

Research summary

Investigating language policies in IB World Schools

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Introduction

This study investigated language policy development and implementation in eight International Baccalaureate (IB) World Schools in order to better understand how the schools put into practice “the centrality of language in the learning-teaching relationship” (May 1997: 229). The study aimed to illuminate the exemplar practices, common struggles and contextual factors that play a role in language policy development and implementation in IB classrooms. The following research questions guided the study’s overall approach.

1. What are the key activities involved in the process of language policy development and implementation?
2. How does the development and implementation of a language policy differ in various settings?
3. How are *Language and learning in IB programmes* (IBO 2011) and *Guidelines for school self-reflection on language policy* (IBO 2012) used by schools and programmes in their development and implementation of language policies?

Research design

To examine the research questions listed above, this study employed an in-depth, multiple-site case study approach utilizing a combination of document analysis, interviews and observations in eight IB World Schools. The eight schools represented all three IB regions—Africa, Europe and the Middle East, Asia-Pacific and the Americas—in order to provide a diverse sample. The researchers included both continuum and non-continuum schools, as policies may be developed and implemented differently in these schools. Lastly, the study included both public and private schools due to variations in external influences on policy development. Table 1 offers information about the eight case study schools (school names have been changed to protect anonymity). Of the eight case studies, four were conducted on site at the schools, while the other four were conducted off site.

Country/region	School	IB region	Public or private	Continuum or non-continuum	On site or off site
Spain	IES Mar Blau	Africa, Europe, Middle East	Public	DP	On site
Canada	École du Centre Ville	Americas	Public	PYP and MYP	On site
Mexico	Mexico Colegio Armadillo	Americas	Private	Continuum	On site
United States	Evergreen High School	Americas	Public	MYP and DP	On site
China	Happy Achievement International School	Asia Pacific	Private	Continuum	Off site
West Africa	Circle International School	Africa, Europe, Middle East	Private	Continuum	Off site
India	Excellence Academy of India	Asia Pacific	Private	PYP and DP	Off site
Japan	Leadership School of Japan	Asia Pacific	Private	MYP and DP	Off site

Table 1. Description of participating schools

Summary of findings

This section includes a brief overview of the study's main findings based on the eight case studies. To review the complete case studies, please see the full report.

Although all eight schools had language policies in place, variations existed in the processes by which they were developed and the extent to which they were implemented consistently across the school. In some cases, language policies were developed solely by a high-level administrator while in others policy development involved school-wide dialogue including administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and students. In cases where it was developed through a school-wide endeavour, respondents demonstrated a higher level of comfort with and dedication to the school's language policy. This point is illustrated by the Excellence Academy of India, which regularly convenes a highly inclusive and representative language policy steering committee. A sense of ownership among stakeholders seems to translate into maintaining a relevant and active school language policy.

Moreover, the study suggested that when teachers have a sense of ownership of the school's language policy, they often develop creative solutions for putting the policy into practice. For instance, Excellence Academy of India's language policy is the epitome of a flexible working document. The policy exists in a Google Document format, so staff members are able to propose new ideas, suggestions and modifications at any time. This strategy has led to a language policy embodied by the school as well as a policy that reflects actual practice. Conversely, in cases when teachers had little to no exposure to the school's language policy or the theories behind having one, respondents did not feel that they had language responsibilities in addition to their content area.

Participants who had the opportunity to attend professional development generally valued these experiences. Those most familiar with IB guides and publications found the resources to be very informative and helpful when thinking through the development or implementation of their school's language policy. In schools that have made the language policy a priority, teachers reported feeling more prepared to implement the policy and more comfortable talking about the role of language in the classroom. Interviewees from the Circle International School, for example, noted improvements in implementation as more teachers embraced the philosophy that all teachers are language teachers. As noted by Wiley (2008), standard teacher training rarely equips teachers with the skills associated with language policy implementation and navigating a classroom with diverse linguistic profiles. Instituting a language policy alone is not sufficient to seamlessly integrate the policy at the classroom level; teachers must also receive the appropriate professional development to accompany such shifts.

It is notable that schools' approaches to language policy often reflected the ways in which they understood "language" within their particular context. Perceptions of language were often influenced by the national or regional context in which the school is located. According to Shohamy, language can be "viewed as a closed, stagnated and rule-bound entity" or "an open, free, dynamic, creative and constantly evolving process with no defined boundaries, involving multi-modal representations and different forms of 'linguaging'" (2006: xvii). IES Mar Blau and École du Centre Ville are similar in that both schools employ a politically charged minority language as their language of instruction. As a result, the language of instruction in these two schools is part of an effort to promote and protect the status of a national minority language. Therefore, administrators, teachers, parents and students have a more heightened awareness of how language is both a tool and a symbol of identity. Another example of language as a foundation of culture and identity came from Colegio Armadillo, which includes Hebrew in its curriculum to equip students with linguistic competence in a language that carries much religious and cultural importance in their local Jewish community.

There did not seem to be much difference in how continuum and non-continuum schools approached language policy development and implementation. Private schools exhibited a higher degree of freedom in curriculum and policy development, as they generally did not have to adhere to national or regional requirements.

While schools indicated that *Language and learning in IB programmes* (IBO 2011) and *Guidelines for school self-reflection on language policy* (IBO 2012) provided a strong theoretical framework that proved helpful, respondents suggested that the documents were not written in a way that was easily accessible for a general school audience or for parents. Additionally, some of the more fundamental questions regarding the development and implementation of a school language policy were challenging for these schools, such as how long the school language policy document should be or how to incorporate mother tongue and local languages into instruction. While many teachers and coordinators believe in the values of multilingualism and validating students' mother tongues, they find the actual implementation of these practices in the classroom to be difficult at times. To support the implementation process, participants recommended providing schools with case studies of how other schools have approached language policies, examples of other written language policy documents and examples of how other schools have put their policies into practice.

At times, well-intended policy goals are hindered by competing national or regional language policies or seem overwhelming due to the multitude of languages represented in the school. Some of these challenges stem from the problem inherent to school contexts; thus, no two school language policies will be developed or implemented identically. Schools should understand that, particularly within the IB system, school language policies will vary considerably. As opposed to being a source of frustration, this uniqueness should be seen as a starting point from which to develop a language policy.

Recommendations

Many of the recommendations listed below mirror those suggested in *Language and learning in IB programmes* (IBO 2011). Based on the results of the eight case studies, IB programmes follow these guidelines to varying degrees. Those schools that followed them most closely seemed to feel more at ease with the development of a school language policy and less overwhelmed by implementation at the classroom level. Therefore, it is recommended that the IB require schools to meet certain criteria for language policy development and implementation based on the IB *Guidelines for developing a school language policy* (IBO 2008) and the recommendations below. The following recommendations are abbreviated; to review the full recommendations produced by the researchers, please see the full report.

Language policy development

- Ensure that the development and implementation of the language policy is streamlined across grade levels, particularly in continuum schools.
- Encourage the development and use of a language policy steering committee.
- Develop guidelines for disseminating the language policy throughout the school to ensure that teachers and staff are aware of and familiar with the policy.
- Develop buy-in among teachers and staff as well as school-wide accountability for the success of the language policy.
- Schedule regular language policy reviews to ensure that the policy remains current, relevant and reflects the language profile of the school and its students.
- As the language policy is developed and revised, refer back to evidence of the school's practices—a language policy does little good if it is not reflective of school practice.

Language policy implementation

- Upon hiring new teachers, provide information about the school language policy and how teachers are expected to implement the policy in their classrooms.
- Create guidelines for a minimum amount of professional development related to the language policy for all teachers and staff, which incorporates IB language policy documents.

- Develop strategies for incorporating mother tongues and local languages into the classroom, particularly in highly diverse schools.
- Clearly describe in the language policy the processes for collecting the feedback, evaluation and evidence that will inform revisions of the language policy.

References

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This summary was extracted by the IB Research department. A copy of the full report is available at <http://www.ibo.org/research>. For more information on this study or other IB research, please email research@ibo.org.

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