

## Language Conundrum

### *The language conundrum in international education*

The purpose of this article is to show how teachers can draw on the richness of the language diversity of individual backgrounds, and to give some tips for language planning.

The place of languages in international education is a very important one, and this position is recognized by the IBMYP (Middle Years Programme of the International Baccalaureate) and the IB Diploma. For the former, it is necessary to follow a Language A and a Language B course (comprising two of the eight spokes on the schematic "wheel"), and for the latter there is a more sophisticated programme where out of a total of six subjects at least two, and up to three, languages may be chosen, with the possibility of gaining a Bilingual Diploma.

Language A in the IBMYP is the language of instruction and the target language of all students; Language B is a foreign language. This simple definition belies the complex language make-up of many international schools, but it does give a framework which can be adapted and developed.

In Any school containing students from many language backgrounds, where there is one language of instruction (Language A), the students will have varying degrees of competence in that language. There will be native speakers of the language (group 1); students who are not native speakers but who have a 'native-like' competence in the language (group 2); and students who are at varying stages of development in learning the language (group 3). The

first group will have no intrinsic problems with the course.

The second group are in a similar position and though they may not be naturally acquainted with the target language (Language A), they are in many ways advantaged as they have another language (their own mother tongue) and culture and are thus bilingual, with all the benefits this skill provides. The third group have a large task in front of them, and it is important that the immensity of this task be understood by all: teachers, administrators, and parents. For some students, the switch to a new language, not only for day-to-day social discourse but for use in a sophisticated and complex written mode, comes quite easily; for many, however, the difference between their own language and culture and the target language, the pressures from home and school, and the amount of (or lack of) literacy in their own language are all key factors to be considered in developing a varied programme to suit their needs.

The students in group 1 will be in a strong position for Language A, but may have no knowledge of another language; thus from the point of view of number of languages known, they are the 'poorest' students in the programme. Most international schools encourage the student body to take the host country language as Language B; or, if the language A is the same as the host country language, one of the generally accepted European languages. Students in group 2 already have two working languages: the target language and their own mother tongue. For many of them, the language B at their school may be their own language - usually when it is the host country language and there are large numbers of host country students at the school; in this case they will be doubly advantaged, and well on the road to a high level of biliterate bilingualism. Those who are not in this situation, but who have a mother tongue which corresponds neither to the Language A or Language B of the school will be learning a third language when taking the Language B. This raises the important issue of which Language B a school should offer, and also the issue of supporting students' mother tongues, both discussed later.

Students in group 3 are those with the largest task in front of them; they have to tackle the whole school curriculum in a language which they either do not speak at all or which they have varying degrees of knowledge in. It is important

that schools recognize the enormity of the task and instill an awareness of the need for patience and support in all mainstream teachers.

Long experience at the Vienna International School has shown that there is no single category of student in this last group (we are talking about ESL students in schools where English is the Language A). We do know that a student who comes to the school with no knowledge of the school language may take from 5-7 years to achieve the same level of competence and performance as his or her own fluent Language A peers; we know that achievement may depend very much on ability in the mother tongue; and we know that once competence in both languages is achieved, the student may well have cognitive benefits that monolingual students do not have. Experience also shows that some students at the Vienna International School can be well integrated in the regular school programme after three years (often arriving with no knowledge of the Language A) whatever the similarities or differences between this language and their mother tongue; some students require longer, but are good performers at a later age; and some students experience great difficulty and seem to have a history of never really getting on top of the language. For the first two categories mentioned, a specially-designed programme of language support is essential, providing students with all the language tools they need to be able to "catch up" with their peers; for the third category it is important to identify each individual and provide whatever back-up is deemed necessary - this may mean involving specially trained teachers. However, again experience shows that in the long-term such students are able to reach reasonable levels of achievement; identifying their needs is the important factor, and informing teachers of the specific characteristics of each individual; tolerance and patience over a number of years provide surprising benefits.

The Language B foreign language chosen by the school will often be the host country language, especially when this is a well-known language or one considered to be 'useful' in the world. If this is the case, it is convenient as it encourages students (and possibly even staff!) to become more involved with the local community.

However, the Language B programme can also arrive at a similar situation to that of the Language A one - there may be native speakers of the language, those who have been at the school a

long time and who have a near-native knowledge, and genuine foreign learners (recent arrivals). In this case the second group and the third group may contain students who have long-term language learning problems and who need careful monitoring and support.

The importance of literacy in the mother tongue before learning any other language is a factor that has now been largely recognized by educators, but perhaps not so much by parents and students. Ways of encouraging both parties to keep up the students' mother tongue are by promulgating information as widely as possible and facilitating classes in the languages concerned during or after school. Information given at the Vienna International School includes the following:

1. It is a fact that instruction in a student's mother tongue will help him or her become more proficient in English.

2. Many students who have been at VIS for some time can talk quite well in their mother tongue (if not English), but know nothing of their own culture, history, or literature and have poor writing skills.

3. To begin mother-tongue classes just before the IB exam is often too late; it is continuity that counts - beginning in the Primary School. Students need to prepare for offering the language as one of the subjects for the International Baccalaureate Diploma or Certificate at the end of the T3/4 courses.

4. Many students who have just arrived at VIS think they don't need classes in their mother-tongue as "they have only just left their country and are good at writing their own language". Maybe this is true, but they will quickly lose these skills if they do not practice them and they should also keep in touch with their own culture, history and literature.

5. They may need to meet entry requirements for universities in their home country.

Finding and training teachers for the various mother tongues is a time-consuming process but is an important factor in an international school. Ideally the mother tongue programme will be offered as an alternative during the foreign language slot, but an after-school programme attracts a significant number of students.

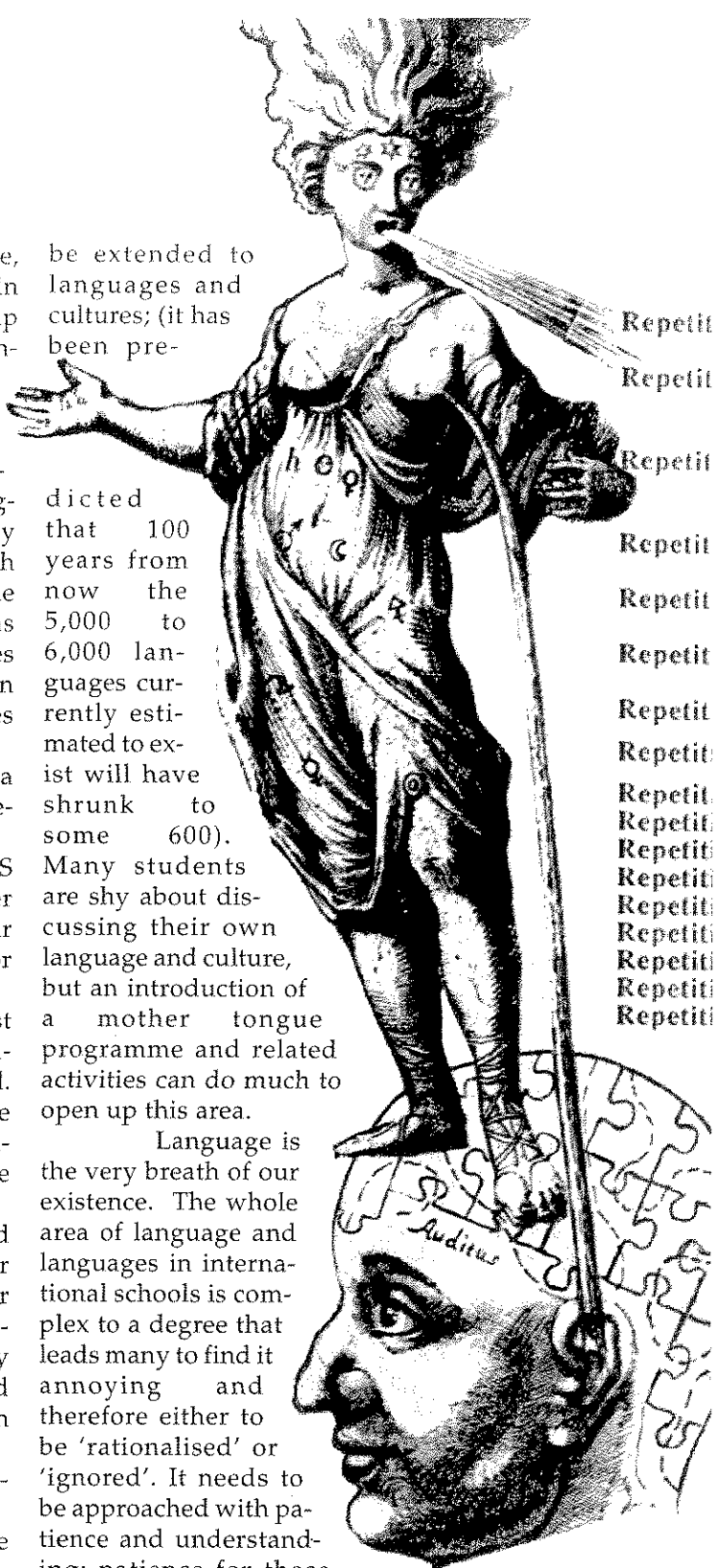
Language diversity is an important factor in a multi-faceted world, and increasing concern about the environment and preserving the richness of variety in all forms of nature should

be extended to languages and cultures; (it has been pre-

dicted that 100 years from now the 5,000 to 6,000 languages currently estimated to exist will have shrunk to some 600).

Many students are shy about discussing their own language and culture, but an introduction of a mother tongue programme and related activities can do much to open up this area.

Language is the very breath of our existence. The whole area of language and languages in international schools is complex to a degree that leads many to find it annoying and therefore either to be 'rationalised' or 'ignored'. It needs to be approached with patience and understanding; patience for those students who need more time to develop the many skills involved, and understanding for the staff who work in this area.



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