An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Looking at English
Draft Guide for Post-Primary Schools

Inspectorate

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Introduction

Looking at English (2022) has been compiled by inspectors of English to make a positive contribution to the learning and teaching of the subject in post-primary schools. It seeks to enrich existing self-review practices, to share exemplars of highly effective practices gleaned from subject inspections, and to assist English departments in interlinking processes of self-review in the subject with ongoing whole-school self-evaluation.

Materials are presented in the following order:

- A suggested list of possible evidence sources to support self-review by the English department. In reflecting on your particular context you may identify additional in-house sources of evidence relevant to your needs.

- An overview of how the learning and teaching domains of *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* can be used as a tool to support English department development.

- A discussion of each domain in *Looking at Our School* along with an examination of how these might be utilised to support the self-evaluation of an English department along with prompt questions to support departmental review and exemplars of how the process might take place in departments.

- A practical example of interlinking subject specific school self-evaluation (SSE) with the whole-school and SSE process.

- Further reference sources to support self-evaluation of learning and teaching in English.

Possible evidence sources to consider during subject department self-review

- Feedback from students of their learning experiences through surveys, focus groups, review of exemplars of work

- Review of draft/redraft process in student writing

- Teacher observation notes on students' listening skills

- Teacher or student observation of group work

- Minutes of meetings including key points for improvement raised following Subject Learning and Assessment Review (SLAR) meetings

- Department discussion exploring the use of digital technology to support teaching, learning and assessment

- Ongoing review and development of units of learning for each year group

- Inspection reports conducted in this subject

- Student outcomes from internal and external assessments

Further sources of evidence and tools can be found at http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/post-primary/resources/gathering-evidence/.

Using *Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools* to support subject department self-review

Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools provides a set of standards that can help teachers and school leaders to assess how good practice is and guide the way towards improvement. Within this framework, learning and teaching are viewed through the following four distinct, although interrelated and sometimes overlapping, domains:

• **Learner outcomes** • **Learner experiences**	• **Teachers' individual practice** • **Teachers' collective/collaborative practice**

Having identified and agreed on the aspects of practice they need to evaluate, schools should look more closely at the relevant domains and standards for the areas of their practice that require more investigation. The statements of practice associated with each standard will serve as a useful and more detailed benchmark in assisting schools to decide on the effectiveness of their practice. If subject departments reflect on the learning and teaching domains and standards, they will be able to gauge quickly the aspects of practice that are working well and those they might prioritise for improvement.

It is advisable to focus on one or two areas for improvement rather than taking on too many at one time. This will facilitate incremental, ongoing self-review and improvement planning that is manageable for teachers and meaningful for students.

Learner outcomes

This domain and its related standards encompass students' attitude to learning, their understanding of themselves and others, their acquisition of curriculum knowledge and skills, and their levels of attainment.

When enquiring into learner outcomes, the English department may use the related standards to establish whether:

- Students enjoy their learning, are motivated to learn and expect to achieve as learners

- Students have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to understand themselves and their relationships
- Students demonstrate the knowledge, skills and understanding required by the post-primary curriculum
- Students attain the stated learning outcomes for each subject, course and programme

When the learner outcomes in English are good or very good:
Students have explored a wide range of texts and can use a range of strategies to comprehend them. They engage in exploratory talk effectively, can listen attentively to each other's contributions without interruption, and demonstrate a capacity to think carefully about their responses. They are skilled in language use, and in the process approach to creating written and oral texts. They enjoy deepening their understanding of words, language and literature.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review

- Having gathered evidence of students' attitudes toward English, what areas of teaching, learning or assessment need further development?
- How well can students comprehend written and oral language?
- How well-developed are students' listening skills in our lessons?
- How well is exploratory talk supporting student learning?
- Is there evidence that students are making progress?

How one subject department improved the quality of learner outcomes in English

As part of the whole-school SSE process, the English department sought to establish the degree to which students had the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes required to understand themselves and their relationships. They focused on the oral language skills required to work effectively with others.

To gather data, teachers surveyed students and used a simple rubric to observe group work and interactions in lessons. Students reported that opportunities for exploratory talk improved both their understanding of texts and their confidence in expressing a personal response. However, such opportunities were found to be irregular. In addition, classroom observation by teachers suggested that there was considerable variation in first-year students' listening and discussion skills when they were placed in groups. The

department decided to teach these skills explicitly whenever groups were formed in first-year for the coming year.

Following an agreed period of time, teachers evaluated the effectiveness of this strategy through observation. Positive responses then saw teachers collaboratively identify opportunities for usage across the curriculum for all year groups through further development of co-operative learning strategies. To further develop opportunities for student discussion in lessons the English department agreed to also explore approaches to the flipped classroom: homework tasks would introduce students to learning materials before lessons, allowing additional classroom time for deepening understanding through exploratory talk.

Learner experiences

This domain and its related standards encompass students' learning experiences as demonstrated in levels of engagement as learners; growth as learners, self-reflection and ownership as learners, and development as lifelong learners.

When enquiring into learner experiences, the English Department may use the related standards to establish whether:

- Students engage purposefully in meaningful learning activities
- Students grow as learners through respectful interactions and experiences that are challenging and supportive
- Students reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning
- Students experience opportunities to develop the skills and attitudes necessary for lifelong learning

When learner experiences in English are good or very good:
Students engage in purposeful tasks that link texts to their real-world experiences. They participate in a dialogic classroom environment that clearly values listening and contributing. Success criteria support the drafting of written and oral texts and students' developing understanding of quality. They both reflect on and act on feedback. The personal reading and study that students engage in stem from their own interests and excite their aesthetic and critical responses.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review

- Does the study of English foster personal engagement and excite an aesthetic enjoyment of language and literature?
- To what degree is assessment-task design providing students with meaningful learning activities?
- To what extent do students take action based on feedback to improve the quality of their work?
- How well can students critically analyse and respond to their own work and the work of others?

> **How one subject department improved the quality of learner experiences in English**
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> As part of the whole-school SSE process, the English department sought to establish the degree to which students reflect on their progress as learners and develop a sense of ownership of and responsibility for their learning. They considered student writing in relation to this standard
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> Teachers gathered evidence from a student focus group and a sample of writings reflecting the typical range in class groups. They identified student action in response to feedback as an area for improvement and agreed a departmental strategy to address it. They then established the target that all students would reflect on and improve their written work though actions in response to feedback.
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> Teachers changed their practices by requiring students to read exemplars of genres before students were asked to identify success criteria for their own writing in that genre. Students were then encouraged to assess their work in relation to success criteria before submission. At other times, students were given five minutes following feedback to plan and note the actions they would take. In all cases, students were guided to reflect on their feedback and adjust their work accordingly. After an agreed period of time, teachers re-evaluated the quality of student writing from a representative sample group of students and reviewed the effectiveness of the interventions.

Teachers' individual practice

This domain and its related standards encompass teachers' knowledge and skills, their use of practices that progress students' learning, their use of appropriate teaching approaches, and their responsiveness to individual learning needs.

When enquiring into teacher individual practice, English teachers may use the related standards to establish whether:

- The teacher has the requisite subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills

- The teacher selects and uses planning, preparation and assessment practices that progress students' learning

- The teacher selects and uses teaching approaches appropriate to the learning intentions and to students' learning needs

- The teacher responds to individual learning needs and differentiates learning and teaching activities as necessary

Where a teacher's individual practice in English is good or very good:
Teachers incrementally teach reading, writing, listening, and oral language skills. The teacher designs classroom activities and assessments to meet the learning needs of students of all abilities. The teacher prioritises the development of students' understanding of the content and structure of language. The teacher scaffolds and invites personal responses and critical analysis. The development of a speaking, listening, reading, and writing culture is evident throughout the classroom as the teacher cultivates a love for language and literature.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review

- How is a love for language and literature being engendered by the department?

- Which approaches are most effectively supporting the development of reading, writing, listening and oral language skills?

- Which aspects of students' understanding of language or content require further support and how can this be addressed?

- Which planning approaches are most effectively supporting the design of inclusive classroom activities and assessments?

How one teacher reviewed teaching approaches to respond to the learning needs of students

A teacher felt she engendered a keen love of literature through her lessons, but knew from her students' oral feedback that there was scope to make her teaching of drama more responsive to senior cycle students' individual learning needs.

In previous years, she had taught the play by reading it or asking students to read it in parts, spanning a substantial number of weeks. As a result, she had always found that time was limited for discussion, analysis and writing development. After consulting with colleagues, she decided to trial some new approaches, focussing on structuring the learning experience differently. In her preparation, she divided the play into key segments, where key scenes would be studied intensively. Sharing this plan with students from the outset was crucial.

To make the play directly accessible to students, she chose a visual rather than a textual entry point. She set comprehension questions to guide the viewing of a good quality recorded production of the play. Next, carefully-balanced groups of students were asked to engage in a rapid 'gist' reading of the play, supporting their understanding with images from a graphic novel version of the play.

With the students clear regarding the plot, the teacher focussed on five key scenes in the play centring on stagecraft, language and important thematic elements. During this phase, she led students through a series of scaffolded exercises, supported by a standalone audio recording of the play.

By the end of the unit, students were much more confident in their oral arguments about the play. Rather than lapsing into plot summary in their written work, as had previously occurred, most students were now able to write personal, critical responses, grounded in the world of the text. Essentially, the teacher felt that her planning and teaching approaches had shifted the role of meaning-maker from her to her students. She looked forward to sharing this insight with her colleagues at their next subject department meeting.

Teachers' collective/collaborative practice

This domain and its related standards encompass teachers' professional development and collaboration, their co-operation to extend students' learning opportunities, their collective use of dependable assessment practices, and their sharing of expertise to build capacity.

When enquiring into teachers' collective/ collaborative practice, the English department may use the related standards to establish whether:

- Teachers value and engage in professional development and professional collaboration
- Teachers work together to devise learning opportunities for students across and beyond the curriculum

- Teachers collectively develop and implement consistent and dependable formative and summative assessment practices
- Teachers contribute to building whole-staff capacity by sharing their expertise.

When teachers' collaborative practice in English is good or very good:
Teachers regularly discuss and share practice for the teaching of English, and all English teachers work together to ensure that the English programme responds to students' needs and interests. Teachers collectively plan to support students at transition points in school-life so that they can progress from the primary curriculum to Junior Cycle English and, in turn, to English at Senior Cycle. Teachers engage productively in SLAR meetings. The English department identifies common approaches to assessment-task design, and collaboratively plans units of learning to guide the assessment and development of student work.

Possible prompt questions to support departmental self-review

- How is the English department supporting a whole-school appreciation of English language and literature?
- Has the department developed and implemented a consistent approach to assessment-task design and to the development of units of learning and assessment?
- Do subject department meetings and the collaborative consideration of student work support the sharing and development of teaching, learning and assessment practices?
- How well does the English department plan for and support students during transitions?

How one English subject department improved teachers' collaborative practice by developing collaborative assessment practices

At the end of a SLAR meeting, the English department discussed key items that had transpired regarding teaching, learning, and assessment. One teacher described how he had learned from his colleagues' approaches to the classroom-based assessment (CBA) and that sharing approaches in the future would be worthwhile. This led to a discussion regarding the use of success criteria because some teachers' students appeared to be much clearer on what was expected of them than others. The department as a whole also expressed concern regarding the descriptors awarded to a number of students with special educational needs.

Following a SLAR meeting, teachers of Art were prompted to reflect on their collective practice. One teacher described how they had learned from their colleagues' approach to enabling students in their classes to develop ideas more fully from primary sources that were meaningful, and interesting to them. This led to a discussion regarding the strategies employed by the teacher to effectively engage students when choosing interesting objects to explore for the development of course work.

At the next subject department meeting after that SLAR discussion, the teachers of English decided to implement a number of actions to improve students' outcomes in the CBAs. They set a target to ensure all students achieved at least in line with expectations according to the criteria set down in the assessment specification.

To do this they focused on the following actions
- Teachers would collaboratively design tasks to ensure they were inclusive and that students with special educational needs would get a fair chance to display their learning
- Collaborative task design would also focus on making assessment tasks specific, making certain they were aligned with key learning and, ultimately, that they addressed the features of quality in the CBA
- Teachers would agree key success criteria as part of the design of key summative assessment tasks throughout the junior cycle

The department agreed that teachers would discuss their experience of these adjustments in a number of department meetings over the next school year. They would also consider the outcome of these adjustments at the end of each SLAR meeting during the coming year.

Using this document to support your whole-school SSE strategy – a practical example

	Whole-School	English Department
Identify focus	Example: Focus on student voice to make it a driving and shaping force in our assessment practices	We ask questions of ourselves as teachers, and consider the focus in relation to the syllabus, specification, and classroom e.g. • How can we use student voice to improve assessment in English?
Gather evidence	Possible approaches • Focus group of students • Questionnaire for all/sample of students • Survey of parents on progress reports • Teacher peer observation to identify current practices	With a focus on assessment, we might: • Ask our students what is working and what needs to change • Set up structures to enable us to observe each other's work • Investigate how we report on student progress
Analyse and make judgements	Evidence gathered indicates positive practices in some subjects and classes: • co-creation of success criteria • productive classroom interactions • students purposefully using feedback to improve their work	Evidence might indicate that: • We're using success criteria but we need to work on co-creating • Students need more opportunities to discuss with each other in class • Feedback isn't yet helping students help themselves
Write and share report and improvement plan	Improvement plan commits us to developing and implementing these positive practices widely and effectively at whole-school and subject department level	At subject level, the school improvement plan commits us to developing and implementing practice to address the shortfalls we've uncovered so as to empower students and give them real voice.

Put improvement plan into action	• Amend assessment policy to support plan • Implement at subject department level • Set up cross-department structures to enable consistent implementation	→	• Agree success criteria with students so they can work more purposefully • Plan classroom interactions that enable students to learn with and from each other • Implement agreed assessment practices that help students
Monitor actions and evaluate impact	• Is there consistent implementation? • Are adjustments needed? • Was the process manageable? • Was the process meaningful? • How did the plan support students to be agents in their own learning?	→	• What is the feedback from students? • Do we need to make changes? Why? • Was the process manageable and meaningful in English? • How can we continue to support and develop the process?

Further reference sources to support subject departments in self-evaluating the learning and teaching of English subjects

- A survey of inspection reports on the learning and teaching of English collated from the DE website. (See https://www.gov.ie/en/school-reports/ for copies of subject inspection reports and also follow-through inspection reports on subject inspections of English)

- Focus on Learning Toolkit, NCCA

- Online resources from the English advisory team in JCT and PDST

- State Examination Commission (SEC) examination instruments such as past examination papers, marking schemes, and Chief Examiner's reports.

- Circulars outlining prescribed materials for the subject

- The Junior Cycle subject specification and associated Assessment Guidelines

- The revised module descriptors for LCA English and Communications (2020)

- The LC English syllabus

- The Digital Learning Framework

- The School Self-Evaluation Process

- School Self-evaluation: Next Steps 2022-2026

- The Digital Learning Framework

- STEM Education Policy