



Providing Inspection Services for

Department of Education  
Department for Employment and Learning  
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE



EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSPECTORATE

# Better English

October 2011

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Northern Ireland Curriculum seeks to ensure that all pupils can achieve their potential and are able to make informed and responsible choices throughout their lives. This is underpinned by a need for pupils to prepare for life and work by developing as individuals, contributors to society and contributors to the economy and environment.

1.2 English has a very significant role to play in achieving these curriculum objectives. The study of English provides pupils with opportunities to become confident and discerning users of language and to appreciate literature more fully. It allows pupils to acquire, develop and use the necessary skills of reading, writing and talking and listening in a wide range of contexts, purposes and forms; many of which will re-occur throughout their lives.

1.3 This report provides information, advice and guidance for all teachers of English based on first hand evidence from Inspection activity over the period 2008-2010.

1.4 The purpose of this document is to:

- provide a clear and detailed breakdown of inspection findings within the curricular area of English;
- provide clear and concise indicators of what better English provision looks like, as well as providing indicators that define weaker practice;
- encourage all English departments to evaluate and reflect upon their own provision and to use the prompt questions provided as a focus for self-evaluation; and
- promote improvement.

1.5 It is worth highlighting the fact that the starting point for improvement is building upon the existing very good practice which exists in many of our schools. This report seeks to disseminate some of this practice with a view to promoting better English provision leading to higher standards of achievement for all our pupils.

1.6 In 2001, the Education and Training Inspectorate published *Improving English*, in which the strengths and areas for improvement in English provision in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland were identified. Since then, the Inspectorate has reported on English/literacy in the biennial Chief Inspector's reports, as well as promoting the role of self-evaluation in improving the quality of education.

1.7 This document aims to build on *Improving English* in two ways: first by publishing the findings and evaluations carried out in a range of post-primary English departments during the last two years; and secondly by providing a series of questions for English departments to support a process of self-evaluation and improvement.

1.8 The findings in this document are based on inspections of and visits to English departments in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from 1 April 2008 to 31 March 2010. During this period, the work of 39 departments was evaluated.

1.9 As part of their work, inspectors visit classes, talk with pupils, teachers, classroom assistants and others. They provide the school with detailed feedback, write and publish reports which evaluate the quality of what they have seen. In reporting on what they have seen, inspectors use the following words:



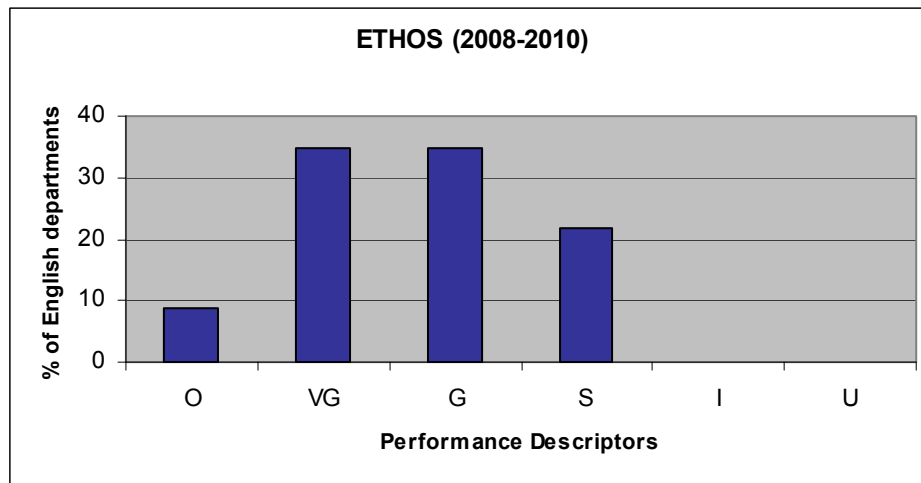
This document uses these words and they are abbreviated in the charts which use the following performance descriptors.:

<b>Quality Descriptors</b>	
O	Outstanding
VG	Very Good
G	Good
S	Satisfactory
I	Inadequate
U	Unsatisfactory

#### **Other terms used in this document**

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

## 2. ETHOS



2.1 In most of the English departments, the classroom ethos was good or better. In particular, the clear existence of a positive working relationship between teachers and pupils was a significant feature and pupils were motivated and challenged to work diligently.

2.2 In a minority of departments, the classroom ethos is not good enough.

2.3 Good ethos is essential to better English because high quality learning takes place in classrooms where relationships are positive and supportive and where pupils feel safe and secure. In such circumstances, pupils feel confident in expressing their views and opinions, can enjoy fully their English work and develop their learning in a climate where they can be challenged and encouraged to give of their best.

### BETTER ETHOS

#### **BETTER ETHOS is characterised by:**

- a distinctive subject identity inside and outside the classroom;
- positive working relationships for all;
- high expectations set for all;
- pupils demonstrating pride, enjoyment and independence in their work;
- well-settled and well-motivated pupils, who are consulted about their learning needs and respond well to classroom routines;
- an atmosphere which helps promote and develop a love for literacy and literature in all pupils;
- an atmosphere which promotes success rather than failure.

**POOR ETHOS is characterised by:**

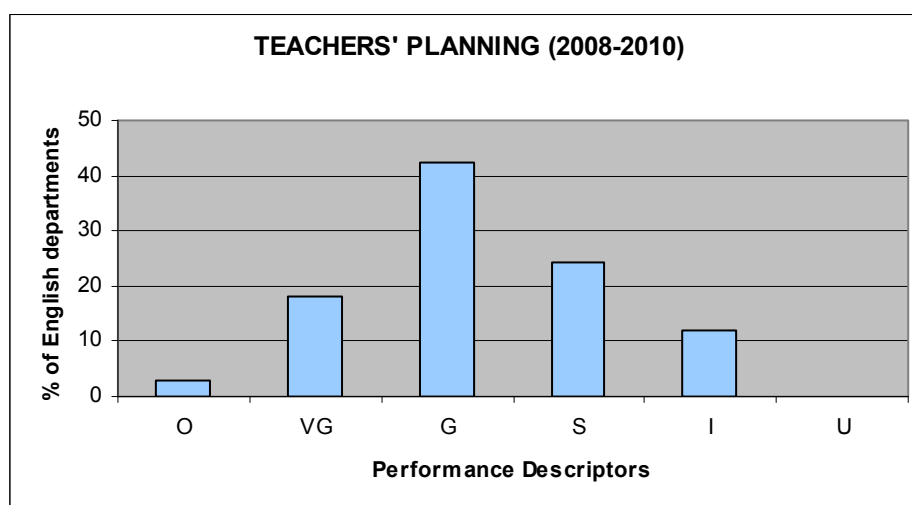
- poor working relationships between teachers and pupils;
- low expectations and low morale of teachers and pupils;
- poor achievement and standards in English;
- pupils who show little interest or demonstrate negative dispositions towards their work and learning; and
- an atmosphere unsympathetic to the pupils expressing their views and opinions.

**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent can you ensure there is:

- a strong sense of purpose and identity for the work of the English department;
- a high quality and stimulating learning environment;
- equity for all pupils in the classroom;
- good morale and working relationships amongst all;
- an environment where high expectations for teachers and pupils are met;
- regular use of well-earned praise, encouragement and reward;
- a well-ordered environment where pupils are well behaved;
- the opportunity for good relationships, communication and collaboration with parents; and
- a caring atmosphere that respects the diverse backgrounds and individual identities of all pupils?

### 3. PLANNING



3.1 The majority of English departments have good or better planning to guide and support their work. Teachers generally prepare well for their lessons and many departments have revised their schemes and units of work in light of changes in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. In such cases, these departments demonstrate clear and coherent planning which underpins the work of teachers and provides a clear and coherent programme to meet the needs of pupils. In a significant minority of departments, planning was ineffective.

3.2 Good planning is essential to better English because high quality learning happens where planning has been thorough and meticulous and where the teacher has clearly established exactly what and how the pupil will learn, understand or do. Better quality planning ensures that lessons are well-structured, provide appropriate challenge and are matched to the needs, interests and abilities of all pupils. Good planning must be able to demonstrate coherence and progression.

#### BETTER PLANNING

##### **BETTER PLANNING is characterised by:**

- establishing clearly what and how the pupil will learn, understand or do;
- demonstrating coherence and progression in talking and listening, reading and writing;
- all staff working together to create and promote long-term planning for the department;
- focusing not just on what is to be taught, but indicating the learning to take place;
- outlining strategies and methods to be used;
- making explicit connections in learning;
- prioritising talking and listening in long-, medium- and short-term planning; and
- taking into account the needs and interests of the pupils in the class.

**POOR PLANNING is characterised by:**

- documentation which does not support or guide the work in English and fails to impact on the teaching and learning;
- ineffective collaboration in the planning process; and
- specifications and mark schemes being used as a substitute for planning.

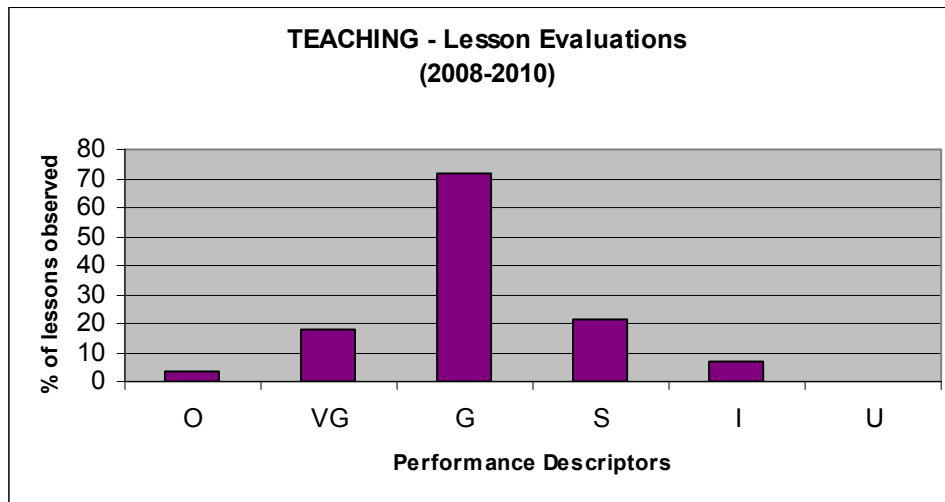
**Self-Reflective Questions for the English department**

To what extent can you ensure that planning:

- is up to date, comprehensive and fit for purpose;
- guides and directs the teaching and learning of English clearly and effectively;
- provides a programme of learning for English that has breadth, balance and coherence;
- identifies and builds upon prior learning, particularly in Year 8 and at transitional stages;
- ensures individual learning needs are met;
- matches learning to interest and ability;
- reflects the Northern Ireland Curriculum for English with media education;
- supports and promotes the transferability of the cross-curricular skill of Communication;
- builds upon an evaluation of learning that is matched to individual needs?



#### 4. TEACHING



4.1 Between April 2008 and March 2010, inspectors evaluated 409 English lessons. The quality of the teaching in the majority of the lessons observed was good or better. Such lessons matched activities to the needs of the learner and there was a strong sense of pupil engagement and learning. Clear learning outcomes were established at the start of the lesson and the pace of the lesson was brisk; there was detailed and accurate teacher exposition and guidance and there was appropriate time set aside at the end of the lesson for pupils to reflect on what they have learned.

4.2 In a significant minority of lessons observed, the teaching and learning were ineffective.

#### **BETTER TEACHING**

##### **BETTER TEACHING is characterised by:**

- lessons matching the needs of the pupils;
- learning outcomes which are understood and agreed by teacher and pupil;
- appropriate pacing;
- time for pupils to reflect on their learning throughout and at the end of the lesson;
- good questioning which helps promote learning and understanding for all;
- promoting talking and listening, leading to high-level thinking skills;
- the use of a wide range of appropriate teaching strategies and skills;
- being creative and innovative;
- enthusing and inspiring pupils to develop a love for language and literature;
- the appropriate and creative use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to enhance the learning process;
- engaging the pupils in the learning process; and

- teaching which links with previous learning and learning in other subjects.

**POOR TEACHING is characterised by:**

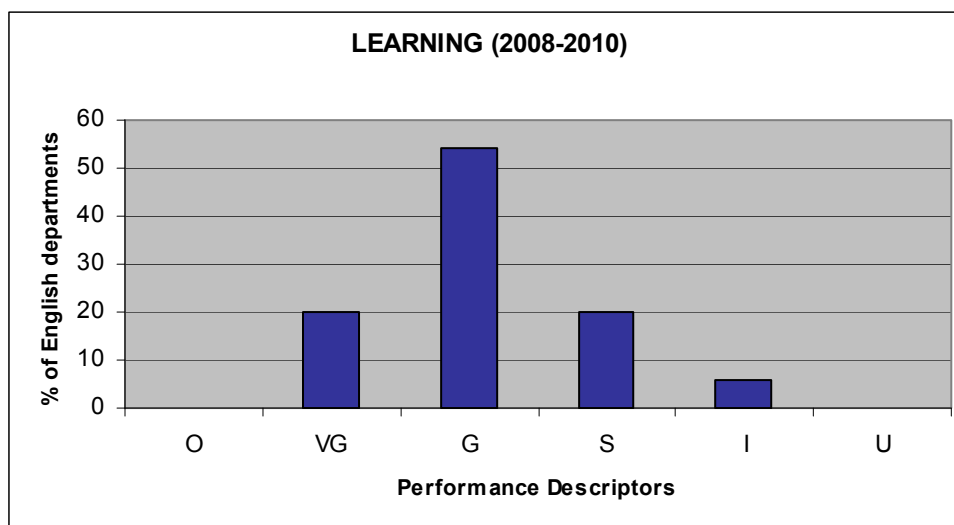
- work and responses being over-directed by the teacher;
- too much teacher talk;
- pupils simply being busy and compliant;
- limited opportunities for the pupils to contribute orally and in written form;
- skills being taught or promoted becoming lost in activity or context; and
- the overuse of work sheets or comprehension tasks.

**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent does your teaching:

- create a safe and supportive climate for learning;
- recognise diversity and meet the needs of all the pupils;
- build on prior learning, motivate and challenge the pupils;
- develop systematically the skills of Communication by building progression in talking and listening, reading and writing;
- engage the pupils, encouraging them to contribute to and take responsibility for their learning;
- use a range of appropriate teaching approaches and methods;
- make effective use of questioning in order to promote thinking skills and talking and listening;
- enable pupils to learn in a range of whole-class, group and individual contexts;
- encourage pupils to be self-disciplined;
- recognise the pupils' voice by offering them choice and by negotiating aspects of their learning with them; and
- make the best use of time and resources?

## 5. LEARNING



5.1 In most of English departments inspected, learning was good or better. It is significant to note that the learning was better in almost 10% of the lessons observed. In these situations, pupils responded well to the high expectations of their teachers and were able to work enthusiastically. As a result of clear learning intentions being identified by the teachers, the pupils were able to become more involved with their learning and contribute more effectively to the learning process. Written and oral work was of a high standard and matched effectively to the pupils' interests and needs. Pupils were enabled to demonstrate what they understood and could refine further their skills in reading, writing and talking and listening.

### BETTER LEARNING

#### **BETTER LEARNING is characterised by:**

- a strong sense of the pupils' engagement with and contribution to the learning process;
- the pupils responding well to the high expectations of their teachers;
- high standards in written and oral work;
- work that is matched effectively to the pupils' interests and needs;
- pupils being given the opportunity to talk about their learning and refine further their skills in talking and listening, reading and writing;
- pupils being given the opportunity to work in pairs and groups;
- pupils feeling confident to ask questions or seek help; and
- pupils enjoying the learning.

**POOR LEARNING is characterised by:**

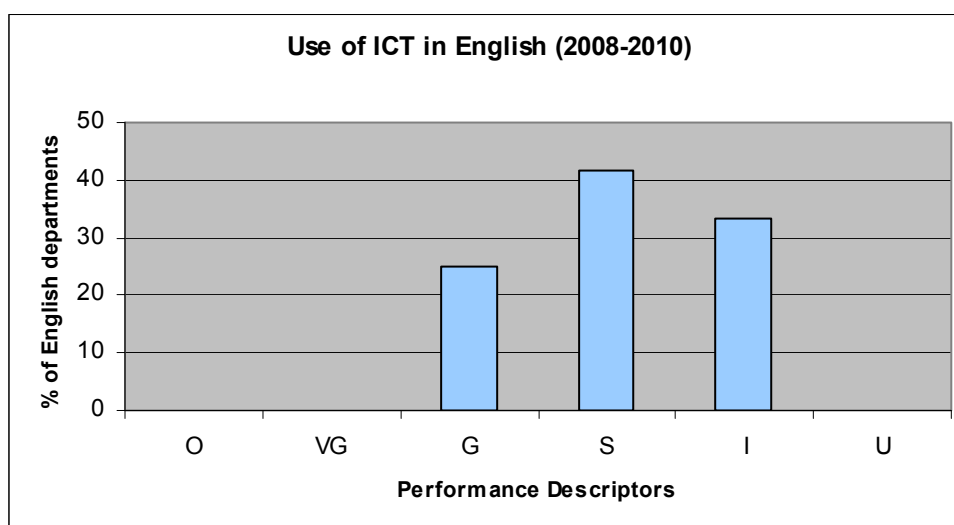
- pupils endlessly engaged in limiting written exercises, such as filling in work sheets and workbooks;
- learning not being consolidated during and at the end of the lesson;
- pupils not being given the opportunity to write independently for a variety of purposes and audiences;
- talking and listening mostly being achieved through whole-class question and answer sessions;
- pupils lacking confidence and giving limited responses; and
- teachers asking questions that neither elicit extended answers nor promote effectively the thinking skills of their pupils.

**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent do you ensure that pupils:

- feel safe and learn in a well-behaved and purposeful manner;
- demonstrate self-discipline and independence in their learning;
- work constructively with teaching and non-teaching staff in an atmosphere of mutual respect;
- demonstrate year-on-year progression in line with their ability;
- display enjoyment, demonstrate motivation and take pride in their learning;
- transfer and develop their literacy skills across the curriculum;
- demonstrate individual thinking, good social skills and personal responsibility;
- read, write and talk with increasing accuracy and appropriateness; and
- work collaboratively, listen respectfully and learn from others?

## 6. USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY IN ENGLISH



6.1 Since the publication of *Improving English* in 2001, there has been a discernible increase in teachers' use of information and communication technology (ICT). This, however, does not disguise the fact that in most cases, the use of ICT is not enhancing the quality of teaching and learning to good effect in English. Only one-quarter of departments were recognised as using ICT in a way that makes a significant impact on the quality of the learning.

### BETTER USE OF ICT IN ENGLISH

#### **BETTER USE OF ICT IN ENGLISH is characterised by:**

- pupils' individual study being enhanced by the use of a virtual learning environment;
- pupils being given the opportunity to explore and research in a meaningful context to help consolidate their learning;
- internet research which enables the teacher to promote accuracy, discernment and judgement for the pupils to become more effective in managing information;
- ICT enabling teachers and pupils to access, select, manipulate, enhance and use texts in ways that would not otherwise be possible;
- data projectors or whiteboards being used to present a shared text (including messages presented in written, spoken, visual and symbolic forms) to the whole class or a group of pupils and the teacher being able to model reading, writing and spelling strategies; and
- pupils developing powerpoint presentations as a support to, and not an alternative to, talking and listening activities.

**POOR USE OF ICT IN ENGLISH is characterised by:**

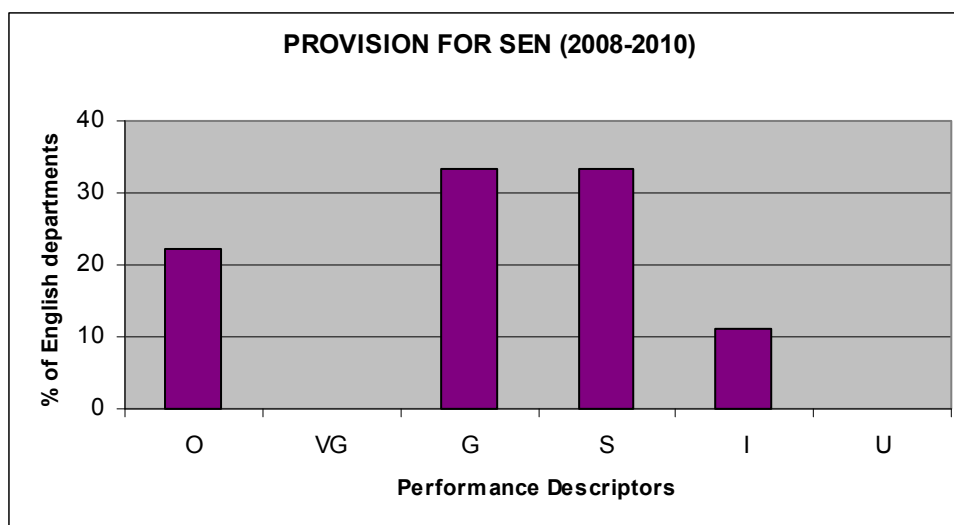
- planning which does not build upon previous learning and skills acquired in the primary school;
- lack of progression in ICT skills with pupils repeating the same type of tasks; and
- activities which demonstrate low-level skills with no significant learning being planned for, or taking place in, talking and listening, reading and writing.

**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent is ICT:

- planned for in departmental schemes of work;
- used to improve the quality of pupils' talking and listening, reading and writing skills;
- used to promote positive attitudes and dispositions towards learning;
- used to allow pupils to become independent in their learning;
- used to allow pupils to share, exchange and showcase their learning; and
- used innovatively to improve the quality of the learning experience?

## 7. SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS PROVISION IN ENGLISH



7.1 In the majority of English departments inspected, special educational needs (SEN) provision was good or outstanding. In the lessons observed, teachers were sensitive to the varying needs of all the pupils. They ensured that learning and support were matched closely to individual needs and involved the pupil in setting and meeting targets. In such cases, learning and teaching were underpinned by clear and accurate Individual Education Plans (IEPs), which outlined precisely the needs of individual pupils and the strategies required to help them overcome the difficulties they may face.

7.2 In a significant minority of departments, SEN provision was ineffective.

### **BETTER SEN PROVISION IN ENGLISH**

#### **Better SEN provision in English is characterised by:**

- early identification of needs leading to appropriate intervention;
- the high expectations of teachers and pupils;
- an appropriate emphasis being placed on talking and listening skills through all aspects of teaching and learning;
- rigorous monitoring and assessment of the impact of provision;
- professional liaison between the English Department and the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO); and
- high-quality pastoral care to support learning in literacy;

**Poor SEN Provision in English is characterised by:**

- work which is not planned or differentiated to meet the needs of all the pupils;
- planning, teaching and learning which are not informed by a clear understanding of previous learning and accurate assessment of the pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills with regard to language and literacy;
- work that is repetitive with a focus on the completion of low-level tasks; and
- low expectations of teachers and pupils.

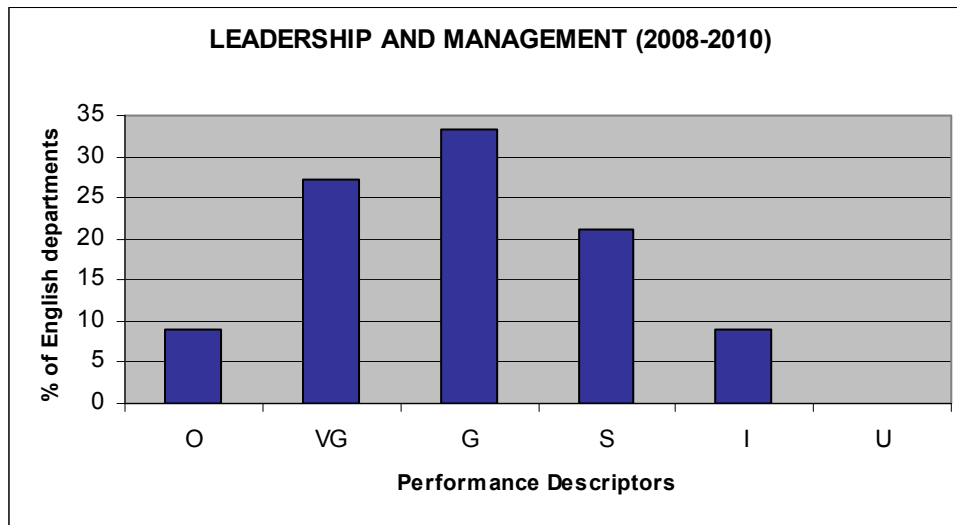
**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent is SEN provision in English:

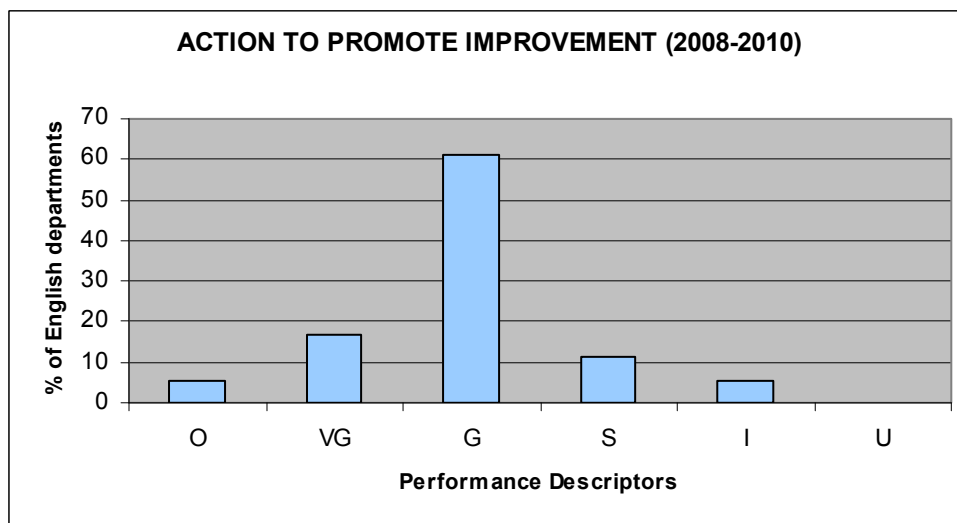
- planned for in close liaison with the SENCO;
- reflective of an appropriate range of strategies matched to the needs of the pupils;
- used to improve the quality of pupils' talking and listening, reading and writing skills;
- used to create a more fully inclusive and enabling experience for each individual pupil?



## 8. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT



8.1 The quality of the leadership and management in the majority of the English departments inspected was good or better. The Head of the English department worked hard to create a collegial ethos within their departments: the majority of which functioned effectively and efficiently. Data was used to measure performance and inform planning and any under-performance was appropriately addressed. In these departments, planning for improvement was a priority. In a minority of the English departments inspected, the leadership and management was ineffective.



## **BETTER LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

### **BETTER LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT is characterised by:**

- the promotion of English across the school;
- the head of department acting as an excellent role model, keeping up to date with curricular developments;
- honest, comprehensive self-evaluation as the basis for departmental action plans and target setting;
- the development of effective team work and a collegial ethos within the department;
- regular, purposeful departmental meetings which promote the sharing of good practice in English;
- opportunities provided for all teachers to develop and extend their skills and pedagogies; and
- a strategic approach to improvement supported by the analysis of statistical data and the regular monitoring of provision, outcomes and standards.

### **POOR LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT is characterised by:**

- limited or no processes for self-evaluation;
- limited understanding or acknowledgement of significant shortcomings in teaching, learning and standards;
- poor use of evaluative data to effect improvements in teaching, learning and outcomes; and
- departmental meetings which focus on administration rather than on teaching and learning and improving standards.

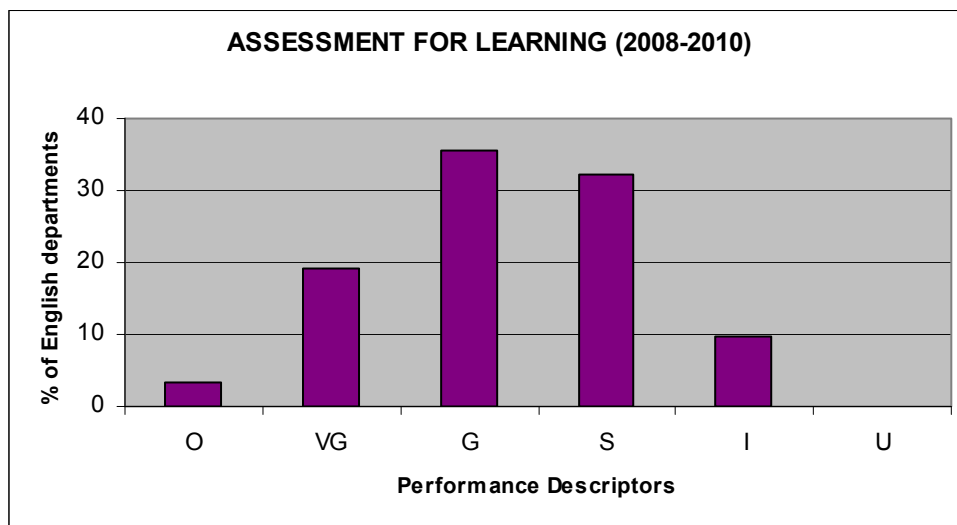
### **SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent does the Head of English:

- set a positive tone by ensuring there is a clear vision and purpose for the work of the department;
- create a collegial atmosphere, in which all teachers feel their views, efforts and contributions are valued;
- challenge poor performance and ensure there is accountability;

- present himself/herself as a good role model and promote the sharing of good practice;
- use a wide range of data to help identify priorities and plan action for improvement;
- effectively lead and manage change;
- communicate key messages and disseminate information to the rest of the department and the school; and
- regularly evaluate all aspects of the work of the department?

## 9. ASSESSMENT



9.1 A majority of the English departments inspected were making effective use of Assessment for Learning strategies. In such cases, departments shared and mediated effectively the learning with pupils, set individual targets for the pupils to effect improvement and ensured that pupils benefit from good quality formative assessment. There were clear and helpful assessment procedures in place to monitor and assess pupils' attainment.

### BETTER ASSESSMENT

#### **BETTER ASSESSMENT is characterised by:**

- all teachers having a shared understanding of what makes for good learning intentions or outcomes;
- opportunities being provided to share and mediate the learning intentions with the pupils, when appropriate;
- marking and assessment which gives the pupils the opportunity and expertise to improve;
- appropriate questioning which allows the teacher to assess the learning or understanding of the pupils;
- pupils acquiring the skills and dispositions to evaluate effectively their own work and that of others sensitively and usefully;
- assessment which leads to further improvement; and
- assessment for learning strategies which are embedded in the learning experience within English classes.

**POOR ASSESSMENT is characterised by:**

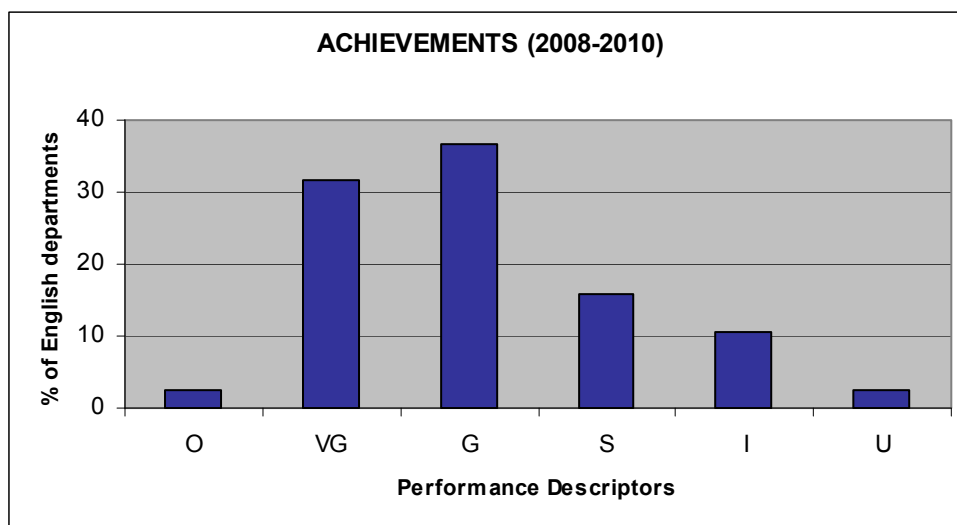
- work being simply corrected, with no support being provided for improvement;
- the learning focus of the lesson being ignored and the success criteria not being identified or shared;
- assessment not being an integral part of the planning process for English;
- assessment opportunities being missed in teaching and learning; and
- assessment failing to provide useful information for pupils, other teachers and parents.

**SELF-REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

To what extent do you ensure that:

- assessment is informed by an effective policy that is fit for purpose and offers clear guidance on the range, methods, purposes and frequency of assessment;
- there is a wide range of assessment strategies used, such as self assessment, peer assessment, written and oral feedback;
- there is a consistent approach to all aspects of assessment for learning within the department;
- assessment procedures are in line with statutory requirements; and
- comprehensive records of pupils' attainment and progress are kept and used to inform parents and others?

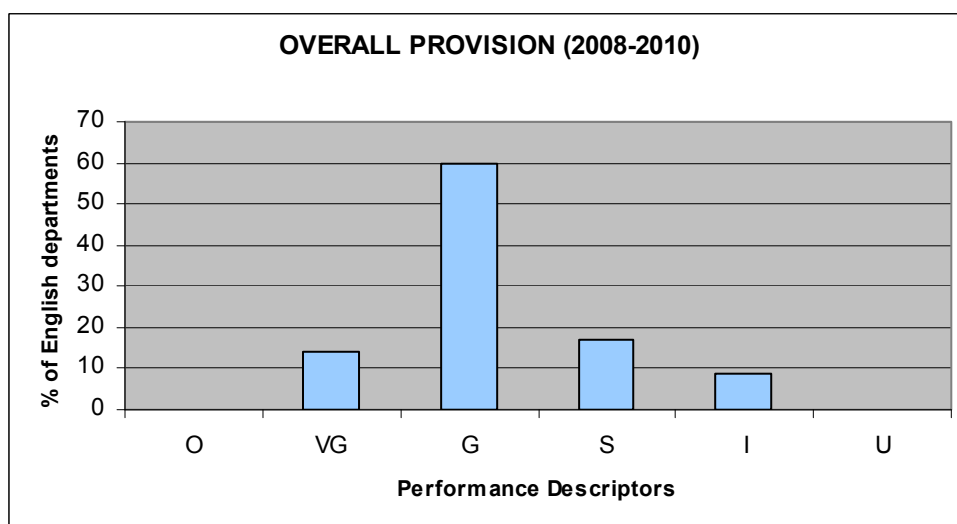
## 10. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS



10.1 Achievements and standards were good or better in the majority of English departments inspected. Good achievement in English enables pupils to participate more fully in life and learning; it empowers pupils to demonstrate the required skills and dispositions needed for the world within and beyond school. In those cases where achievement is good, pupils frequently take pride in what they can do and are positively disposed to overcome new challenges.

10.2 Where achievement is good or better, the pupils are enabled to access a wider range of appropriate learning and vocational pathways.

10.3 In a significant minority of English departments, achievements and standards are not good enough.



10.4 In most of the English departments inspected, the overall quality of the provision was good or very good.

## 11. CONCLUSION

It is hoped that this report will assist English departments as they endeavour to improve standards in English for all pupils, helping them become effective members of a rapidly changing society and giving them the opportunities to develop the skills to help shape the world of the future and develop as informed and thinking individuals.

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