

IMPROVING English

in Post-Primary Schools

2001

eti

The Education and Training
Inspectorate



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education

Department of Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment

Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure

A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

More than 90%	-	almost/nearly all
75%-90%	-	most
50%-74%	-	a majority
30%-49%	-	a significant minority
10%-29%	-	a minority
Less than 10%	-	very few/a small number.

INTRODUCTION

The findings in this paper are based on inspections of and visits to English departments in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland during the period 1996-2000.

1. Strengths

- 1.1 A majority of English departments are characterised by good relationships and the teachers work well together. The pupils co-operate readily with their teachers. In most classes, they are learning to work in a variety of ways and with increasing independence. Occasionally, the pupils have good opportunities to interpret their literary texts through drama and role play.
- 1.2 In a majority of schools inspected, the work in English and the overall standards achieved by the pupils are satisfactory or better. In the best practice, the pupils are enthused by lessons which are well-planned, challenging and enable them to use language in contexts which are meaningful to them. They read a wide range of literary and non-literary texts and learn to work with a range of media; their learning is extended through frequent opportunities to express, explain and defend their own opinions and to appraise and, if appropriate, modify those in the light of new information or understanding.
- 1.3 Most key stage 3 (KS3) pupils engage in the shared reading of well-chosen novels and to a lesser extent the reading of poetry and drama. For the most part, the teaching approaches and learning activities at this level are appropriately varied. The teaching of English literature at both General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and General Certificate of Education 'A' level (GCE) is sound; the pupils are well-motivated and have a good knowledge of their set texts. In the majority of schools, and at all levels, the pupils' appreciation of their texts is enhanced through seeing films or video recordings of stage productions. Less frequently, the pupils have regular opportunities to see live performances and/or attend poetry readings.
- 1.4 GCE 'A' level classes are usually characterised by good expository teaching. This approach is best when it is coupled with well-prepared discussion sessions that are informed by the pupils' personal research and wider reading.
- 1.5 External assessment procedures are becoming increasingly well-embedded in practice; teachers are generally comfortable with determining the level at which their pupils are working. GCSE and GCE 'A' level formal assignments are regularly marked with detailed and constructive comment. There is evidence that pupils are gradually being helped towards evaluating and improving their own work.
- 1.6 Most English departments are well-ordered and efficiently managed. A majority of staff are well-qualified. Regular departmental meetings help to promote teamwork in planning and the teachers work together to

produce comprehensive schemes of work and to share articles and pieces of literature which complement the chosen texts or themes.

1.7 Where English teaching is good, the library is well-used. The pupils have opportunities to read for pleasure and can talk about their personal preferences in an informed and increasingly sophisticated way. In these classes they are also learning to research information for themselves, using book and non-book resources, and to represent their findings in a variety of ways for a range of audiences.

1.8 The organisation of special help is usually good.

2. Areas for Improvement

2.1 In a significant minority of schools the quality of teaching and learning is uneven. The most common weaknesses are a narrow interpretation of the programmes of study, an imbalance in quality across the three attainment targets and the poor development of the pupils' talking and listening. In such instances, the teaching of writing is often dominated by language exercises and the teaching of reading by an over-reliance on the model adopted by Council for Curriculum, Examination and Assessment (CCEA) in the KS3 test. The pupils are earnest, rather than independent learners. They have insufficient experience of exploring and inferring meaning for themselves and too few opportunities to work creatively with language to communicate their ideas, and to adapt their use of language to meet their purpose and the needs of their readers.

2.2 At KS4, even where the standards are satisfactory or better, the work in English is frequently overly constrained by the preparation of coursework assignments and the practising of conventional examination answers. In a significant number of classes the pupils need to have more frequent and varied opportunities to express their own critical appreciation of their texts.

2.3 At KS3, insufficient attention is given in the majority of classrooms to developing sufficiently strongly the pupils' sensitivity to language and their imaginative engagement with what they read.

2.4 In a significant minority of instances, the pupils' individual differences are not well catered for: too often differences are addressed by outcome or by task rather than by building on the pupils' strengths.

2.5 The teaching of those pupils who need special help with English often relies on over-structured activities or the over-reliance on textbooks which do not help the pupils to develop independence in using language.

2.6 There are weaknesses in the day-to-day assessment of the pupils' work; these include the absence, for example, of a shared understanding among the English teachers of the standards that have been set, and of the teachers' careful observation and interpretation of the pupils' responses; the teachers' comments do not reflect closely enough the purpose of the tasks and there is little marking of the pupils' work for improvement.

- 2.7 It is still rare to observe the computer's word processing facility used for purposes other than improving the presentation of work; even for this purpose the pupils seldom use the spell-check.
- 2.8 Insufficient time is given by English departments to reviewing and evaluating the provision and its effectiveness in advancing the pupils' learning.

3. Priorities for Action

To promote further improvement in the teaching and learning of English:

- 3.1 teachers of English need to build on the pupils' skills across the three attainment targets. In particular, the skills of discussion, explaining, exploring and questioning, and with them the attitude of attentive listening, in order to build on the contributions of others, need to be developed more effectively; teachers also need to become more confident in knowing how best to support and develop the quality of the pupils' writing;
- 3.2 there is a need for more extensive and more thoughtful use of Information and Communications Technology in English; more effective use of CD-ROMs will require the pupils to develop improved information handling skills;
- 3.3 in catering for the pupils' individual needs, particularly the needs of those pupils experiencing difficulties, English departments need to give greater attention to the assessment of the pupils' strengths and shortcomings; they also need to take more account of the pupils' different learning styles in order to ensure that work is more carefully matched to their aptitudes and interests;
- 3.4 departments need to ensure that assessment is built into the planning stage of the work so that standards additional to those related to the presentation of their work, are clearly established for the pupils; the teachers' responses to the pupils' work across the attainment targets should help the pupils to identify the next steps in the process of improvement;
- 3.5 heads of departments need to monitor more closely the quality of work within their departments and identify suitable teaching and learning strategies for improvement in the pupils' standards of achievement.

CONCLUSION

Schools and the Inspectorate recognise the importance of self-evaluation as a basis for improvement and development. It is intended that this publication, and the publication 'Evaluating English', will support English teachers and departments in their evaluation and improvement of their teaching and of their pupils' learning and standards of achievement.

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