

Intercultural awareness, bilingualism, and ESL in the International Baccalaureate, with particular reference to the MYP

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One of the most complex challenges, without doubt, of any international school curriculum is fitting everyone into it. Those adversely affected, if this challenge is ill-met, are chiefly students who come with little or no English, the instructional language of most international schools, and who must learn it, and absorb as much of the rest of the curriculum with it, as their limited language allows. The author, a long-time student of and spokesman for ESL in the curriculum, describes the state-of-the-art programme at his school, with a few suggestions to the IBO for improvement in the programme.

As of this month I have been teaching English to students from other cultures and with other mother tongues¹ for thirty-three years. For the last twenty years I have headed the ESL and Mother Tongue Department at the Vienna International School, whose students from 90 countries speak 65 different languages. What is evident to me, every single minute of every class that I teach, is that if students do not know the language of the school curriculum then they will not be able to perform to their true potential. They therefore need a well-devised programme that will enable them to own the key to the door of the curriculum. Over the years such a programme has been developed at the VIS; it includes all the elements necessary for supporting the students' bilingual language development, and also provides a programme of language awareness for teachers.

As David Graddol pointed out in his keynote speech 'The Future of English' at the ECIS ESL and Mother Tongue Conference in February 2000 in Vienna, English is already the de facto international language, with more and more people using it on a daily basis. Since people will also continue to speak their mother tongue, the basis of their cultural underlay, the world will become increasingly bilingual, and mother tongue speakers of 'English only' will become a minority in the broader spectrum of second language speakers of fluent English.

However, this process will require time, and those learning English as a second language will need a well thought out programme of instruction. Virginia Collier's research (Collier, 1999) gives indisputable evidence that five to seven years is the time needed for young second language learners to achieve proficiency in English equivalent to their English mother-tongue peers, and shows that a two-way developmental bilingual educational model, including content ESL, is the most successful one. This is a programme that serves both language minority and language majority students in the same classroom, using each group of students' first language for academic instruction at certain points during the programme with the aim of achieving bilingualism and biculturalism for both groups of students. Not many international schools have this model, which leads us to the central argument of this article: should international schools feel obliged to offer the best educational model possible for their students and, since they are 'international', should they offer an inclusive model, which guarantees ESL support across the board, with no extra tuition fee? Should they offer a mother-tongue programme; and an in-service training programme of linguistic and cultural awareness for teachers and administrators? I believe it will be difficult for schools to refuse such a commitment.

¹ Mother Tongue: a student's original language; in more than 90% of cases it is also the best academic, written language.

Three components of a good ESL programme

We now know much more than before about the best way of delivering an ESL programme, and as a secondary teacher I feel best qualified to talk about the situation in grades 6-12 (ages 11-18). After many years of experience, I am convinced that three components are necessary.

The *first component* is a systematic programme of ESL instruction, which should be taught to students in a separate group. This gives them the opportunity to learn the grammatical structure of English, to be taught how to write with fluency, to share the problems of being a second language learner with a teacher they know and trust, and generally to have support from the group. At the Vienna International School, ESL students have an ESL-English class (which parallels the mainstream English syllabus, using original and simplified texts) and an ESL-Foundation class (grammar, content-related work, etc.) These two classes, which take up 23% of the students' instruction time, form the fundamental part of the programme and there is no way that an international school can avoid this. (Of course there may be in addition ESL-Science, ESL-Geography, ESL-History, and so on.) It is worth adding that a class size of more than fifteen for an ESL class more or less defeats its purpose.

The *second component* is training in 'linguistic and cultural awareness' on the part of all mainstream teachers and administrators. At the IB Coordinators' Conference in Marbella, Spain in October 2000, the lack of teacher understanding of the concept of intercultural awareness and the basic ways of promoting it on a daily basis was raised as an issue. A course entitled 'ESL in the Mainstream',² in my opinion, provides a perfect model for this awareness training. It is a course which originated and was developed over many years in Australia, and though some elements are aimed at the Australian indigenous and immigrant population exclusively, my estimate is that at least 85% of it is relevant to international education. I have taken the initial course of certification, was impressed by the thoroughness, professionalism and usefulness of the materials (far exceeding the booklet I myself have developed over the years), and have passed on the knowledge acquired to a group of twelve colleagues. It complements the ESL students' language programme described above and will ensure that mainstream teachers are adapting their materials and techniques to support ESL students in their mammoth task of, in Collier's terms, having to do fifteen months' work in a year for seven years running.

A *third component*, offered at the VIS since 1978, is a mother-tongue programme. Continuing literacy in the mother tongue is clearly vital for ESL students: since they initially have poor English skills, they must keep up the development of their cognitive and academic skills in their mother tongue. As their English improves they will become increasingly bilingual, with all the benefits shown to accrue therefrom.³

Some international schools include these three components, but since international education is said to have come of age and English is now the world language, *all* international schools should be encouraged to follow the three-point model. At the very least, schools need to establish an ESL Department to give focus, solidity, and a base for ESL teachers (otherwise they are easily marginalized or swept away by cost-cutters). ESL teachers should not be 'tacked on' to English departments, where teachers often focus entirely on literature and have no training in applied linguistics and language teaching. And an 'appendage' is not in a good position to create a dynamic environment for second language learners.

² For more information contact DECS Publishing (Department of Education and Children's Services) eslms@unlockingtheworld.com

³ In a nutshell, 'Bilinguals have advantages in thinking, creativity, early metalinguistic awareness and communicative sensitivity. Research on the advantages of bilinguals is strong, and suggests bilinguals are aware of their languages at an early age, separating form from meaning, and having reading readiness earlier than monolinguals' (Baker, 2001).

ESL, bilingualism and the IB

In international education there is one constant: our schools have students, from many nations, who therefore speak many different languages. All IB programmes address this basic area with a wonderful diversity and richness of curricula, though, in my opinion not taking fully into account one basic fact: many (in some schools, most) students will begin the programme (PYP, MYP, or occasionally even the DP) with perhaps no, or an inadequate knowledge of the language of instruction. Anyone who has travelled to a country where the language is unfamiliar to him will have experienced difficulties ranging from confusion to disorientation to anger. Second-language students have to respond to an entire curriculum, every single day of their school career, in this sorry mode.

So what is the answer to which programme is best in this case? Collier and Thomas (1999), having collected records from two million students over twenty years, conclude that the type of programme that will enable ESL students to perform as well as, or better than, their mother tongue peers is a bilingual programme.

Here I must pause to reassure some sceptics: ‘bilingualism’ - the word, the concept, the thought — seems to have an extraordinary effect on many people, including educators, even international ones. As someone with a modest claim to bilingualism (with a bilingual family), I find this difficult to understand. It adds more power to the need for the sort of intensive (and obligatory) programme I am advocating. It is also worth pointing out again that English will not, and ought not ‘take over’ the world in coming years. Rather it is predicted that it will be the ‘additional’ language of those who preserve their mother tongue and culture, ‘English only’ speakers gradually becoming a minority.

In the MYP, students would be encouraged to continue taking classes in their mother tongue (including curriculum academic content), while taking a special course in the language of instruction. This consists of academic language support for students of the language of instruction, and the awarding of a certificate upon successful completion of the programme.

ESL students are not catered for by Language B, which is a Foreign Language programme. Foreign Language students follow a progressive course, from Level 1 to 5, for a limited number of hours a week. (Language A, which has a large literature component, is for students who are fluent in the language.) ESL students enter the Language B programme at any time in Levels 1-5, with varying levels of competence from Beginners to Advanced. They obviously make far more rapid progress than Foreign Language students because they are immersed in the language every hour of every school day.

Both Language A and Language B have Aims, Objectives and Assessment Criteria that students must meet in order to be successful, but the Language B criteria are not complex enough to encompass the range of linguistic skills ESL students must achieve in order to function in the rest of the programme, and the Language A criteria for English may not be reached by ESL students during their time in the MYP.

Thus what I believe to be necessary is a set of specific language objectives for ESL students in the MYP, clearly defined as such. They would require a higher level than Language B, but not so specifically focused as Language A. (They could be classified as Language ‘A2’⁴ objectives for MYP students.)

⁴ Language A2 is the term used in the Diploma Programme for students who are basically bilingual at a highly literate level. Students take Language A1 in Group 1 as their Mother Tongue or best academic language. They may take either Language A2 or Language B in Group 2. Language B is, as we have seen, a Foreign Language; Language A2 has a potentially high literature content. Success in both A1 and A2 leads to the award of a Bilingual Diploma, which, however, offers no gain in points (and there is the alternative route of the original Bilingual

The introduction to the IBMYP emphasizes the interrelatedness of various academic subjects, the fostering of intercultural awareness, and promoting a better understanding of, and respect for, other cultures. It is hard to see how these objectives can be seen as being addressed so long as a proportion of the students are excluded in any way from any part of the programme because of their lack of competence in English. Moderation in the MYP is in Level 5; how should ESL students be moderated in other subjects? ESL students need some years before they reach the same performance level as their English-mother-tongue peers. Furthermore, as bilinguals they will probably have certain advantages. How can they be fairly moderated in their various subjects while they are still 'on the way' and how can their bilingualism be rewarded?

Many ESL students will not be able to take lessons in their mother tongue in Level 5 (sadly for the students, very few international schools run mother-tongue programmes), thus they would not have a 'Language A' for MYP purposes and would not be able to qualify for the full MYP certificate. Cummins (2000) puts the case well: 'In the vacuum created by the absence of any proactive validation of their linguistic talents and accomplishments, bilingual students' identities become infested with shame'. For international school students this could be rewritten as 'bilingual students become lost and undervalued; they may lose their roots and their identity'. ESL students should be on the centre stage of any international curriculum. Instead they are subjected to a process of 'subtractive bilingualism', i.e. English replacing their mother tongue as their best academic language.

If the word 'international' used before 'curriculum' is to mean more than 'English everywhere, catering to mother-tongue (Western) interests' then ESL students' needs must be considered, and a proper curriculum (with Aims, Objectives and Assessment Criteria) put in place. Serious consideration should also be given to awarding a 'Bilingual Certificate' to those so gifted in the MYP.

At the Diploma level, a decision needs to be taken on the rigour required of students in their efforts to choose an appropriate programme. Language A2 filled a gap, but rules are not always followed. Students know that they can get 'more points' on BHL than A2 HL, and, though the IB guidelines state that 'Language B is for those who have been studying the language for between two and five years', it is not unusual to find students in the B programme who have not only been studying the language longer, but have been educated in it for their entire school career. I have heard of schools that allow all students to take their Mother Tongue as Language B. A firmer statement from the IB on this matter, plus a rethinking of the status of the Bilingual Diploma (giving it more 'value' and thus motivating students to take A2 instead of B) is much to be desired.

In the MYP there are 'Areas of Interaction' which rightly receive much attention in the promotion of the MYP as a curriculum for the contemporary world. However, without understanding the language of instruction no student is going to be able to access the Areas of Interaction; and without a suitable training programme teachers will not be able to help those students. Perhaps there should be a basic, central Area of Interaction focused on something similar to '*ESL in the Mainstream*', mentioned earlier, whose aim is to value and make the most of students' diverse backgrounds. Just as important is that the programme delivers explicit teaching which informs and supports learning across all areas of the school curriculum.

In 1990 a book about ESL programmes in international schools was published (Murphy, 1990). It was hoped that this would 'empower' ESL students and their teachers, heighten awareness among

international school administrators, and bring the second language issue to centre stage. However, my perception is that this has not been the case.

I have recently heard that an IB-MYP working party has been formed to discuss the situation of second-language students. The IB MYP now has the opportunity to put the second language issue at the centre of its educational philosophy, promoting bilingualism, intercultural awareness, and giving all students and staff in the programme the opportunity to possess the key to the large door of other languages, cultures and civilizations. If it does not, then the interpretation of 'international' will inevitably be seen as properly serving only the dominant linguistic and cultural group, the Western, English-speaking world.

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