musical and drama productions, and of assisting students to attain high levels of competence in public speaking and debating. Theatre companies make regular visits to the school and trips to the theatre and cinema are organised as co-curricular activities.

Planning and Preparation

Co-ordination of English is the responsibility of a post holder, and senior management and the teaching team expressed their appreciation of the work done in this area. The role of the co-ordinator includes chairing and writing the minutes of subject department meetings, liaising with the senior management, ordering books and resources, and distributing relevant information to all teachers of English. It is suggested that these duties be listed in the subject plan and reviewed as part of the subject planning process. The role of the co-ordinator in facilitating the sharing of good practice should be discussed and included. The possibility of developing a rotating co-ordinator role was discussed during the evaluation. This would provide a means whereby all teachers could gain experience of co-ordination and have a formal opportunity to contribute their own skills and expertise to the role.

At least three subject department meetings are held each year, and there was evidence of a high level of informal contact and of good collaboration and support within the teaching team. The minutes briefly record items discussed and decisions taken, and these mostly concern text choices, assessment and student placement in class groups. There was some evidence of discussion of appropriate approaches for particular students or groups. The teaching team is encouraged to include some discussion of teaching and learning methods in each meeting, so that organisational matters do not entirely dominate proceedings, necessary though they are.

A subject plan was made available during the inspection. Commendably, each teacher of English has a copy, and the plan is reviewed and amended every year by the whole team. The aims and objectives contained in the plan are in line with the relevant syllabuses, and the curriculum content for each year is appropriate and indicates both agreed common programmes of work and areas where teachers can make individual choices. It is noteworthy and commendable that the plan includes a section on teaching and learning methods which is quite detailed and discursive, and also outlines the rationale underpinning homework and assessment practices. In further developing the subject plan and building on its current strengths, the teaching

team should discuss and agree specific learning outcomes appropriate to each year for inclusion in the plan. As a preliminary to this work, the teaching team should consult the draft of the rebalanced Junior Certificate syllabus on the NCCA web site. It sets out a series of learning outcomes to which specific details of texts and tasks can be added. These should be expressed in clear and concrete terms so that they can be shared with students and can be clearly linked to teaching and learning activities, thus assisting lesson planning and preparation.

An outline of each term's work for the TY programme in English is contained in the subject plan. A description of the English course is also contained in the TY plan and there are some discrepancies between the two, which should be reviewed and reconciled. It would also be helpful if the TY component of the English plan were amended to include more detailed references to the film studies module and the public speaking element of the TY programme. This would provide an opportunity to articulate the cross-curricular components of the programme as they relate to English and so optimise its potential to develop students' oracy and visual literacy. While references to the Leaving Certificate in the planned programme are appropriate, care should be taken to avoid material or resources that refer explicitly to the examination.

Individual planning and preparation was for the most part of a high standard. The issue of planning for thirty-five minute lessons was discussed during the inspection. Teachers pointed out that lessons began promptly with little time lost and this was generally observed to be the case. However, there was some evidence of over-ambitious planning for lessons with classes that did not have English every day. Care should be taken to ensure that the planned lesson is consistent with the time available.

Teaching and Learning

Ten lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation. They covered all years, levels and programmes and involved all of the English teaching team with the exception of one member who was on leave. The teaching and learning in the lessons observed was for the most part of good quality; indeed, instances of exemplary practice were noted in the case of both very able and less able class groups, and teachers are commended on the range of skills demonstrated during the evaluation. The English classroom was observed to be a warm, supportive and often stimulating learning environment, and classroom management was well maintained through firm yet friendly control. Students' efforts were consistently affirmed and their participation in class discussion and activity was sought and encouraged.

Some observations on time management within lessons have already been made. In most instances, however, lesson pacing was effective, the amount of material to be covered was substantial yet well judged, and a good forward momentum was maintained. The focus of the lesson was clearly established in most cases. Where teachers stated the learning intention at the outset, students were swiftly made aware of the purpose and direction of the lesson and were thus able to engage purposefully themselves. This practice is commended and should be

followed in all lessons. During roll call, which took place at the beginning of most of the lessons observed, students were often asked to check on spellings or to do some other short, defined task, and this is commended as a good focusing technique.

Resources used in the lessons observed included anthology textbooks, set texts and worksheets. Textbook material was well selected for the intended purpose. Worksheets and other supplementary materials were well designed to support specific activities, including information retrieval and character profiling. Film was used in a number of lessons, both as material for study in itself, and as complementary to the reading of a novel in one junior cycle lesson and to the study of narrative techniques with a senior cycle group. In a context other than film study, the purpose for which the film is being viewed must be clearly explained to students. Good practice was observed where students were encouraged to express their own visualisations of characters in a novel, and to refer to the text to support their views. Very good use of the board was observed in a number of lessons: to record points made in class discussion; to model accurate writing; to note assignments; and to provide visual reinforcement of new vocabulary. Given the availability of data projectors and broadband access in a number of classrooms, the teaching team could consider ways of exploiting this potentially very rich resource in relation to the reading of both visual texts and the printed word.

Many of the teaching methods observed were traditional and included teacher exposition, teacher-directed class discussion, reading aloud and the setting of individual reading and writing tasks. It should be emphasised that much of the expository teaching observed was assured and skilful. Teachers effectively communicated their enthusiasm, successfully engaged students as active listeners and elicited thoughtful responses in turn from them. In a number of instances, teachers affirmed and encouraged widely differing yet soundly-based responses from students, and this is warmly commended. In building on and extending current good practice, it is suggested that the English teaching team consider approaches such as co-operative learning, which would facilitate purposeful and productive group work, and more investigative learning strategies through which students could be further encouraged to think independently and arrive at reasoned conclusions for themselves.

In a number of the lessons observed in both junior and senior cycle, students were studying drama. The plays selected were appropriately challenging and students demonstrated a good grasp of the genre, such as an awareness of plot, characterisation and conflict. In a junior cycle lesson, students participated in performing a scene, and this was skilfully managed so that it clearly enhanced their understanding and enjoyment. In a senior cycle lesson, students were encouraged to relate the dramatic situation to real-life contexts within their own experience and this encouraged a range of valid responses. Care should be taken to place sufficient emphasis on drama as a performance art, and therefore as open to a very wide range of interpretation and treatment. In this regard, greater use of audiotapes of plays would assist students to focus on aspects of performance, and to discuss the movements and gestures they would consider appropriate to key moments of the play.

Good practice in relation to the development of students' writing skills was observed in both junior and senior cycle lessons. A junior cycle group working on a character study was assisted to plan and structure their writing through the use of "spidergrams" and writing frames. These approaches support both able and less able writers to produce well-organised and substantial pieces. The fruits of close attention to the development of individual style were observed in a senior cycle lesson where students shared short pieces in the diary genre and critiqued each other's work in a helpful and appreciative manner. This is exemplary practice.

Students were observed to work diligently, and expectations of positive and co-operative student behaviour were established in all instances.

Assessment

Teachers assiduously monitored students' work and levels of engagement in class through observation, questioning and circulation throughout the room to look at students' work and to give individual attention where required. A range of questioning styles assessed students' understanding, from the level of recall and basic comprehension to the application of higher-order skills including analysis and inference. Where questioning revealed gaps or errors in students' understanding, teachers revised topics. Occasional mistakes were used constructively to clarify a point, and students were encouraged to signal any areas of difficulty.

Students' written work, for the most part done in well-maintained copies or folders, provided evidence that substantial and frequently imaginative assignments are set regularly. For example, there was little evidence of summary work and a praiseworthy emphasis on tasks that required more analytical and creative thinking. Particularly commendable was the prevalence of extended composition exercises, both critical and creative. These provide students with invaluable training that will stand to them in the certificate examinations and beyond. In many instances, there was excellent practice in giving feedback to students on their written work. Encouraging comment identifying strengths and progress was given, and then one or two areas for improvement were identified along with helpful directions. Giving such feedback is time-consuming but most valuable in relation to any piece of substantial student work.

Formal assessments are held twice a year at varying times for examination and non-examination classes. The English department is commended for developing common assessments where appropriate.

Summary of main findings and recommendations

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Provision for English on the school timetable is good, both in the number and distribution of lessons.
- The pattern of deployment ensures a concentrated delivery of the subject and means that teachers have an experience of the subject across a variety of programmes, years and levels.

- Class libraries and in-class book clubs have also been developed, and these are praiseworthy initiatives.
- Senior management and the teaching team expressed their appreciation of the work done in the co-ordination of English.
- At least three subject department meetings are held each year, and there was evidence of a high level of informal contact and of good collaboration and support within the teaching team.
- The teaching and learning in the lessons observed was for the most part of good quality; indeed, instances of exemplary practice were noted in the case of both very able and less able class groups, and teachers are commended on the range of skills demonstrated during the evaluation.
- A review of students' written work provided evidence of substantial and frequently imaginative assignments.

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

- The systems of class formation for English should be reviewed periodically and their effectiveness evaluated.
- In further developing the subject plan and building on its current strengths, the teaching team should discuss and agree specific learning outcomes appropriate to each year for inclusion in the plan.
- The English plan for TY should be amended to reflect the recommendations made in the body of the report.
- In building on and extending current good practice, it is suggested that the English teaching team consider approaches such as co-operative learning, which would facilitate purposeful and productive group work, and more investigative learning strategies through which students could be encouraged to think independently and arrive at reasoned conclusions for themselves.

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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