

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Subject Inspection of English
REPORT**

**Dominican College
Sion Hill, Blackrock, County Dublin
Roll number: 60070K**

Date of inspection: 6 May 2009



**AN ROINN | DEPARTMENT OF
OIDEACHAIS | EDUCATION
AGUS EOLAÍOCHTA | AND SCIENCE**

REPORT
ON
THE QUALITY OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN ENGLISH

SUBJECT INSPECTION REPORT

This report has been written following a subject inspection in Dominican College, Sion Hill. 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. The board of management of the school was given an opportunity to comment on the findings and recommendations of the report; the board chose to accept the report without response.

SUBJECT PROVISION AND WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT

Second, third, fifth and sixth years have five English lessons each week, which is good provision. First years have four English lessons each week and Transition Years (TY) have three English lessons each week, which is satisfactory but not generous provision. Teachers reported satisfaction with the provision of a double lesson period for TY students each week as it allowed time for more in-depth work. There is concurrent timetabling of English lessons in TY, fifth and sixth year and this is commendably used, not just to facilitate movement of students between higher and ordinary level, but also to facilitate the hosting of whole year group activities such as TY public speaking.

Students are placed in mixed-ability class groups from first year through to the end of third year and for TY. In both fifth and sixth year, there are two class groups of mixed-ability students who follow the higher-level English course and one class group containing ordinary-level students. The mixed-ability placement of students is clearly working very well for the students in the school and it has most likely contributed to the very high uptake of higher-level English in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations over the past number of years. It was evident that teachers' expectations of students are high and that students are challenged to reach their highest possible potential and it was also evident that students respond positively to these high expectations. The school and English department are highly commended for this, especially in light of the fact that there is quite a large population of students with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in the school and many of these students go on to take higher-level English.

Students with special educational needs (SEN) are given learning support on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. This year a member of the SEN teaching team is also on the English team and this facilitates good liaison between the two groups. In addition, the English plan documents techniques for teaching students with SEN and EAL needs. However, given that there is no fully qualified learning support or SEN teacher on staff, although a number of staff have taken courses

in this area, whole school in-service on supporting students with SEN might be worth arranging. In addition, the school might consider team teaching or co-teaching as another strategy for supporting SEN students in a mainstream setting.

There is very good whole school support for English. Teachers have access to a range of resources within their classrooms including televisions, DVD players, cassette recorders, and in some instances, laptops and data projectors. Shelving in the staff room contains resources such as DVDs, videos, books, State Examinations Commission chief examiners' reports and the subject plans, all of which are easily accessible by the whole department. English teachers could also consider setting up an electronic folder on the school's intranet for storage of electronic resources. A cinema size screen has been installed in the newly refurbished school concert hall and it was reported that teachers also have access to the computer room. All classrooms are broadband enabled. Classrooms are teacher based and these presented as good print-rich environments with posters and newspaper articles pertaining to English as well as, in some instances, key English words and key quotes and students' work on display.

There is a spacious school library available, which is used for the hosting of the junior and senior cycle book clubs. The books in the library are in need of updating and some fundraising by the student council has already taken place for the library. The English department has identified the library as an area for development and has some plans in place for improving it. The use of book boxes, where TY students bring in and swap books to read for pleasure, is commended and this could be extended to other year groups especially first-year students. As it stands, students are given book lists in many year groups and are encouraged to read books from this list and this too is commended as very good practice.

Dominican College is a vibrant place. At the time of the inspection, Arts week was taking place and a range of performances was being hosted at break time and lunch time which showcased the enormous talents of students in the school in the areas of poetry recitation, drama, music, dance and art. The walls of the school, which are decorated with pictures of school events including many school musicals, are also testament to the range of extra-curricular activities that have taken place in the school.

The English department is highly commended for its involvement in a range of co-curricular activities to enhance the learning experiences of its students. As already mentioned, a book club is hosted for both junior and senior cycle students. Each first-year class group stages a drama in the last term as part of their English course. The school also stages two school musicals annually; one with a nearby boys' school and one produced solely within the school. Students in all year groups are entered for the Poetry Aloud competition and for a range of creative writing competitions. Debating and public speaking are encouraged in all year groups and students participate in external and in-house competitions. TY students, for example, are required to research a speech on a topic of their choice and deliver it to their entire year group as part of an in-house public speaking competition. Fifth and sixth years also participate in public speaking competitions organised within the school and externally. Students from first year onwards are brought on visits to the theatre and cinema and there is an annual trip arranged for sixth years to Stratford-upon-Avon. The English department is hoping to set up a film club in the coming school year. Such opportunities develop students' confidence in public speaking and performance, support their awareness of the concept of stagecraft and, overall, broaden their minds.

All English teachers are appropriately qualified to teach the subject to the highest level and are deployed to ensure continuity of experiences for students. Teachers are rotated between higher

and ordinary level on a fair basis in senior cycle. Currently, there are five English teachers teaching English, one of whom is studying for the Post Graduate Diploma in Education.

Management facilitates teachers' attendance at continuous professional development (CPD) courses and also organises school-based in-service for the whole staff. For example, the staff has recently engaged in training on Assessment for Learning (AfL). English teachers have also attended relevant CPD events outside of school and teachers share the learning from these courses, which is highly commended.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

The co-ordination of the English department is rotated among teachers on a termly basis. Agendas are prepared for all formal meetings of the English department and there is a long tradition of recording minutes of these meetings. Minutes of meetings demonstrate discussion on a range of issues from course content and learning outcomes for each year group to placement of students and choice of texts. Minutes of meetings also record very interesting and good discussion on AfL strategies and this is evidence of the very good reflection that takes place among English teachers.

English teachers meet very frequently, generally at four to six weekly intervals, as well as at the beginning and end of the school year. Many informal meetings also take place. The quality of planning for each year group was excellent. English teachers have developed separate subject plans for each year of the course and each subject plan is presented in a separate folder, which also contains key resources for the subject and year group. There is much detail in each subject plan, which is commendably written in terms of the learning outcomes that students should achieve from their study of each aspect of the course. A list of recommended teaching strategies is also included alongside each learning outcome. Such detail is helpful to all teachers as it encourages the sharing of alternative teaching and learning methods and is a particular support to all new teachers. To further build on this very good practice, it is suggested that at the start of each English department meeting, teachers share useful and successful teaching strategies.

As well as the subject plan for each year group, there is also an overall plan for English which explains the structure of English in the school, and documents key resources and effective teaching methodologies. Overall, the planning documentation has all the hallmarks of good collaboration and productive work. Of particular note, is the very good planning for EAL students including the choice of texts to target racism and to help in the hosting of intercultural and anti-racist events.

Each subject plan contains the aims for each year group and the overall plan contains the teachers' mission for English: "to promote the progress of all students, to encourage and motivate students to have high expectations and to achieve at the highest level of which they are capable. To achieve this objective, it is imperative that the learning environment is challenging, stimulating and enjoyable." It was evident throughout the evaluation that the mission of the English department is being realised.

The subject plan for each year group is generally divided into units and the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening are nurtured in each unit. It is laudable that all students study a Shakespearean drama. In addition, depending on the year group, a third novel is sometimes taught to students in third year. The focus on staging a drama in first year is particularly noteworthy as it introduces students to the world of stagecraft and also facilitates the study of often quite challenging dramas in an enjoyable way. The first-year course is mainly structured around

personal writing, study of a novel and performance of a drama. In second year, the focus is generally on the novel and play, and the study of poetry, short stories and media is left mainly until third year. The learning outcomes outlined for students for each aspect of the course are highly commended but it is recommended that a more integrated approach be developed in each year of junior cycle so that students study all genres in each year. It was evident, and it is highly commended, that the junior cycle English programme is suitably challenging and prepares students for the greater demands of senior cycle.

The aims of the TY English programme are also commended. Students are encouraged to read for enjoyment throughout the year, and the public speaking module, observed during the inspection, is highly commended for the many skills it develops among students. Students must also compile a personal anthology of pieces of writing about a theme that each has chosen, although it was noted by teachers that this section of the course may need review.

The programme of work for fifth-year and sixth-year students is organised in such a way as to facilitate movement between levels. Both higher-level and ordinary-level students study the Shakespearean text as their single text, which is particularly challenging for ordinary-level students although there was much evidence that students are taught in such a way as to make this text accessible.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

There was evidence of very good teaching of English taking place in the school. As well as the effective teaching methods observed, the specific teaching methods outlined in the subject plan for each section of the course are also innovative and promote active learning. These include pair and group work, role play and improvisation. Very good use of pair work was observed in some instances. For example, in one lesson, students were asked to discuss a statement about a key character in a text and then look for evidence from their text to back up this statement. The students then reported their findings, which were recorded on the board, to the class.

A key feature of success in the school is the fact that all students in all classes are encouraged to reach their full potential. In this regard, teachers are highly commended for their differentiated approach in the mixed-ability classroom. There was evidence of very good student-teacher relationships and students also worked well together. In many instances, students spoke with confidence during their lessons. Students were well able to articulate their points in a thoughtful way that was beyond the simple recall of facts and represented more critical analysis. This is highly commended. The existing focus on developing students' oral communication skills from first year through drama, debating and public speaking is a significant contributor to developing student confidence. Teachers were also very affirming of their students. Of particular note was the real enthusiasm that students showed for their studied texts. It was evident that they really enjoyed their study of literature. Teachers are commended for making English so accessible and enjoyable for all students.

In keeping with the principles of Assessment for Learning, the purpose of each lesson was clearly established from the beginning. Good practice in this regard was seen when the purpose was written on the board and when this purpose described not just the topic but also the learning intention of the lesson. Links were created between texts and between lessons, which put learning in context for students. For example, teachers recapped on the previous lesson by asking what happened up to this point in a text and links were also created with the next lesson when students were asked what might happen next or how a character might look at a certain point in a text. In

addition, links were created between studied texts and students' own lives, which allowed students to relate to the texts.

Very good questioning, which stretched students and challenged them to think more clearly about their texts, was observed. It is recommended that all teachers adopt a 'hands down' policy when asking questions to ensure an even distribution of student voices. In one instance, where students were reticent about speaking out, they were asked to discuss the answer to a question in pairs together for a short time before one of them was asked to report on the discussion. This is a useful strategy and its use could be extended with all groups. There was also very good use of higher-order and open-ended questions, which allowed students to move beyond simple recall of facts to observation and critical response. There were a couple of instances, however, when, instead of eliciting from students the meaning of a text, the teacher told the students the meaning and went into detail or analysis on the piece of writing without first asking students for an overall response to the text. It is recommended that the students' personal responses to a piece of writing be first invited before beginning analysis.

Teachers were well prepared for their lessons and all necessary resources for use in the lesson were at hand. They had factored in time for revision in their yearly planning, especially for examination classes, and very good revision plans were given to students by some teachers. In the main, the board was used well to record all contributions and key points made in lessons. There was evidence of information and communication technology (ICT) being used in one lesson observed and its use was also reported among other teachers. For example, TY students write an online class Blog for their book reviews. In the instance of use of ICT observed, students were shown a PowerPoint presentation detailing key points about the work of a poet on the course. This is a highly commended strategy and students could also be encouraged to create their own storyboard using ICT for each poem. The practice of playing audio versions of poetry and drama to class groups is also highly commended as it gives an authentic voice to the text and it allows students to visualise events.

The English teachers demonstrated exemplary practice in the language they used. In their everyday use of language, they introduced new vocabulary in a seamless manner which was in turn used by students in their spoken and written work. Students also showed good knowledge of the mechanics and techniques of writing. An appropriate expectation of students being able to quote from texts was also in evidence. Students are also taught the skills of critical reading.

There was a very good range of written work evident in students' copies. It was clear from students' work that the teaching of language and literature was often integrated. For example, the 'Verona Times' and the 'Maycomb Tribune' were on display on a classroom wall; and in one lesson observed students had to take on the persona of a character in a text to write a letter or a diary entry. In addition, good practice was observed when the teachers prepared students for their homework by discussing it first in class. The focus on requesting students to redraft their work is commended. It is suggested that students use a separate copy, maybe a manuscript or hardback copy, for this redrafted work to showcase their best writing.

ASSESSMENT

Parents receive four reports on students' progress annually from the school. These are based on formal Christmas and summer examinations and continuous assessment marks at the autumn and spring mid-terms. TY students sit a formal Christmas examination and are then evaluated in the summer based on their work during the year. Good practice takes place in that common

examinations are set in English for all year groups where it is appropriate and common marking schemes are developed for these examinations. Examination classes sit 'mock' examinations.

There is a formal homework policy in school. It would also be good practice if English teachers agreed among themselves on the frequency of assigning longer pieces of work for each year group and included this in the section on assessment in the subject plan.

Very good practice was seen in that students have personal response notebooks for different aspects of their course. In addition, some class groups keep folders for storage of resources. A policy at senior cycle is that students use hardback or manuscript copies for their written work. From examination of teachers' records there was evidence of frequent written work being assigned and that teachers keep very detailed records of students' progress.

As already noted, teachers have received in-service on Assessment for Learning strategies and minutes of English department meetings show very good discussion on the trialing of these AfL strategies in the classroom. One of the AfL strategies which is clearly being implemented is the use of constructive comments for students on their work. Also, at senior cycle, the discrete criteria of assessment are in use which allows students to see exactly where they need to improve.

Results achieved in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations over the past number of years are very good. There has been a consistently high uptake of higher level which is indicative of the high standards in the school and among the English department. No student attempted foundation level English in the results analysed. It is recommended that management undertake a formal analysis of examination results in English on an annual basis for discussion with the English department as this will help to identify any emerging trends. Such an analysis could compare English results and uptake of levels in state examinations with previous years in the school as well as against national averages.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Teachers' expectations of students are high and students are challenged to reach their highest possible potential. Students respond positively to these high expectations.
- There is a very high uptake of higher-level English in both the Junior and Leaving Certificate state examinations and past results for these examinations have been very good.
- There is very good whole school support for English.
- There are very good strategies for encouraging the development of reading habits in the school.
- Dominican College is a vibrant place. Students are given many opportunities to showcase their talents throughout their time in school.
- The range of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities related to English is outstanding.
- The quality of planning for each year group was excellent. The planning documentation had all the hallmarks of good collaboration and productive work.
- There is very good planning for EAL students.
- The mission statement for English is being realised.
- The junior cycle English programme is suitably challenging and prepares students for the greater demands of senior cycle.
- There was evidence of very good teaching of English taking place in the school.

- The English teachers demonstrated exemplary practice in the language they used.
- There was a very good range of written work evident in students' copies.
- There was evidence of very good student-teacher relationships
- Students were well able to articulate their points in a thoughtful way and could critically analyse texts.
- Teachers are commended for making English so accessible and enjoyable for all students.

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

- It is recommended that a more integrated approach be developed in the subject plan for each year of junior cycle so that students study all genres in each year.
- All teachers should adopt a 'hands down' policy when asking questions to ensure an even distribution of student voices.
- The students' personal responses to a piece of writing should be first invited before beginning analysis of the piece.
- Management should undertake a formal analysis of examination results in English on an annual basis for discussion with the English department to ensure that the high standards are maintained into the future and to identify any emerging trends.

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.