

Second language learners in the MYP

Maurice Carder outlines a three-point model

The IBMYP has decided to address the educational situation of second language learners in the MYP. In February a group of educators from international schools around the world met in Cardiff to begin work on a guide for the area. This news can only be greeted with a deep sigh of relief and thanks that the situation of second language learners – overwhelmingly ‘ESL students’ in the global sea of English in which we swim – is finally being recognized and considered as educationally important.

To those of us who are directly involved in this subject area (as I have been all my professional life) it is, of course, long overdue. In spite of the wealth of research evidence about, and educational materials for, second language learners, international education (which depends to a great extent on ESL students to fill up places) has tended to peripheralise and downplay the issue, seeing such students as a factor (often a ‘thorny one’) to be ‘coped with’ rather than fully integrated and placed at centre stage.

Many international schools even require that such students pay extra if they do not have a sufficient level of English, or that parents sign a waiver agreeing to withdraw children from school after a year or two if they have not progressed sufficiently. ‘International’ seems in such cases to need interpreting in an Orwellian way – ‘pursuing western interests, in an English-speaking globalized world’. Some parents accept such an interpretation gladly: English is the route to ‘success’.

It is thus gratifying to see that the IBMYP group is following a path based on now solidly-based research (on some two million second language learners over a 20-year period¹) which shows that establishing and maintaining literacy in students’ mother tongues (or best, or first, or academic language – terminology abounds) while developing the second language is the way to ensure academic success; pursuing an ‘English-only’ path gives initial gains, but is the road to academic failure in the long-run.

The MYP has now taken a stance on this issue: international schools world-wide need to follow this up. How? By employing well-qualified ESL specialists who will set up integrated

programmes containing three elements:

- An ESL programme based on teaching English through content materials, as well as the nuts and bolts of grammar, vocabulary, and providing a ‘pastoral’ home.
- A mother tongue programme, through which students are taught their mother tongue, from Primary up to IB Diploma.
- An in-service programme of ‘cultural and linguistic awareness’ for all mainstream teachers and administrators².

Much is currently being made of the ‘gap’ in global perceptions between the USA and the European Union. Perhaps if international schools gave more positive recognition to and encouragement of bilingualism then they could more genuinely contribute their share towards international understanding.

For detailed information about setting up a mother tongue programme, contact: mcarder@vis.ac.at

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¹ ‘A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students’ Long-Term Academic Achievement’. The quickest and easiest way to review this is to visit the website: www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/ilaa/1.les.html

This gives a 96-page summary, with charts, graphs, evidence and recommendations of Professors Virginia P Collier and Wayne P Thomas.

² Such a programme is ‘ESL in the Mainstream’ (see review in the last *IS* Magazine, Vol. 4, Issue 2, by Bora Ranic, page 17). Information about this excellent model can be obtained from: admin@eslmainstream.com or visited at: www.eslmainstream.com