ESL in International Schools in the IBMYP: the elephant under the table.

Maurice Carder *International Schools Journal Vol XXXI No1 November 2011 pp.50-58*

At present, Second Language Learners (SLLs) – largely ESL students in international schools as English is the language of instruction in some 90% of these schools - are not given any special status or programme in the MYP as regards curriculum or assessment, the two prime areas that the IB delivers for its clientele. They are referred to the language B programme, one of the eight curriculum areas on the MYP octagon. Sources in the IB state that there will not be a separate track for SLLs.

Foreign Language

Language B students are those who are studying a foreign language. Typically they begin the language in year 1 of the MYP and progress to Year 5, where they gain certification. MYP students are required to take a language B and follow the language B programme, which is one of the eight MYP curriculum areas.

In schools in Europe and the USA the language B is most often French or Spanish. This is also the case with most International Schools worldwide, though there may be regional variations where, for example, Chinese or German are offered. Currently three levels are available: Foundation, Standard and Advanced. This will change in 2013 when there will be a new language B Guide, and reportedly there will be six 'phases' available in every year, allowing more flexibility of attainment at every stage.

Language B students usually have three or four lessons a week throughout their five years, and the assessment criteria focus on their language competence as foreign language speakers. Language B students do not require the language for use in school. They learn the language as one subject, of many.

The MYP provides a Guide for language B which is obligatory.

Second Language (for discussion of terminology in this area see Carder, 2009)

SLLs, or ESL students, on the other hand, come to a school with varying degrees of competence in the language, usually English, which will be required for academic use in all school subjects: in social use, and in almost every aspect of their lives, thereby involving their emotional and cognitive selves. It may eventually become their best language and be used for academic advancement, leading to career choice and general usage. They can be described as 'developing language A students.'

The education of ESL students has become a highly political issue in national systems, especially in the USA, Canada, Australia and England (see Carder, 2008). Crawford and Krashen (2007:10) write that 'Perhaps no other area of education has been more politicized in recent years.' Such students are immigrants, have a specific socio-economic status, and are not described as an elite. On the other hand, students in international schools are described as affluent (Baker, 2006:252), and live in what I have conceptualised as an 'international space' (Carder, 2010) in which national politics need play no part and educators can look to provide the best pedagogical model. However, from my experience the majority of international school Directors come directly from a background of English-speaking national systems and bring their knowledge of ESL provision with them from those systems. The result is often that ESL is seen as low priority, taught by unqualified teaching assistants, 'parents who speak English', or 'English lit.' graduates, no separate ESL department, and no delineated ESL curriculum. Such an approach results in all those concerned with ESL – teachers and students – being perceived as peripheral and with low status, or being 'supported.' This has immeasurable negative effects on the education and self-esteem of ESL students, often with lifelong implications.

It seems to be the view in many administrative circles that there is no agreed programme for ESL students, seeing them as a 'problem;' something that 'can be dealt with by all teachers;' or 'they seem to do OK in the long run.' There is much research evidence (e.g. Cummins, 2000) to counter such unpedagogical whimsies, which should be challenged whenever they are made. ESL students who do not have well-constructed programmes fail in comparison with native-speaking peers (Thomas and Collier, 1997).

An MYP guide was compiled for *Second Language Acquisition and Mother Tongue Development* but it is little known, and in need of revision; it is not obligatory. At MYP language B workshops the focus is on Foreign Language, and ESL is rarely mentioned.

The components of a well-designed model for ESL students in the middle years.

There are three basic components (see Carder, 2007):

- Maintaining and developing fluency and literacy in the mother tongue, which transfers to the second language
- Providing training in cultural and linguistic awareness for all staff and administrators, and making parents aware of the issues involved in bilingual development
- Providing comprehensible input in English, for beginners by providing ESL instruction in parallel classes; for intermediates by providing 'sheltered'instruction in academic subjects

The first and third components have been endorsed as a model for international schools by Collier (in Murphy 2003:8), a world leader in research on SLLs' needs:

> When the demographics of a school population include a multilingual student group with small numbers of each language represented, *then mother tongue literacy development for each language group,* combined with ESL taught through academic content, may be the best choice for support of non-English-speakers' needs.

Setting up and running a mother tongue programme is a demanding but rewarding task (Carder, 2007).

The second component can be provided by such courses as *ESL in the Mainstream*, or *Teaching ESL Students in Mainstream Classrooms*, for which information can be found at www.unlockingtheworld.com. It is important not only that all teachers *and* administrators participate in these course but that awareness is maintained and controlled through on-going appraisal systems. It is equally important for parents to be made aware of what their children are involved in through booklets and information evenings. Many parents are so grateful to have their children in an international school that they will accept any type of programme, and the 'promise of English,' the world language and key to success, may blind them to the vast task of language-learning and personal stress awaiting their children (Krashen,2006).

Unfortunately, unscrupulous or unknowing international school Boards and Directors are frequently a party to attracting parents to a school with poorly designed provision for ESL students.

The third component, a credible ESL programme, is the hub around which the other two components revolve. The aim of the programme is for children to reach a level of Second Language Instructional Competence (SLIC) where they can achieve at a similar level to their native English-speaking peers. An excellent summary of all of these issues, including straightforward explanations of how the subject of bilingualism has been politicised, can be found in Crawford and Krashen, 2007, and also Thomas and Collier, 1997. A good ESL programme in the MYP years will have an ESL class for Beginners in which over the year students may exit in controlled stages to sheltered instruction classes in maths and possibly Science. Intermediate students will require sheltered instruction in maths, science, social studies/humanities and English (literature) for a longer period.

> Sheltered subject-matter teaching is a form of communication-based ESL instruction in which the focus is on academic content – science, math, history, and so forth – taught in a way that is comprehensible for students with limited English. The goal in the minds of both the students and the teacher is mastering subject-matter, not particular rules of grammar or vocabulary. In this way, students absorb academic English naturally and incidentally, while they are learning useful knowledge. If students are tested, they are tested on subject matter, not language (Crawford and Krashen, 2007: 24).

The last point shows up another huge difference between foreign language and SLLs – MYP language B assessment criteria refer to language, whereas ESL students (beginners excepted) need to be assessed on 'sheltered content,' i.e. the quality of the content, not the language. How long students remain in the sheltered ESL class is an important issue: many schools 'rush' the exit process in order to respond to parental demands, or those of administration. The weakness of many ESL programmes is that students are transferred to the mainstream before they have acquired enough SLIC to do well in content classes. '5-8 years' is the time shown by research for SLLs to score at the 50^{th} percentile level on tests of reading comprehension in English. This is a high level of achievement, and a SLIC level can be acquired in a shorter time.

Summarising an entire academic field in an article such as this will not do it justice, and is another reason for school leaders to ensure they employ well qualified ESL staff, and listen to their advice. This is possible, as I found in my former school. Although in the USA 'only 18 percent of ELLs' teachers are certified in English as a second language' (Crawford and Krashen, 2007:14), and in England there is no statutory provision for an 'EAL' qualification, I always insisted that ESL teachers had an MA in ESL, TESOL, Applied Linguistics, or similar: there are plenty of such teachers out there looking for employment in international schools. It was written in 1990 (Carder, p. 81, in Murphy, 1990) that 'An ESL department is generally seen as the hub of the school with the spokes leading out to the other departments,' and elaborated on by Gallagher (2008: 104) in diagrammatic form with the spokes leading out to all aspects of students' school lives. An ESL department should certainly not come under the aegis of a SEN department: although there may be 'grey areas' in determining students' needs, to put regular ESL students in with SEN students is educationally a profoundly negative experience for potentially high-flying ESL students and simply shows the ignorance of those devising school structures.

Assessment

ESL students require specific modes of assessment. A key factor in language learning is motivation, and for Beginners in English to receive low grades from content teachers when the students are doing their utmost to work their way up the ladder of the entire school curriculum is clearly counter-productive and severely de-motivating. Portfolio work, with teacher comments is the solution in this case, but there is no provison for this in the MYP. As Cummins comments

> Policy-makers in English-speaking countries have generally considered the implications of state-mandated assessment schemes for ELL (English Language Learning) students only as an afterthought. The typical picture is that assessment regimens are initially mandated by the central authority with vague directions regarding the criteria for exemption of certain students or for accommodations of various kinds for students who might be unable to participate in the assessment without support (e.g. some . . . ELL students) (Cummins, 2000, p. 145).

> There is considerable consensus in Australia about the need for separate benchmarks for ELL students (Cummins, 2000, p.152).

The first comment accurately reflects the IB approach: ELLs have to follow the language B, foreign language, assessment criteria. ESL students are best assessed by multiple measures, including classroom grades, projects, portfolios of student work. At higher levels of proficiency the amount of 'numerical assessment' can be increased and portfolio work reduced. ESL students in content classes can be given modified grades.

It is important for ESL students to be treated with equity, a subject elaborated on by Eithne Gallagher (2008). In the context of the MYP this will include an equal right to certification. If SLLs leave the SL programme before Year 5 they will not gain certification in the language, and may score at a lower level in the medium of instruction language A (usually English). In addition, to qualify for full certification at the end of Year 5, students must have completed study in Language A. For ESL students this means their mother tongue. Most international schools do not (regrettably) offer such courses. This means that ESL students would not qualify for full certification – after working diligently at their English language skills. This once again peripheralises and stigmatizes and de-motivates ESL students – the very students who are at the core of international schools – by making them the only ones not to qualify for full certification.

Trends in the IB

Sources in the IB have stated clearly that there will be no separate track for SLLs in the MYP. From communications from the IB it is possible to discern a current focus on 'catering for contexts around the world' where there is 'no one model that fits all contexts'. Such a mindset appparently makes it impossible to provide a specific model for international schools. International schools, though providing the original inspiration for the IB, now make up only 12% of the IB clientele (Matthews, 2009). However, it has been suggested (Edwards, 2009) that we live in an age of 'superdiversity,' implying that SLLs are on the increase in national systems as much as in international schools. Crawford and Krashen (2007) estimate that 33% of students in the USA will be ELLs by 2043 (op.cit., p. 13). Therefore it may be thought to be in the interest of the IB to devise a specific response for the curriculum and assessment needs of SLLs – with the caveat of '**if** ELLs in national systems were in the same socioeconomic bracket.'

The IB has recently produced some useful papers making it clear that IB students in all their diversity are multilingual and that multilingualism is a resource for the IB 'vision'. However, it is the daily routine and specific programmes that are the lifeblood of teachers' and students' lives in schools, and comprehensive as stance papers may be, the reality in schools is not supported by distant rhetoric. A distinct curriculum and assessment are needed for ESL students in the MYP. Any policy will depend on its detail, relevance, and above all its obligatory implementation in a school as a programme: otherwise it is simply one more piece of paper to add to the administrator's file and ticked during the ten-yearly authorisation visit.

A review of journal articles about the IB provides useful insights into why such a separate area may not be being instituted. Bunnell (2008) writes that:

> The IB has become a familiarised commodity, and thus is very much part of the hypercapitalist transition of society. … The IB has an image, evident in articles in the popular press, of being a curriculum of 'high flyers.' This entrenched perception now looks difficult to reverse, and is a moot point for many international educators. … The education of the global elite … contradicts strikingly with the inclusive notion of global citizenship.

Doherty (2009) writes:

> I do not want to diminish what the IB may offer its students, but I do want to highlight how its current appeal stems not so much from its internal design as from its opportunistic fulfilment of a number of current political agendas. … Parents will be buying the gift-wrapped promise constructed in the media before sampling the actual product, and having invested in that choice, will carefully protect and promote their chosen brand and their high-stakes investment in its forms of distinction.

Bunnell (2011a) further comments:

> The growth of the IB continues its random path largely among Western-oriented, English-speaking countries, whereas many areas of the world remain mostly untouched by the IB. For developing countries … the growing image of the IB as an 'Anglo-centric' product may be a barrier.

Finally, Bunnell (2011b) also notes, with reference to the huge, rapid expansion of the IB:

> Since late 2008, a new phenomenon has appeared – a willingness by IB insiders (mainly head teachers in international schools, such as Toze and Matthews) to openly voice concern about the growth and their perception of quality being compromised.

It is possible to draw conclusions from these insights that since the IB is focusing more on a particular type of clientele, the majority of which is now middle class and in North America, having a set curriculum and programme for ELLs would diminish from the marketing potential of the IB in a context where ELLs are seen as immigrants.

International School clientele

International schools are service schools for the international community, which can be loosely defined as an internationally mobile elite who are involved in diplomacy, business and other international affairs. Kymlicka (2007:14), discussing these elites, states that 'if international organisations have stumbled in their efforts [of formulating norms and standards regarding the governance of ethnic diversity], at least part of the explanation is that they have received bad advice from the network of academics, advocates and donors.' It could be argued that the provision of a rigorous model of SL pedagogy for international school SLLs in the MYP would be in the interests of the whole international community; and conversely, a poor or non-existent model would have a deleterious effect on the education of the children of this community. Elites are the primary focus of international schools and the IB was once thought to be available to provide programmes aimed specifically at them; SLLs form a majority in many IB international schools. Kymlicka adds, when talking about participation in discussions about minority rights, that (p.15): 'I've often sensed an unspoken agreement to ignore the elephant under the table.' This is certainly how I perceive the situation of our efforts in the IB: SL students and teachers are politely ignored, while being given the 'option' of being included under language B. But, to reiterate, in international schools the 'minority' is a majority, and there needs to be a level playing field, where provision of pedagogical programmes is based on academic potential and latest research, not national political issues of 'them and us: immigrants and residents.' It is unfortunate, but necessary to state, that much administrative treatment of SLL matters comes under the thinly disguised racism of 'linguicism,' wittingly or unwittingly.

At the March 2011 ECIS ESL & Mother Tongue conference in Dusseldorf I gave a talk about the issues described in this article (handout available at http://edmundo.ecis.org/new/conference/esl/Documents/Carder2.pdf). Of the 60 or so signatories to the petition supporting my handout were five of the conference speakers (see their handouts at http://edmundo.ecis.org/new/conference/esl/index.asp), all prominent and respected professionals in the area under discussion, and six ESL department heads in International Schools that I could identify – there may have been more. A guest speaker at the conference later commented: 'ESL students make up at least (if not more than) 50% of the ECIS student population. And yet, I leave every conference with empathic frustration upon hearing the stories about ESL teachers being treated like second class citizens in their schools.' To which I would add – as are ESL students.

I look to the IB to turn this situation around by recognising the reality of the situation and also the huge potential in terms of academic excellence that could emerge through providing an appropriate programme for SLLs in the MYP: the IB can only benefit from such a move. Well-qualified and experienced ESL teachers represent a huge resource, literally bursting with expertise and enthusiasm to improve the learning trajectories of SLLs in International Schools, but they are largely dismissed as second class citizens, with the resulting negative treatment of their SL students. If the IB takes no action, ESL, EAL, TESOL, ELL, SLL teachers may have no choice but to act as 'positive deviants,' a term devised by Parkin (2010) to describe those who aim to change thinking in organisations in matters relating to sustainability. But they might not have their contracts renewed or get good references if they try too hard.

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