

Research summary

The effectiveness of literature on acquisition of language skills in the high school context

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June 2017

Background

This study explored the use of literature to support language acquisition in International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) language B classrooms. The study involved case studies at three different IB World Schools in Europe and an online survey distributed to nearly 500 schools offering the DP. In conducting the study, researchers aimed to learn more about how teachers choose literary texts, how they use these texts in their teaching and their views on the impact of using literature in language B teaching.

Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, consisting of three school case studies alongside a 118-item online survey. Each case study involved a variety of data collection methods, including teacher interviews, student discussions and student focus groups, open student questionnaires and lesson observations, as illustrated below.

	Teachers interviewed	Lessons observed	Students involved in discussions
School A	9	3 lessons: English, French, Spanish	26
School B	14	7 lessons: German, French, Spanish, Italian	22
School C	9	7 lessons: English, French, Spanish	32

Table 1. Overview of case studies

The questionnaire included mainly closed items, using 6-point Likert scales, but also included a number of open-ended questions to elicit additional information from the respondents. A total of 264 respondents answered the open-ended questions.

Findings

General views on literature and language teaching

Both the survey respondents and the teachers in the case study schools were overwhelmingly in favour of using literature in language teaching, stressing the general contribution of literature in education as well as the linguistic benefits. The responses to the general items of the survey showed very high means (mostly above 5 on a 6-point Likert scale), demonstrating the perceived value of using literature in language teaching. The survey respondents also affirmed their confidence in their ability to understand and teach literature.

The teachers that were interviewed showed great enthusiasm and engagement with literary texts, and in many cases attributed the success of their literature lessons to their own passion for literature. The survey results suggest that the respondents consider literary texts to be important for understanding the culture of the language being taught, with means above 5 for all items in this question of the survey, which dealt with knowledge about the countries where the language was spoken, cultural knowledge and intercultural awareness. Cultural knowledge and cultural awareness were highlighted by the teachers in the case studies as well; as one teacher pointed out, "Unless you understand the culture you cannot understand the language".

The benefits of using literary texts in language B classrooms

Teachers perceived a variety of general benefits for using literary texts, although this was mainly in relation to the language properties of literary texts. The majority of students also came out in favour of using literature in language learning during the focus groups and discussions.

The main skills that teachers believed could be enhanced by using literary texts in language B teaching included vocabulary development and the development of reading skills. This came through very strongly in the survey and teacher interviews. Students also focused primarily on vocabulary learning as a major benefit of using literary texts.

Although teachers recognize the specific benefits of using literary texts in the language classroom, overall the survey findings suggest they do not intentionally use literary texts for teaching specific language areas (such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking). Based on the findings of the survey, teachers invariably thought that the contribution of literary texts to developing different aspects of language was high, but the extent to which they targeted specific language aspects when using literary texts was substantially lower. These findings indicate that teachers see the contribution of literary texts as incidental rather than targeted.

Although literature was perceived by some case study participants to be a linguistic challenge, it was nevertheless felt that the benefits of using literary texts in language B classrooms outweighed the challenges. However, in one school there was some question of whether literary texts would best be used with more advanced learners, and poetry was seen to be the preserve of more advanced learners.

Assessment and topic

Two areas that arose in the case studies were the need to meet IB assessment requirements, which influenced teaching decisions and text choices, and the importance of a text's topic. The assessment seemed to have a strong washback effect on teaching practice (Alderson and Wall, 1993), with many teachers mentioning it as an important element in their pedagogic decision-making. Indeed, some teachers repeatedly came back to assessment, and many of the teachers that were observed mentioned the written assessment and explained how specific activities could contribute to students' success on the assessment. One of the teachers, for example, talked about the importance of incorporating poetry for the examination papers. Another included a writing activity which would specifically feed into the assessment. Topic, too, came to the fore in the case studies as a major element directing text choice (so that the text would be relevant to other content being covered in the course). The text's topic also had an impact on the way in which teachers conceptualized their lessons.

Effect of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) training on teachers' use of literary texts

As demonstrated by responses to the questionnaire, the amount of training in using literary texts in language teaching that respondents had received from their ITE seemed to influence their attitudes and subsequent teaching practice. Of the 17 different batteries in the survey, teachers with a large amount of training in using literature during their ITE showed the highest means on 16 of the batteries; teachers with no such training showed the lowest means on 14 of the batteries.

The findings suggest that teachers with more training had more positive attitudes towards the use of literature, and they were also more confident in their abilities to teach literature and reported using learner-centred activities more often. Taken together, these findings highlight the importance of including training on the use of literary texts in ITE programmes.

Effect of language taught on teachers' use of literary texts

There were statistically significant differences between teachers of the four main languages present in the survey (English, French, Mandarin and Spanish) on 8 of the 17 batteries. The only consistent pattern that emerged was the way in which the Mandarin teachers stood apart as a group. This was particularly clear in the factors that they considered when choosing which texts to teach; they were more concerned than the other teachers with language factors and tended to prefer canonical texts and texts already in their textbooks or anthologies. It is not clear what the reason for such differences may be; however, based on demographic information for the different groups, the Mandarin teachers were a distinct group in terms of their educational background.

Genres taught

There was a clear difference in the various genres teachers reported to be using, with poems, plays and literary essays being used significantly less frequently than novels and short stories. This is probably not surprising in terms of literary essays, but more surprising with regard to plays, as many of the interviewees did mention a play as one of the pieces that they taught. Interestingly, there was a difference between teachers of different languages, for example, teachers of English taught novels significantly more than Spanish teachers. Conversely, teachers of Spanish reported the highest frequency of teaching plays, although the difference was not statistically significant. This does, however, support the researchers' experience in the case study schools, where all three schools taught the same Spanish play, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* by Lorca. There may thus be specific pieces or genres that are associated with specific languages, which is referred to as the curricular heritage of the language.

Poetry emerged as a neglected genre, although in School A teachers did discuss the importance of poetry and, in fact, two of the three lessons observed in this school dealt with poetry. This may well be a place where teachers' own feelings towards literature come to the fore. This connects to previous research which suggests that teachers often have reservations about teaching poetry (Bouman, 1983), and that poetry is taught less than other genres (Greene, 2017). Students, too, said that they found poetry difficult and obscure. In addition to the five genres that were explicitly included in the study, 44 teachers (17% of the sample) provided examples of other genres, with the most frequent additional genre being songs and song lyrics, mentioned by 10 teachers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers provided some recommendations related to curriculum development and continuing professional development for possible consideration.

- IB World Schools could explore ways in which teachers can cooperate more when choosing texts to study in language B, creating stronger communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). These communities of practice could provide a way to share experiences and ideas both within and across languages.

- In terms of training, it could be helpful to include sessions which explore the use of poetry, as there was clearly a reluctance among some teachers in this study to use poetry in language teaching.
- Schools could consider developing joint projects focusing on literature and language learning between IB World Schools in different countries to share best practices and learn from one another.

References

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This summary was developed by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at www.ibo.org/en/about-the-ib/research/. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

To cite the full report, please use the following:

Duncan, S and Paran, A. 2017. *The effectiveness of literature on acquisition of language skills in the high school context*. The Hague, NL. International Baccalaureate Organization.

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