

An Roinn Oideachais agus Eolaíochta

Department of Education and Science

**Evaluation of English as an Additional Language (EAL)
REPORT**

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

Date of inspection: 13 and 14 May 2008



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

REPORT
ON
PROVISION OF ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE (EAL)

EVALUATION REPORT ON ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE

This report has been written following an evaluation of provision for students learning English as an additional language (EAL) in Dominican College, Sion Hill, Blackrock. It presents the findings of the evaluation of provision, teaching and learning of EAL and makes recommendations for the further development of EAL in the school. The evaluation was conducted over two days during which the inspector visited support and mainstream lessons and observed teaching and learning. The inspector held meetings with the principal, and with groups of teachers and students, and reviewed school planning documentation, teachers' written preparation, and students' work. Following the evaluation visit, the inspector provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the principal, deputy principal and EAL teachers. This report forms part of the evidence base for a forthcoming composite report on EAL provision in primary and post-primary schools, intended to inform Department of Education and Science policy and to promote good practice in schools. 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.

WHOLE SCHOOL SUPPORT AND PROVISION FOR EAL

Dominican College Sion Hill is a long-established voluntary secondary school for girls situated in south County Dublin. The school has traditionally had an academic focus, and offers the Junior Certificate, a compulsory Transition Year (TY) programme, and the established Leaving Certificate. Because it was formerly a boarding school, it has a long tradition of educating students from other countries, and now has a number of EAL students whose parents work or live nearby, or who have been placed with local host families. The senior management and teaching staff reported that the school's EAL students tend to be highly motivated and keen to progress within the Irish educational system. The school's commitment to inclusion is evident in its policies and practices.

Five qualified post-primary teachers form the core EAL teaching team in the school, and all teach both EAL and mainstream classes. Many have degrees in modern European languages or English, and studied language-teaching methods as part of their teacher training, and thus have skills appropriate to EAL. This represents good deployment of the existing teaching resource. Many also have training and experience in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) abroad and in Ireland. While a TEFL background provides insights into communicative and social language acquisition, the emphasis in EAL is placed on the language of instruction. The language of instruction refers to the range of language skills that enable students to access the curriculum, to make progress within it and to take the relevant certificate examinations. Reading and writing skills, for example, are of particular significance to EAL students. The distinction between language for social interaction and language in the instructional context was discussed with senior management and the EAL teaching team during the evaluation, and they saw the distinction as helpful in informing future practice.

The school has an allocation of three whole-time teacher equivalents, which is sixty-six hours, for EAL support. The school is using its allocation in four ways: to provide timetabled EAL lessons to all EAL students; to offer additional EAL support to some students; to create smaller inclusive class groups; and to provide time for members of the EAL teaching team to meet with EAL students and their parents, to deliver the induction programme and to undertake initial and ongoing assessments. It should be noted that the number of EAL students who completed a questionnaire as part of the evaluation was significantly greater than the number recorded in the school's returns to the Department of Education and Science. While some of these have already received two years of EAL support, it is important that school management ensure that all eligible EAL students are included in these returns. It should also be noted that additional allocations can be sought where students enrol after the beginning of the school year. The Department's circular letter, 53/2007, contains the details of allocations for EAL support.

For every class group in the school, an EAL support lesson is offered at the same time as Irish, which is timetabled concurrently in all years. This arrangement provides an EAL lesson every day in all years except first year and TY, which have respectively four and three lessons per week. A better distribution of these EAL lessons throughout the week in TY would be beneficial to EAL students as it would provide more regular formal instruction in the target language. In fifth year, EAL is timetabled at the same time as both Irish and the modern European language option. EAL students who wish to take Irish or who are taking French or German in the senior cycle are accommodated and encouraged, and alternative arrangements for EAL support are made for them. This is commendable. Additional EAL support is offered to students one-to-one or in small groups through using gaps in the timetable where students are not taking certain subjects. This additional support is generally used to assist students in subject areas where vocabulary or concepts need to be learned or reinforced, and is offered by a range of subject teachers. It is good practice to involve subject specialists in this way, and the good communication between these teachers and the EAL teaching team was noted and is commended. The allocation has also been used to divide the year group with the largest number of EAL students into three inclusive base class groups.

This flexible and varied approach to EAL provision is appropriate to the context of the school, and supports its inclusive ethos. However, it was observed during the evaluation that a small number of EAL students were in need of a high level of EAL support, and it is important to ensure that resources are being used in a targeted way where needs are greatest. Circular 53/2007 encourages a flexible approach but requires the school authority to deploy the support allocation having regard to the proficiency levels of individual students involved and in line with their evolving needs. Students receiving EAL support who are making less progress than others should have their additional needs met through a more targeted use of the language support allocation and a greater level of liaison between those delivering learning support and EAL support. This last point is particularly relevant since the school's policy is to place EAL students in base classes according to age, and the EAL class groups in each year are therefore of mixed proficiency levels.

The school management has considered the possibility of introducing an immersion programme for EAL students with little English language competence on enrolment. The most suitable model would provide a number of EAL lessons every day while also giving students access to aspects of the mainstream curriculum. Since the target group would almost certainly have a range of ages, it would be preferable to link its timetable to that of a junior and a senior cycle year, for example first year and TY. Another possible method of providing further EAL support to students with little English language competence is team-teaching in the form of in-class support across the curriculum. The school is encouraged to investigate both these approaches further.

School management is commended for allocating time each week to some members of the EAL teaching team to facilitate the initial assessment and monitoring of EAL students. An initial oral assessment of English language competence is followed by tests of reading and aural comprehension and a written assessment, all carried out by the EAL teaching team. They have devised these tests themselves and use them to assign students to one of three levels of competence, with criteria based on the English Language Proficiency Benchmarks drawn up by Integrate Ireland Language and Training (IILT) but in a simplified form. Information on students' assigned levels is shared with mainstream teachers, and this is good practice.

Ongoing monitoring of student progress takes place in both the support and mainstream contexts. The EAL teaching team has designed a standard progress report sheet for mainstream teachers to complete in respect of EAL students. In addition to noting areas of progress, teachers are also asked to note problem areas for these students both in language skills and subject-specific matters. The EAL teaching team is commended on setting up this very helpful practice, and the information thus gathered should be used to the full in planning targeted support. Analysis of these reports is recommended not only to identify individual needs as is the current practice but also to establish patterns of need and difficulty. Helpful pointers arising from this information can then be communicated to the whole staff.

Many of the EAL students who enter the school in the senior cycle do not have a modern European language, hence the timetabling of EAL support in this slot. Furthermore, while some of the school's EAL students have home languages that are examinable in the Leaving Certificate on a curricular or non-curricular basis, others do not. The principal and EAL support team raised this issue, expressing concern that EAL students with a limited number of examination subjects and no modern European language are consequently at a disadvantage in relation to third-level access. The school management aims to provide the greatest range of subjects for all students, and this is acknowledged and commended. It is recommended therefore that the possibility of offering a modern European language to these students be explored. Some EAL students in the school were reported to have a knowledge of and facility with Italian and Spanish. Since Italian is offered in TY, it could perhaps be accommodated in the fifth and sixth year timetable and would offer these students another subject.

The EAL department has an annual budget and is generally well resourced, although some areas for development were noted. All but one of the EAL teaching team have their own base classrooms and this system has facilitated the creation of print-rich and stimulating environments for the teaching and learning of EAL. The EAL department has built up a stock of teaching materials. These are stored centrally in the staff area where all members of the team have access to them. An inventory of the available resources is kept and these include a range of grammar and vocabulary manuals, learner dictionaries, TEFL textbooks, language learning activities, and materials developed by IILT. Lists of key subject-specific terms drawn up by each subject department would be a valuable addition to these resources, underpinning whole-school support for EAL students. A second useful addition would be a bank of writing frames and exemplars designed to give EAL students a structured approach to the development of the necessary writing skills. Co-operation with other mainstream teachers would provide very good models for report writing, critical analysis and other relevant genres.

The school book club, a reading group with a number of EAL participants, is a highly commendable initiative. A major re-stocking of the school library has been planned and funds have been raised for this purpose. A broader range of accessible novels and biographies should be included to provide further stimulus for EAL students to engage in recreational reading. Where it is possible to source reading material in students' home languages, it could be

considered for inclusion in the library stock to help students maintain home language literacy. Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council's library service has an intercultural initiative and is available to give advice in relation to dual language publications and books in a range of languages, and it is suggested that the school establish links with it.

The school has one computer room, and students in first and fifth year have lessons in information and communication technology (ICT). Students in TY complete their ECDL programme during the year and therefore have regular access to the computer room. However, EAL students reported little or no use of ICT in EAL lessons. Given the wealth of interactive learning materials available on the Internet, and the school's advocacy of ICT in other areas, this should be regarded as an area for development. ICT could also provide a means for students to read for a purpose in their own languages through access to international newspaper web sites.

Members of the EAL teaching team have engaged in continuing professional development (CPD) in the area of English language acquisition, including in-service delivered by IILT. They showed commendable interest in developing their expertise and are members of the English Language Support Teachers Association (ELSTA). Other teachers providing support to EAL students articulated a need for training, and the staff as a whole would welcome in-service in this area. Senior management identified as particularly important the development of all teachers' understanding of the centrality of the language of instruction and saw this as beneficial for all students. In addition to seeking external support for whole-staff CPD on inclusion and successful EAL strategies, the school should draw on the expertise and experience available among the members of the EAL team to deliver in-house CPD.

PLANNING AND CO-ORDINATION

School development planning is an ongoing and productive process in the school, and the School Development Planning Initiative (SDPI) assists at whole-school planning days each year. A number of policies relevant to provision for EAL students have been developed. These include policies on admissions, pastoral care, guidance, and special needs, and each makes appropriate reference to inclusion measures. For example, the guidance policy refers to specific information and supports relevant to EAL students. Commendably, a policy on newcomers has also been drawn up and ratified, and it was suggested to senior management that it be renamed more appropriately to identify its aims as the support and inclusion of EAL students.

The EAL teaching team are thoughtful and reflective practitioners who show a commitment to the progress of their students and to the development and sharing of good practice. The team meets formally every month and matters discussed and decided are recorded. Other meetings at shorter notice are called as needs arise, for example when new EAL students arrive. Meetings facilitate the sharing of information and resources, the organisation of EAL activities, and a collaborative approach to difficulties that may arise. Two members of the team share the co-ordination role, bringing to it a combination of experience, innovation and continuity. It is suggested that in further developing EAL planning, a description of the co-ordinator role be agreed and included in the EAL planning folder. Since the position is voluntary, it may also be appropriate to agree a term of office and a rotation that would allow all members of the team to experience this role.

Planning and programmes of work for EAL are based on the three levels of language competence corresponding to A1, A2 and B1 of IILT's language proficiency benchmarks. This is a very useful approach. Schemes of work for each level contain a statement of aims followed by objectives that are clearly presented in the form of "will be able to" statements. The schemes also

list topics to be covered, resources, and forms of assessment. The EAL teaching team is commended on the clarity of the schemes and their focus on learning outcomes. In further developing these schemes within the continuous planning process, it is recommended that they be reviewed in order to place an appropriate emphasis on the language of instruction. For example, the descriptors attached to Level 3 or B1 competence make useful and appropriate references to reading, writing and comprehension skills in the context of mainstream subjects. The inclusion of such references in the descriptors for Level 1 and Level 2, appropriately tailored to those levels of competence, is recommended. This would have the effect of expressing EAL learning objectives as a continuum of skills acquisition framed within the requirements of the curriculum, an approach that supports the emphasis on acquiring English as the language of instruction. It would also take due cognisance of the three phases of language learning: “the learning core, the development of school learning skills, and the development of subject-specific learning skills” (*IILT Resource Book 2007*, pp. 37-51).

The school’s EAL plan also contains a brief overview of provision, CPD, resources and assessment, and identifies areas for further development, including more training, increased use of ICT in the classroom, greater liaison with subject teachers and more regular meetings of the team. This is evidence of good reflective practice and professional judgement. In this spirit, the EAL plan also notes certain challenges, including differentiation to accommodate the range of proficiency in English. Differentiation is best approached as a whole-school matter since it applies to all class groups and subject areas, and the second level and special education support services could be consulted for advice.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Six lessons were observed during the course of the evaluation, three in the EAL support context and three mainstream lessons where EAL students were present. The lessons covered all programmes offered in the school, and all years with the exception of sixth year. In all instances, lessons were well structured, learning was contextualised, and there was very good monitoring of students’ participation and classwork. A sense of enjoyment in learning and a lively yet supportive atmosphere were characteristic of the lessons observed.

Measures to support inclusion and to encourage students to work collaboratively were consistently observed. In the support context, the organising of pair and group work to involve students from different countries created a real context for communicating; for example, students engaged in real conversations about topics such as homeland customs, weather and food. In the mainstream setting, the inclusion and support of EAL students is commended. Strengths noted included seating arrangements that ensured distribution of EAL students throughout the classroom; pair and group work involving a mix of students; careful explanations of procedures; the use of active learning methods to provide a context for both content and language learning; and the affirmation of students’ work and efforts. Where teachers gave clear instructions orally and reinforced them in writing or by repetition it was of great benefit to EAL students. All teachers should be aware of the importance of gestures and other non-verbal signals in communicating with EAL students, and should be especially mindful of the need to speak clearly and carefully.

Resources used in the support context included short texts on specific topics with vocabulary and grammar activities, some downloaded from the Internet; wall charts to reinforce learning of verb forms and word families; and the board to record and organise vocabulary work, for example through spidergrams. The displaying of students’ work affirmed their efforts and provided

reference and conversation points. Visual resources such as weather maps were used in some EAL lessons observed, and their greater use is encouraged. In the mainstream setting, the use of ICT was observed in two lessons, one held in the computer room where the students were working on their own PowerPoint presentations and the other in Mathematics where a data projector was used to demonstrate a geometry problem and solution. The visual and practical approach clearly engaged all students and helped to mediate new language and concepts for EAL learners. This finding further points up the need to develop greater use of ICT as a learning tool for EAL students in the support lessons.

Commendably, the teaching approaches observed in both support and mainstream lessons promoted active learning. Whole-class direct instruction was used sparingly, usually to amplify or summarise the lesson topic. In the support context, pair and group work was used to develop speaking and listening skills, and to practise certain language constructions. For example, the “pair then share” sequence allowed students to discuss a topic in pairs and then provided a good opportunity to practise indirect speech when reporting to the whole group. In mainstream lessons, group work gave students an opportunity to use the target vocabulary as well as developing non-verbal skills, for example by using the correct terms when discussing mathematical problems.

Practical investigative work was also observed. In a science lesson, students investigated the rate of spread of a virus, using test tubes of colourless liquid which were shared with a number of contacts and then tested for “infection”. Students were required to write up the process and their findings, and the practical nature of the task, along with the template given, enabled them to prepare a clear report. This was a very effective strategy involving the development of a range of skills, including report writing. The inclusion of a writing task in the planned activity is of benefit to all students, and of particular assistance to EAL students, for whom accuracy in writing may be a particular challenge. It is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on writing tasks in EAL support lessons, using the writing frames already mentioned rather than cloze exercises, so that students can practise extended writing in a range of genres.

EAL lessons observed provided good instances of oral language development and the extending of students’ vocabulary in the context of a range of topics, including the weather, travel and energy. Instances were observed where distinctions between near-synonyms were pointed out and placed in context, and the connotations of words as well as their literal meanings were discussed. Efforts were made to relate the topics chosen to a wider context, for example the topic of energy was related to Energy Awareness Week. This thematic approach to the acquisition of English is commended and should be further developed to relate wherever possible to areas of the curriculum, so that students are learning language which they can apply in an instructional context. The thematic approach should also embrace the affective and figurative aspects of language, as these are usually the most difficult areas for learners. For example, poetry and descriptive writing related to the theme could be included, and collaborative work with the English department would identify a wealth of suitable texts.

The use of home languages by EAL students in the classroom was discussed during the evaluation. The EAL teaching team pointed out that high use of the target language is considered best practice in the modern language classroom, and that translation is discouraged. Teachers follow this principle in EAL lessons, and are commended in this regard. However, subject lessons in mainstream classes present a different context. Here the EAL student must focus on the understanding of concepts and the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge in areas where previous learning has taken place in the home language. For this reason, where a number of students share a home language, their purposeful use of a common home language to facilitate

peer tutoring is beneficial and should be encouraged and supported. Teachers can then ensure that this approach is complemented and completed by the teaching and learning of the required vocabulary in English.

The need to focus more explicitly on the language of instruction should be communicated to the whole staff, and ways of supporting students to acquire relevant terminology for the range of subjects should be discussed and established in a whole-school context. Subject-specific lists of key terms have already been recommended. These would assist mainstream teachers to foreground the teaching of specific vocabulary to all students, including EAL learners, promoting a greater awareness and knowledge of the language of instruction, and would assist EAL teachers to reinforce students' learning. Additional ideas on methodologies to support EAL students can be found on the IILT web site, on the NCCA web sites (including its new ACTION web site), and at www.ltscotland.org.uk under *Learning and Teaching in 2+ Languages*.

EAL student learning in the lessons observed was generally good. Students asked probing questions and made perceptive comments, and were able to report to the class and summarise pair and group learning. In most cases, EAL students worked diligently and with interest and demonstrated a determination to progress. Examples of their written work which were seen during the inspection included Science folders, mathematics copies, and portfolios for their EAL lessons. These generally reflected great application and care.

EAL students spoke positively about being in groups of the same age rather than the same language level for EAL lessons. Good instances of peer tutoring were observed in EAL lessons, indicating the benefit to students of learning in the company of peers with greater English language proficiency. However, students with little English language competence may not benefit sufficiently and may continue to struggle. Some instances of this were noted in the senior cycle EAL lessons observed, and these require specific interventions to address deficits, using the allocation provided.

It was reported that the achievement of EAL students in Mathematics and the sciences is impressive. In a junior cycle higher level mathematics lesson observed, most of the students were EAL learners. In the meeting with students during the evaluation, they reported that they found subjects that were not exclusively language dependent and could be mediated through other means, for example Mathematics, Art and Music, accessible and enjoyable.

SUPPORT FOR EAL STUDENTS

The school's support and pastoral care structures are based on a class tutor and year head system, which links with senior management, the guidance counselling service, learning support teachers and subject teachers. Roles and responsibilities within the care network are set out in a draft pastoral care policy. The newcomers' policy, as it is currently named, references the pastoral care structure and commits the school to practical initiatives to provide academic and social support and to promote inclusion. These include a more formal induction programme, in which an orientation day and a resource pack are provided, and a buddy system for EAL students, both of which commendable supports were introduced this year.

The EAL students interviewed spoke positively about their introduction to the school, although they identified language and communication as posing the greatest initial difficulty. The buddy system is currently focusing on pairing students in the same base classes to offer practical and immediate assistance to EAL students from their English-speaking peers. Students apply to be

buddies and the application form gives them scope to describe the role themselves and to say how it could be further developed. This approach is commended, as is the commitment to review the system and adapt or expand it as necessary. All students are asked to complete an annual questionnaire to elicit their views on various aspects of school life and organisation. A specific questionnaire is given to EAL students. Senior management, along with members of the EAL team, analyses the responses. This is very good practice and has informed the school's approach to provision for EAL students.

The newcomers' policy outlines the role of support structures, such as the guidance counselling or learning support services, in addressing the needs of EAL students experiencing particular difficulty. In the case of EAL students with apparent learning difficulties, the building up of a student profile and the provision of targeted learning support within existing resources are the appropriate measures. Arising from some internal redeployment of personnel, the learning support allocation is currently divided among a number of teachers. It is therefore recommended that clear systems for exchanging information on EAL students with possible learning difficulties be established between the EAL teaching team and the learning support department and that a staged approach to meeting the needs of these students be devised between them, and shared as necessary with mainstream teachers. Helpful information on a range of assessments including non-verbal tests is appended to the Department's circular 99/2007.

In addition to the good classroom integration observed, practices promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity are well established and highly visible in the school. The assembly area contains colourful school-produced posters on the homelands of EAL students and photographs reflecting a diverse and inclusive student body, and the various languages of the student body are used in a "welcome collage" in the school foyer. An impressive mural in the assembly area was created by students in collaboration with a Zambian artist to explore the theme of human rights in an international context. An international week, called the Intercultural and Anti-racism Week, took place this year, and international days have been held in the last two years. Such events provide opportunities for students to inform each other about aspects of their culture including food, language, music and dance. The international days also involve the participation of parents in the preparation of stalls and exhibits which showcased the range of countries and nationalities represented in the school, including Ireland and the Irish. These initiatives are warmly commended, and the emphasis on interculturalism is especially laudable.

The school's student and parent organisations support inclusion and are themselves inclusive. The student council, which has a prominent role in the school and contains representatives from all years, has committed itself to promoting interculturalism. EAL students serve on the council and are also involved in its fundraising activities, for example in the choreographing of the annual "danceathon". Parents of EAL students are among those who have been nominated to serve on the board of management. The parents' association is very involved in a range of school activities and its committee includes parents of EAL students. Parents are asked to assist the school by taking part in activities such as TY interviews, and parents of EAL students have volunteered for these and other forms of involvement.

Senior management reported that no communication difficulties with parents have been encountered. Although application forms and policies are available only in English, parents commented positively on the ease and clarity of enrolment procedures and the accessibility of information. It may however be helpful to bring to the attention of the parents of EAL students that translations of a number of official documents into six European languages are available on the Department's web site.

All students are encouraged to participate in the school's co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, which are seen as engines of inclusion. EAL students have high rates of participation in team and individual sports, in the school choirs, in the Green Schools committee and in pursuits linked to Gaisce. The achievements of all students in these activities are celebrated through displays of photographs and awards, and coverage in school newsletters and in announcements.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- The school's commitment to inclusion is evident in its policies and practices. In addition to the good classroom integration observed, practices promoting inclusion and celebrating diversity are well established and highly visible in the school.
- The EAL teaching team are thoughtful and reflective practitioners who show a commitment to the progress of their students and to the development and sharing of good practice.
- The good work to extend students' English language skills observed in both support and mainstream lessons is commended.
- A sense of enjoyment in learning and a lively yet supportive atmosphere were characteristic of the lessons observed. Commendably, the teaching approaches observed in both support and mainstream lessons promoted active learning.
- The practice of eliciting the views of all students in order to inform school policy and practice and the specific measures taken to elicit the views of EAL students are commended.
- The school's student council and parents' association support inclusion and are themselves inclusive.

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

- The teaching and learning of the language of instruction should be given greater emphasis both in the EAL support and mainstream contexts.
- The additional needs of EAL students who are making less progress than others should be met through a more targeted use of the language support allocation and a greater level of liaison between those delivering learning support and EAL support.
- Greater use should be made of appropriate ICT in EAL lessons.

A meeting was held with members of the EAL teaching team, the principal and deputy principal at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.