

Using AIM in a PYP school

The ability to communicate in a variety of modes in more than one language is essential to the International Baccalaureate concept of an international education that promotes intercultural perspectives.

Language and learning in IB programmes, page 1

As part of its mission to develop intercultural understanding and internationally-minded learners, the International Baccalaureate (IB) focuses attention on the acquisition of additional languages. The three programmes (Primary Years Program, Middle Years Program and Diploma Program) are structured in such a way that graduating students of the Diploma Programme must prove their competence in both their mother-tongue and one additional language. At the same time, the IB recognises the reality of both a multilingual global community and a continually increasing number of multilingual classrooms (p.1) and therefore encourages its students to pursue language learning beyond these two requirements.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS THE PYP?

The Primary Years Programme (PYP) of the International Baccalaureate is first and foremost a framework and philosophy for teaching across the curriculum/across all subject areas. It is an inquiry based pedagogy that in many ways is designed around a programme of inquiry. Specific subject areas such as science, social studies, health, art, etc are integrated together and taught through the lens of six different units of inquiry each year. Each unit of inquiry falls under one of six transdisciplinary themes*, all six of which must be taught each year of the programme. (These six transdisciplinary themes and corresponding units of inquiry then make up a school's Programme of Inquiry.) In as much as possible, all subject areas are to be integrated into units of inquiry where natural, authentic links can be made in order to create an integrated, transdisciplinary educational experience for the students.

At the PYP level, students are required to have the opportunity to learn more than one language from at least the age of 7 (p. 16). This is one of just a couple of key directives from the IB as there are no specific guidelines as to how many hours students are required to spend in additional language classes, what level of achievement they should acquire or where on the language continuum they should be by the end of the programme. A second directive is targeted at all subject areas – that the curriculum should be inquiry-based and link in as often and authentically as possible to the units of inquiry that lay at the heart of the PYP curriculum. I have found that it is this directive – to link into the units of inquiry – that creates the most confusion in trying to create an

*The six transdisciplinary themes defined by the PYP are: Who we are, Where we are in time and place, How we express ourselves, How the world works, How we organize ourselves and Sharing the planet.

additional language programme in the PYP as many schools require specialists, including language teachers, to tie in to a pre-determined number of units of inquiry each year. However, such a requirement would be a school-based decision; the PYP Standards and Practices document does not make any specific expectations in this area.

MISCONCEPTIONS:

While integration across all subject areas is a worthy goal, this has led to a wide-spread misconception as to how the PYP is to be practically implemented in schools, particularly where specialty subject areas such as second or additional languages are concerned. The Programme of Inquiry (PoI) has mistakenly become the central pillar of a school's curriculum, into which everything else must be made to fit. However, the PYP is not a specific Programme of Inquiry; rather it is a framework or lens through which all subjects, including the PoI, can be designed.

Many second language teachers attempt to tie in their thematic units to the current units of inquiry in each grade level in order to comply with the PYP philosophy. However, this results in very superficial learning experiences for the students. Since students at this level do not have the linguistic capacity in their second language to fully explore the "big idea" (the central idea) and related concepts of the current unit of inquiry, the majority of class time is used to develop related vocabulary. By the end of this experience, they will have acquired some new words that are generally topic specific and not too common to their daily lives, which means they will rarely be used beyond the current unit and therefore soon forgotten. Little in this experience moves their general communication abilities beyond their current levels (and does little to enhance the learning within the unit of inquiry). Secondly, the often-missed key word in this directive is "authentic": any links made between specific subjects and units of inquiry need to be authentic, not forced. Learning is most effective when authentic, natural links can be made.

INTEGRATION:

Where additional or second languages are concerned, the most meaningful integration happens through the five essential elements of the PYP: knowledge, concepts, transdisciplinary skills, action, and the learner profile and attitudes.

The school I teach at, Branksome Hall in Toronto, Ontario, has been a PYP school since 2003. We implemented the use of AIM in September, 2008. It is currently the foundation for our French programme from Senior Kindergarten through Grade 5. One reality that must be kept in mind when implementing either or both of these programmes

is that the shift takes a significant amount of time. Often, both of these programmes involve a substantial re-orientation in thinking about teaching and learning and different individuals take this journey at different rates. When we began using AIM, we focused on doing it well and keeping it as a stand-alone subject. Now that we have achieved that, we have begun to bring the two programmes together, both at the classroom level as well as in a more “behind the scenes” way.

Our integration of AIM and the PYP has begun at the planning level. We are currently developing a new scope and sequence that is in line with both the new (higher) levels of student abilities at each level as well as the PYP requirements for a scope and sequence (the inclusion of conceptual understandings, knowledge, transdisciplinary skills and attitudes). We drew on both the PYP Language Scope and Sequence and the Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum documents.

Our long-term planning is now being done using the PYP planner, a document that all PYP teachers are expected to use. This planning begins with the central idea - the “big idea” that we want students to grasp and integrate into their understanding of the world. In specific subjects that deal with multiple strands of learning, this central idea can span multiple grade levels. For example, we are currently developing three general “strands”: one for the plays and all the playing with and exploring of the language that comes with it; one for an additional literacy programme we have launched; and one for working with understanding grammatical concepts. Each of these strands will be defined by a different central idea, which will then be carried across all grade levels that are involved in that particular aspect of our programme.

Planning for each unit then continues by determining the concepts that are most beneficial for students and their related lines of inquiry. The eight official key concepts of the PYP include such things as function (ex. how does the language work?), change (ex. how do verbs change in French?), and connection (ex. how is this connected to what I already know?). Teachers are not constrained by these eight concepts; related concepts provide a plethora of subject-specific concepts to better focus students’ understanding. An example of the use of one of the main concepts in a play is use of perspective with the play *Chat Angora*, when students are asked to either retell or continue the story from the point of view of a different character in the story.

The attributes of the IB Learner Profile can also be taught to students and integrated into daily speech. For example, when pointing out either principled or unprincipled behaviour by a student, the question “Est-ce que ça c’est intègre?” can be asked. Character studies of the characters in the plays can be done by asking students to identify two learner profile traits that the character exhibits and then to justify their

choices. After our final play presentations, we have the students reflect on the process of rehearsals as well as their performance. This year we are adding in an additional reflection question asking them what learner profile traits they displayed throughout the process and again to justify their choices.

(Additionally, AIM shares the characteristics of an inquiry-based classroom. This would be the subject of something further...)

LANGUAGE B IN THE PYP: FRONT-LOADING

The initial stages of any unit of inquiry involve “front-loading” activities; giving the students the basic knowledge they need to best develop their understanding of the central idea. If we take a long-term view of language learning, we can say that the students’ PYP years are their second language front-loading activities. Language learning is a multi-year process. It took us many years of full-time immersion to acquire our mother tongue effectively; we cannot expect the acquisition of our second language to be a quick, painless activity. In order to achieve the bilingual goal that the IB seeks, we must begin by being exposed to useful words that appear and re-appear in a variety of meaningful and authentic contexts and that we can explore and play with, just like when we learned our first language. The content of the classroom context must also be engaging and interesting to the students. Young children especially learn best and make sense of their world through play. AIM provides all this to the students. Just as elementary school is seen as a time for students to “learn to read” and middle and senior schools are seen as a time for students to then “read to learn”, the PYP second language experience should be one in which content (the plays) is used to learn the language (to develop communication skills) so that in later years, the language itself becomes the vehicle through which further content is acquired.

TEACHING & LEARNING LANGUAGES

The IB structures its language continuum on Michael Halliday’s description of the three strands of language and learning: learning language; learning through language and learning about language (p. 21). As stated previously, one of the goals of learning a language is so that it can be used as the instrument for further learning in other areas. Page 24 of the IB document *Language and learning in the IB programmes* quotes O’Neal and Ringler: “The academic disciplines of school curriculum make heavy language demands on learners. They must be proficient in the academic language of instruction if they are to have access to the curriculum.” In other words, if they do not have a sufficient language base, the desired learning cannot take place. Granted, some learning can take place, though it will not be to the preferred depth. Fortunately, the IB

also does provide a significant amount of local choice as stated on page 14: “The short- and long-term planning of courses and language options that a school offers will depend on each unique context and should be clearly articulated in the school’s language policy.” (I would suggest that this allows schools to determine the specific language programme that best suits their needs.)

In Section 5: *A common pedagogy for language and learning*, the IB bases its recommendations on the work of Jim Cummins: “Jim Cummins proposes a pedagogy that emphasizes four dimensions of teaching that are particularly important in ensuring learner participation, promoting engagement and successfully constructing understandings. They are:

1. activating prior understanding and building background knowledge
2. scaffolding learning
3. extending language
4. affirming identity

The first three of these four dimensions are an integral part of how AIM works at both the daily and unit (play) level. The fourth is also present, but more implicit: in acquiring the foundation of a second language, students are on the road to defining themselves as bilingual.

(NOTE: All quotes are taken from the IB document *Language and learning in IB programmes*.)