Learning in a language other than mother tongue in IB programmes

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**Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme
and Diploma Programme
Learning in a language other than mother tongue
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IB mission statement

The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

To this end the organization works with schools, governments and international organizations to develop challenging programmes of international education and rigorous assessment.

These programmes encourage students across the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that other people, with their differences, can also be right.

IB learner profile

The aim of all IB programmes is to develop internationally minded people who, recognizing their common humanity and shared guardianship of the planet, help to create a better and more peaceful world.

IB learners strive to be:

Inquirers
They develop their natural curiosity. They acquire the skills necessary to conduct inquiry and research and show independence in learning. They actively enjoy learning and this love of learning will be sustained throughout their lives.

Knowledgeable
They explore concepts, ideas and issues that have local and global significance. In so doing, they acquire in-depth knowledge and develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines.

Thinkers
They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions.

Communicators
They understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others.

Principled
They act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual, groups and communities. They take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them.

Open-minded
They understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories, and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities. They are accustomed to seeking and evaluating a range of points of view, and are willing to grow from the experience.

Caring
They show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service, and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment.

Risk-takers
They approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought, and have the independence of spirit to explore new roles, ideas and strategies. They are brave and articulate in defending their beliefs.

Balanced
They understand the importance of intellectual, physical and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others.

Reflective
They give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and experience. They are able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations in order to support their learning and personal development.

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Preface

> Language stands at the center of the many interdependent cognitive, affective, and social factors that shape learning.
>
> Corson (1999)

Language is integral to exploring and sustaining personal development, cultural identity and intercultural understanding. As well as being the major medium of social communication, it is tightly linked to cognitive growth because it is the process by which meaning and knowledge is negotiated and constructed. It is the main tool for building our knowledge of the universe and our place in it. Language then, is central to learning, as well as to literacy, and is thus closely related to success in school.

As a result of the global population's increasing mobility, many learners in schools are constructing knowledge in a language that is not their mother tongue. A language profile of any one of these learners may demonstrate two or more languages in his or her learning continuum. This situation has created new challenges for learners, teachers and schools who, in the past, have assumed a common monolingual, monocultural setting. Various responses to these challenges, together with prolific research, have resulted in a wealth of expertise on good practices that nurture the valuable diversity of multilingual and multicultural classrooms to its full potential in developing internationally minded people. The IB is committed to sharing this expertise with all stakeholders.

Along with the research relating to language and learning, there has been an expansion of jargon. Terms for learners such as English as a second language (ESL), English as an additional language (EAL), second language learning (SLL) and English speakers of other languages (ESOL) carry with them differing connotations depending on cultural context. The term of reference in this document will be "**learners who are learning in a language other than their mother tongue**". The term **mother tongue** is used in the research literature in various ways. It may denote the language learned first; the language identified with as a "native" speaker; the language known best; the language used most. When used in this document, it includes all those meanings.

Purpose of this document

Many learners in IB programmes have rich and complex multilingual backgrounds. This means a large number of learners must access the majority of an IB programme curriculum in a language other than their mother tongue. A thorough understanding of how this situation impacts on learning is essential if schools are to ensure that the value of the learner diversity is not lost, that there is equal access to the curriculum for all learners and that the standards of conditions and practices in place foster a successful teaching and learning environment for everyone.

This document therefore provides a conceptual framework of language and learning that is applicable to all IB learners. The particular implications for schools in guaranteeing equal access to an IB programme for learners who are learning in a language other than their mother tongue are also described.

Philosophical underpinnings

The IB offers three high quality and challenging educational programmes for a worldwide community of schools, aiming to create a better, more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect.

Crucial for the success of the programmes is a rich development of language and literacy for all learners. The ability to communicate in a variety of modes in more than one language is essential to the concept of an international education that promotes intercultural understanding. Consequently, this requirement is built into the standards and practices of all three IB programmes as well as the IB learner profile. Recognizing that the language profiles of IB learners are diverse, and that sometimes one language may be more dominant than another in the same individual, IB programmes offer a variety of opportunities for learning more than one language.

Learners accessing an IB programme in a language other than their mother tongue are potentially able to become balanced bilinguals who are highly proficient, literate and knowledgeable in two or more languages. The IB recognizes this valuable potential and the need for guidelines for schools on the best practices for its nurture. Therefore, this document provides a framework for understanding language and learning, and how it informs good practice in IB programmes.

A conceptual framework of language and learning

Almost all education is language education.

Postman (1996)

Language learning in school is not a separate discipline isolated from all other learning (except when studied as linguistics). As well as being part of social and personal development, language learning in school is crucial for academic cognitive growth and the construction of knowledge. The language of academic discourses and the meaning and the knowledge content of any one discipline are closely interwoven. For example, the discourse of mathematics is distinct from the discourse of history and, in each case, is integral to constructing meaning. Similarly, the discourses of interpersonal communications vary depending on purpose. The language of a complaint will be different from that of a wedding invitation. The features of different discourses have been identified and are described in **linguistic genre theory**.

A linguistic genre is a particular text type created by a specific communicative situation. Examples of some common genres used in school are recount, narrative, report, explanation, argument and discussion. As learners in schools build knowledge in and across disciplines, they move along a continuum of language and learning that includes an ability to use and understand a range of academic linguistic genres.

A conceptual understanding of the language and learning continuum is critical in determining what should be the focus in the processes of language teaching and learning. It will inform the staging of these processes in the curriculum as well as the kinds of materials used and developed for learning.

Halliday (1985) expresses some of the complexity of the relationship between language and learning when he talks about "learning language, learning through language and learning about language". Three aspects of language and learning development are identified, although it must be emphasized that language development is a process of constructing meaning in which all three aspects, **learning language**, **learning through language** and **learning about language**, are operating at any one time. A separate examination of each, however, can provide a fuller understanding of what is involved.

Learning language

In the early stages of life when a child is first learning to communicate in a mother tongue, he or she is learning to use language symbolically in order to construct meaning and to interact. In a safe, secure and nurturing environment, rich in stimulating experiences, the child exchanges signals with others and learns to recognize, articulate and encode sounds, rhythms and intonations while associating them with meanings or concepts. He or she may associate the sound "bo", for example, with a ball and learn that by uttering the word the mother is likely to respond in some way; perhaps by rolling it for him. The child is building up a resource for meaning.

The child is also developing what Cummins (1979) calls **basic interpersonal communicative skills** or **BICS**. This is the dimension of language that will enable a child to interact socially with teachers and peers when he or she begins school. The language of such communication is supported by contextual cues as well as by gestures and facial expressions. Learners who already have communicative skills in a mother tongue may become functional in social communication in another language within two years because of the transfer of understanding already in place.

As well as oral skills, the young child develops the early literacy skills of recognizing and manipulating symbols for decoding and encoding written texts in order to read and write. This includes learning to form the shapes of the letters or characters of a writing system and their phonetic associations. Learners who have basic literacy skills in their mother tongue are able to transfer some of these understandings and concepts when learning another language.

Learning language is ongoing and is further fostered through reading.

Learning through language

At some point a child has enough language so that in addition to it being a communicative tool, it is also a flexible resource for further learning and cognitive growth. Language itself, rather than direct concrete experience, can be used to negotiate new meanings and construct knowledge about the world. Literacy becomes increasingly important in doing this as more abstract learning takes place through dense academic texts in school. The ability to access the language of these texts is referred to as a **cognitive academic language proficiency** or **CALP** by Cummins (1979).

For some learners in IB programmes, the language in which they are learning and developing their CALP is not the same as their mother tongue and this has implications for school organization as well as classroom practice. Depending on age and experience, for example, some learners may have a wealth of knowledge in a language other than that of the classroom. However, it can take up to seven years for learners who are using a language other than their mother tongue to attain the same levels in academic language proficiency as those expected for learners learning in a mother tongue.

Learning about language

Understanding the relationship of language and meaning and how language works in the construction of knowledge empowers the language user. A learner in an IB programme who has a critical language awareness will be able to make choices about language use according to his or her purpose and audience, as well as gain insight into the language choices of others. For example, an understanding of various linguistic genres means that a writer can choose the most appropriate genre for the task.

Some learners who are learning in their mother tongue may have an intuitive unconscious sense of how the language works and have a full range of choices and linguistic genres available to them. Learners who are using a language other than their mother tongue to access an IB programme cannot always be assumed to have this awareness, which therefore needs to be explicitly taught in such circumstances.

Conditions for learning

A threshold level of proficiency in cognitive academic language is essential for the learner participation and engagement that is necessary for subsequent success in an IB programme.

Cummins (2007) proposes that the four dimensions of teaching that are particularly important in ensuring learner participation and promoting engagement are:

- to activate prior understanding and build background knowledge

- to scaffold meaning

- to extend language

- to affirm identity.

Activate prior understanding and build background knowledge

New learning and understanding is constructed on previous experiences and conceptual understandings in a developmental continuum. Krashen (2002) stresses the importance of **comprehensible input** for learning to take place. If new information cannot be understood, it cannot be linked to prior knowledge and become part of deep learning. The psychologist Vygotsky (1978) describes a **zone of proximal development** (ZPD) within which new learning can take place if there is support. The ZPD lies beyond the zone of prior knowing, which is where a learner can work independently without support. Anything outside the ZPD is not yet able to be learned.
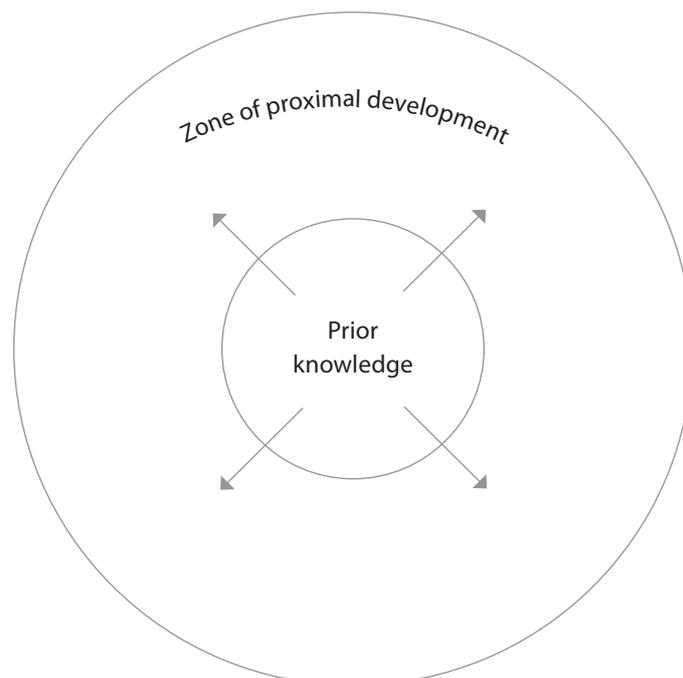

Zone of proximal development

Prior knowledge

Figure 1: Zone of proximal development

When planning the range of new learning that can take place in any individual, previous learning experiences or prior knowing must be taken into consideration.

It cannot be assumed that those learners who are learning in a language other than their mother tongue will necessarily all share the same previous learning and background knowledge. It may be, however, that these learners have a wealth of relevant background knowledge encoded in their mother tongue that can be activated as a base for further learning. However, the teacher may have to build up background knowledge in preparation for further learning.

Therefore, teachers should:

- explicitly activate learners' prior understanding using the mother tongue if appropriate

- use their knowledge of learners' prior understanding to differentiate tasks and activities that will build up the further background knowledge necessary for new learning to occur

- record information in learner profiles that will support planning for future differentiation

- consider the time and strategies necessary for activating and building up background knowledge when planning a unit of work or lesson.

Scaffold meaning

Teaching methodology has identified a variety of specific ways in which teachers can scaffold new learning in the ZPD to help learners understand text.

Scaffolding is a temporary strategy that enables learners to accomplish a task that would otherwise be impossible or much more difficult to accomplish. The use of a mother tongue to carry out research that would be impossible for the learner in another language is an example of scaffolding. Other scaffolding strategies may provide a more concrete and less abstract context for understanding. Examples of these are:

- visual aids

- graphic organizers

- demonstrations

- dramatization

- small, structured collaborative groups

- teacher language.

Learning about language such as word roots and learning how linguistic genres work in particular discourses are also valuable scaffolding strategies that give learners access to a rich diversity of sophisticated texts.

Scaffolding should foster learners' increasing independence in taking responsibility for developing strategies for their own learning, thus always extending the ZPD.

Extend language

As learners progress through the grades, they are required to read and write increasingly sophisticated texts in the content areas of the curriculum. The academic language of such texts reflects:

- the complexity and abstraction of the concepts that learners are required to understand

- the increased density of low frequency and technical vocabulary, many of which come from Latin and Greek sources (for example, photosynthesis, revolution)

- increasingly sophisticated grammatical constructions (for example, the passive voice).

Teachers can help learners extend their language and reading by combining high expectations with numerous opportunities for learner-centred practice and interaction with cognitively rich materials and experiences. Learners who read extensively both inside and outside an IB programme have far greater opportunities to extend their academic language and concepts than those whose reading is limited. Opportunities for enjoying reading are important. Equally important are opportunities for practising writing in a wide range of genres.

Affirm identity

Language is integral to identity, which in turn determines how a person will act. A mother tongue and any other languages used in constructing meaning are intimately connected to a person's relationship with the world and how they come to feel about that world. Social and emotional conditions for learning that value all languages and cultures and affirm the identity of each learner promote self-esteem and **additive bilingualism** (where another language and culture does not replace that of the mother tongue). They encourage the qualities, attitudes and characteristics identified in the IB learner profile, promoting responsible citizenship and international-mindedness. Conditions that do not affirm identity result in learners with poor self-esteem and **subtractive bilingualism** (where another language and culture demotes or replaces that of the mother tongue). Such learners will be unable to develop many of the qualities, attitudes and characteristics of the learner profile.

The identity of each learner must therefore be affirmed. This can be done by:

- promoting a class and school environment that welcomes and embraces the diversity of cultures and perspectives

- valuing and using the diversity of cultures and perspectives to enhance learning

- establishing a mother-tongue programme for all learners

- liaising with parents to establish understanding of how best to collaborate to achieve shared goals.

General implications for practice

Knowledge of the language and learning connection, and the particular significance of this for those learners who are not using their mother tongue to access an IB programme, leads to an understanding of the conditions and practices that need to be in place in schools if these learners are to be successful. The demands on the school to provide these conditions and practices should be clearly articulated in a whole-school language policy. The IB provides assistance on how to do this in the document *Guidelines for developing a school language policy* (April 2008).

Although some of the essential conditions and practices for ensuring that there is equity of access have already been described, there are others that must be included.

Since proficiency in cognitive academic language is inseparable from successful learning in school, it makes sense to think of all teachers as having some role in developing this. In other words, all teachers are language teachers. In order that all teachers are able to be effective in this, professional development, especially as it concerns those learners who are learning in a language other than their mother tongue, needs to be in place. Experts qualified in the field of linguistics should be available in school to work not only with learners but also with teachers, librarians, coordinators and administrators to ensure all are appropriately trained in the best practices for teaching those learning in a language other than their mother tongue. This professional development of teachers has implications for timetabling and time allocation in schools.

As already mentioned, learners learning in a language that is not their mother tongue may take up to seven years or longer to reach the same proficiency level in academic language as a person learning in a mother tongue. An informed consideration of this should be part of any school policy or decision that may impact on the success of these learners. This includes:

- mother-tongue programmes
- admissions policies
- assessment policies
- short- and long-term curriculum planning
- models of language support and programmes
- learner course choices
- teacher professional development
- host-language programmes
- teacher recruitment
- liaison with parents.

Planning for the success of learners who are accessing an IB programme in a language other than their mother tongue requires consideration of all the factors mentioned in this document.

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