Research summary

Alignment and coherence of language acquisition development in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme

Summary developed by the IB Research department based on a report prepared by:

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Background and methods

The International Baccalaureate (IB) has authorized more than 1,300 schools in about 145 countries to offer its Middle Years Programme (MYP) to learners aged 11 to 16. One of the MYP's unique features is its focus on second-language acquisition, which the MYP codifies in its *Language acquisition guide* (hereafter MYP *Guide*). The Educational Policy Improvement Center (EPIC) partnered with the University of Oregon's Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) to examine the alignment and coherence of the MYP *Guide*.

The study involved five phases: a literature review, a within-document analysis, a cross-document analysis, a progression analysis and a discrepancy analysis, as described below.

1. Researchers **reviewed research literature** on language acquisition development and practices to examine how effectively the MYP *Guide* conceptualizes and describes a progression of learning an additional language.
2. Researchers recruited and trained IB programme development and assessment staff members and school-based educators to conduct a **within-document analysis**, examining how effectively the MYP *Guide*'s assessment criteria aligned with its other progressions of language learning.
3. Researchers recruited and trained IB staff members and school-based educators to conduct a **cross-document analysis**, examining the MYP *Guide* in comparison to well-known language acquisition frameworks from three international sources.
4. In the **progression analysis**, researchers identified points of alignment and misalignment between the MYP *Guide* and the language acquisition guides of the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Diploma Programme (DP).
5. In the **discrepancy analysis**, researchers re-examined findings from the first four phases to see how they converged with, complemented or contradicted one another.

This research summary provides a high-level overview of the study's findings. For a more comprehensive understanding of the findings, please see the full report.

Findings

Phase I: Literature review

In the literature review, the researchers focused on studies for MYP-age learners and studies completed within the past 10 years, but ultimately drew upon 20 years of peer-reviewed studies that offered insights into effective progressions of second-language learning and specified listening and speaking, viewing and interpreting, reading comprehension and writing. Using this literature pool (see "Appendix A" of the full report), the authors identified various strengths and made recommendations.

Strengths of the MYP *Guide* include its focus on developing higher-level skills, enabling language learners to process language and engage in authentic interaction. Further, the MYP *Guide* emphasizes meaningful communication activities and fosters language

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proficiency growth by identifying specific progressions of skills. Although there is not full consensus in the academic community about progressions of language development, according to EPIC's literature review the approach the MYP *Guide* takes is generally accepted as the norm. The MYP *Guide* also accurately describes communication as a complex, multimodal, contextual and integrative activity. The researchers identified how the MYP *Guide* models sound pedagogy by prompting learners to negotiate meaning as they acquire language. The researchers also found that the MYP *Guide*'s exploration of digital forms of communication reflects current research on multimodality and multiliteracies, although they noted that further work could be done in this area within the MYP. Moreover, the MYP *Guide* was found to align generally with other international standards, though neither completely nor directly.

The literature review led to three recommendations.
1. To clarify the components of the *Guide* (such as language continuums and language processes) and how they interact
2. To require learners to engage in the mutually influencing processes of interpreting and producing language on single assessments to avoid complicating feedback loops
3. To provide guidance that helps educators conceptualize and implement more proficiency-based classrooms

Phase II: Within-document analysis

Five reviewers (two IB staff members and three IB language acquisition teachers) examined the effectiveness of the MYP *Guide*, specifically rating four components for clarity, alignment and/or appropriateness. The four components included the assessment criteria, phase-specific language acquisition objectives, the global proficiency table, and the language acquisition continuums. Collectively, these components formulate the structural aspects of the course into progressions for language acquisition, which help teachers to plan their instructional process, make placement decisions and design formative assessments. Reviewers demonstrated consensus that the MYP *Guide*'s progressions are generally effective, although reviewers offered some suggestions for revision. A selection of results for each of these components is provided below; for a more detailed and specific description, please see the full report.

Regarding the clarity of the assessment criteria phase-specific descriptors, researchers consolidated reviewer comments into several categories. First, imprecise use and/or inconsistent application of terminology reduced clarity in some portions of the MYP *Guide*, yielding a need for more explicitly defined terms. Examples in the report include specific phrases, criterion and achievement-level notation. Second, educators could benefit from examples that illustrate the MYP *Guide*'s expectations; for instance, exemplifying "basic conventions" in the *Guide*, as educators may "have their own interpretation" of what these might be. Third, the MYP *Guide* applies appropriateness and/or logic inconsistently. Fourth, differentiating several strands from one another more sharply would aid clarity and

improve progressions. Fifth, the IB should consider the appropriateness of using mother tongue and/or language of instruction (rather than the target language) in assessments, and also re-examine word count ranges in assessment tasks.

Phase III: Cross-document analysis

The reviewers re-examined the MYP *Guide*, this time in comparison to one of three international standard sets on language acquisition. Generally, reviewers rated the MYP *Guide* and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (CEFR) as providing better guidance than the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* or the Hong Kong Education Bureau's (HKEB) *Key Learning Areas: English and Chinese Language Education*. The MYP *Guide* and the CEFR provided the highest proportion of consensus ratings with regard to providing "enough" guidance. In particular, the MYP *Guide* showed strengths in interpersonal communication; defining phases of language acquisition; communicative competence; effective input, comprehension and interaction, and output; intercultural competence and contextualized communication.

The MYP *Guide* showed room for improvement in its treatment of assessment, multimodality and multiliteracies. Findings also revealed opportunities for the MYP *Guide* to align further with the international standards. The MYP *Guide* showed some imbalance in its treatment of contemporary aspects of langauge acqusition (such as functioning in digitally mediated environments and synchronous interactive writing), as opposed to older modes that focus on attending to errors in vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

Phase IV: Progression analysis

Drawing on findings from previous phases, the researchers mapped a progression of language learning across IB programmes to examine alignment and misalignment between the MYP *Guide* and those of the PYP and DP by comparatively analysing their treatment of language acquisition. The progression analysis, vetted by four levels of experts (IB classroom practitioners; school-, district- and state-level administrators of IB programmes; IB staff members; and trained researchers with IB classroom experience), showed the MYP *Guide* to illustrate foundational principles of language acquisition and assessment that link well with the PYP and DP. These principles include language learning that involves meaningful communication in authentic contexts and language learning that is valued for its ability to improve learners' intercultural competence. Programmatic differences include the terminology used, the framework provided for language acquisition and approaches to assessment.

Phase V: Discrepancy analysis

Examining data from the first four phases for convergence, complementarity and contradiction raised four questions to guide further inquiry in the review of MYP language acquisition.

1. How can the MYP *Guide* balance exemplification and full detail with simplification and clarity?
2. To what extent should language, assessment criteria and other facets align across IB programmes?
3. What assessment changes can the IB undertake without creating additional challenges for practitioners and schools?
4. What else can the MYP *Guide* borrow from the other international language frameworks?

These questions are discussed in further detail in the following section.

Conclusions and recommendations

Question 1: How can the MYP *Guide* balance exemplification and full detail with simplification and clarity?

This study found evidence to recommend adjustments to imprecise uses of terminology and standardization that would address inconsistent application of those terms, both of which seem to reduce clarity in portions of the MYP *Guide*. Reviewers also sought:

- more explicit definitions of terms
- examples that illustrate expectations (such as how educators might conceptualize a proficiency-based classroom)
- a combination of appropriateness and logical consistency
- sharper differentiation between strands.

Question 2: To what extent should language, assessment criteria and other facets align across IB programmes?

Contemporary language acquisition research does not provide a strong basis to validate one programme's approach to executing the foundational principles of language acquisition and assessment over the other IB programmes. However, considerable differences between the PYP, MYP and DP may complicate learner and practitioner understanding of the expectations inherent to each programme if they participate across the programmes. Still, the extent to which the programmes should align their terminology, assessment criteria and communicative processes remains an open question.

Question 3: What assessment changes can the IB undertake without creating additional challenges for practitioners and schools?

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During this study, several instances occurred in which reviewers identified opportunities to enhance the MYP's approaches to assessment. For example, several reviewers asked the MYP to re-examine word count ranges on assessments. Others suggested reconsidering the appropriateness of using mother tongue and/or language of instruction during summative assessments. Certain assessment changes may require a greater level of effort to implement. For example, literature review findings pointed towards merging assessments, allowing language learners to engage in both input and output on a single assessment, thus avoiding complications in teacher-to-student feedback loops. Meanwhile, other data raised a tension between newer assessment modes, such as those in digitally mediated environments or synchronous interactive writing, and older modes, such as attending to errors in vocabulary, grammar and syntax.

Question 4: What else can the MYP *Guide* borrow from the other international language frameworks?

Though the MYP *Guide* has leaned upon international language frameworks, most notably the CEFR and ACTFL, reviewers identified additional areas where the MYP could benefit. According to findings from the cross-document analysis, the IB could look to the CEFR for examples of strategic competency, summative and formative assessment, communication in face-to-face interactions and digitally mediated environments, and helping teachers attend to students' errors. Reviewers also indicated that the ACTFL and HKEB both provide rich descriptions and examples, which may or may not be helpful in thinking about revisions to the MYP *Guide*. Lastly, both reviewers and interviewees suggested that a cross-check between the MYP *Guide* and sources such as the HKEB and the IB's documents on approaches to teaching and learning (ATL) would increase the MYP focus on some dispositional aspects that are at the core of the IB mission.

Examining literature review findings alongside results from within- and cross-document analyses, it seems clear that the IB could attend to specificity and exemplification in some areas, but not universally across the MYP *Guide*. After accounting for findings from the progression and discrepancy analyses, the researchers recommend that the IB begin conversations about the scope and purpose of change before making any decisions about what in the MYP *Guide* requires revision, how to approach that revision, and to what extent revision is advisable.

References

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