

TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH DISCOURSE-ORIENTED SYLLABUS

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Abstract

One of the most challenging bets in International Primary Education nowadays is the Primary Years educational Programme (PYP), designed and introduced by the IBO in 1997 as a part of the wider International Baccalaureate Programme.

The PYP curriculum model could be encapsulated into constructivist approach with its belief into learning as a process of continual travel on the cyclic path of constructing, tasting and confirming or revising a hypothesis. Thus, inquiry model, allowing students to be actively involved in their own learning, is recognized to be the leading pedagogical approach in the PYP.

Language perspective is a crucial one in the PYP programme. In order to introduce a bilingual vision of the educational content, language is not taught as a separate discipline, but interdisciplinary, as a part of social and cognitive development.

Language acquisition is seen as a process of constructing meaning based on complex relationship between language and learning: learning language, learning through language and learning about language.

In practice, it means a balanced use of language as a communicative tool and a metalinguistic tool, as well as a flexible resource for further learning and cognitive growth.

In continuation, we are offering a detail examination of PYP language learning programme implementation in one of Madrid international schools.

Keywords - Education, Primary Years, bilingual learning, interdisciplinary approach

1 INTRODUCTION

The Primary Years Programme (PYP), together with the Middle Years Programme (MYP) and the Diploma one (DP), represent high quality and challenging international education models offered by the International Baccalaureate (IB) organization, and having as its aim to create active, compassionate, lifelong internationally-minded learners.

The three programme have a common educational framework which is represented by a teaching/learning philosophy that focuses on the development of the whole child, and an overarching concept of how to develop international mindedness.

The PYP, a programme designed for students from 3 to 12 years old, was developed and sustained for over 10 years by the former International Schools Curriculum Project (ISCP), an independent movement of heads of schools and teachers in international schools. In 1997 the responsibility for its ownership and ongoing development was handed over to the IB. The IB has broadened access to the PYP by opening the programme to a wide number of schools willing to support the mission of the IB.

In Spain, the first IB school was authorized in 1977. These days there are 46 schools in different parts of Spain offering a wide range of IB programmes: 6 schools offer the Primary Years Programme, 8 schools offer the Middle Years Programme, and 46 schools offer the Diploma Programme¹.

Although PYP model is still far from being the most popular one in this country, it seems that there is a growing interest towards this educational model in Spain. Thus, only in 2009 four schools in Spain have introduced this programme into their curriculum.

The Primary Years Programme could be of special interest as an alternative model to the bilingual system that is offered nowadays by a number of state schools in Spain, in particular, in Madrid.

In this paper we will analyze more closely how language learning is organized and promoted in the PYP curriculum model.

2 A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF LEARNING IN THE PYP

2.1 Inquiry as a pedagogical approach

The PYP language learning model is tightly connected to the general model of knowledge acquisition, encapsulated most clearly in the constructivist approach where the students are responsible for their learning process and work under their own control, supervised by teachers and parents. This model promotes a significant learning, the learning which supports the construction of knowledge in each student's mind, and where the role of a teacher shifts to facilitating this construction.

Thus, inquiry turns out to be the leading pedagogical approach of the PYP, allowing students to be actively involved in their own learning and to take responsibility for that one.

The philosophy of inquiry-based learning takes us back to the works of Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky and Freire. Thus, Dewey's affirms that the most optimal learning occurs when students are confronted with real, authentic problem to solve. Community-based task and activities that engage students in different forms of social action are essential for learning. Vygotsky's theory of a zone of proximal development is crucial for understanding learning as a process of scaffolding: a continuant process through which a teacher helps the student in his/her ZPD as necessary, and remove this aid when it becomes unnecessary. Finally, Freire's works defend the pedagogical model focused on the identification, analysis and resolution of immediate problems in learners' worlds.

In the PYP model, inquiry model of learning is interpreted in the broadest sense, as a process initiated by the students or the teacher that moves students from their current level of understanding to a deeper one.

The inquiry learning is interpreted as an umbrella term which includes a great variety of forms of acquisition, such as:

- Exploring, wondering and questioning
- Experimenting and playing with possibilities
- Making connections between previous learning and current learning
- Making predictions and acting purposefully to see what happens
- Collecting data and reporting findings
- Clarifying existing ideas and reappraising perceptions of events
- Making and testing theories
- Researching and seeking information

- Taking and defending a position
- Solving problem in a variety of ways¹.

The PYP introduces and successfully exploits the inquiry model as a part of a lively, animated process of acquisition within different age ranges. In fact, the whole curriculum model is organized upon units of inquiry that are a distinguishing feature of the PYP. Collectively, these units make up the programme of inquiry that is a backbone of the PYP learning model.

2.2 The transdisciplinary nature of the programme

The PYP model recognizes the importance of teaching of particular subject areas, such as mathematics, science or arts. Nevertheless, it is considered to be insufficient to introduce them as isolated subject areas.

On the contrary, the PYP promotes to acquire skills in context, and to explore content that is relevant to students and transcends the boundaries of the traditional subjects. According to Ernst Boyer, “to be truly educated, a student must also make connections across the disciplines, discover ways to integrate the separate subjects, and ultimately relate what they learn to life”.² Boyer proposes students to work on some common themes that would represent shared human experiences. This idea is shaped in the Primary Years Programme in its transdisciplinary themes.

The transdisciplinary themes identify shared human experience and have meaning for students from different parts of the world. They represent a unique opportunity to adapt the learning curriculum to the local circumstances, including global and local issues in the PYP curriculum.

There are six transdisciplinary themes:

- Who we are
- Where we are in place and time
- How we express ourselves
- How the world works
- How we organize ourselves
- Sharing the planet

Working with units of inquiry, students’ attention is focused on both: the traditional subject areas as well as transdisciplinary themes. These inquiries also allow students to acquire a set of transdisciplinary skills: social skills, communication skills, thinking skills, research skills, and self-management skills.

¹ The Primary Years Programme. A basis for practice. (2009) Cardiff. The International Baccalaureate Organization, p. 4.

² Boyer, E. (1995) The Basic School: A Community of Learning. San Francisco, USA. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, p.82.

2.3 International-mindedness in the PYP

Last, but not least characteristic of the PYP educational model is its international-mindedness. When we talk about international-mindedness, we mostly refer to the kind of students that we pretend to graduate from a PYP school.

The PYP learner profile is included into the more general IB profile where the learners strive to be inquirers, knowledgeable, thinkers, communicators, principled, open-minded, caring, risk-takers, balanced, reflective.

2.4 Assessment as feedback

The description of the PYP educational model would not be complete unless we stop briefly on its assessment system.

The prime objective of assessment in the PYP is to provide feedback on the learning process. This feedback is treated not in a form of a reward or punishment, but as useful information for both students and teachers in order to provide the most successful learning for each student.

The assessment strategies and instruments that are recommended in the PYP include rubrics, anecdotal records, checklists, anchor papers, portfolios of work, in a word, a wide range of different activities that have as its aim a formative assessment designed to accommodate a variety of intelligences and ways of knowing. That does not mean that summative assessment is completely excluded, but should be used in conjunction with other forms of assessment.

Finally, in its approach to assessment, the PYP recognizes the importance of self assessment and reflection.

3 LEARNING LANGUAGE

The global concepts of learning we have discussed in the previous chapter are essential for understanding of the language learning theory of the PYP.

Language is regarded to be fundamental to learning, thinking and communicating, and permeates the whole curriculum. Language learning in school is not a separate subject isolated from all other learning, on the contrary, it forms a part of social and personal development, being crucial for academic cognitive growth and the construction of knowledge.

Thus, all teachers in a PYP school are considered teachers of language.

Language learning plays a major role in schools where the language of instruction is not the student's first language or there are several languages of instruction. It is the case of Spain, where the schools with the PYP model provide a significant part (about 50%) of learning instruction in English. The students' mother tongue (Spanish) is also supported as a crucial one for cognitive development and in maintaining cultural identity. The use of two languages as the languages of instruction promotes students' intercultural awareness and understanding, as well as works as a strong predictor of their long-term academic achievement.

Language is the major connecting element across the curriculum. Therefore, in a PYP school, the focus is not only on language for its own sake, but also on its application across the subject areas and throughout the transdisciplinary programme of inquiry. The learning process simultaneously involves learning language (as students use language in their everyday life), learning about language (as student tries to understand how language works), and learning through language (as language is also used as a tool to think about, or reflect on a theme, concept or issue) ¹ (Halliday 1980)

In this way, structured, purposeful inquiry turns out to be the main approach to teaching and learning language in the PYP. Defending inquiry as a main tool of language acquisition, the PYP in no way

¹ Halliday, M. (1985) Three Aspects of Children's Language Development: Learning Language, learning through Language, Learning about Language. Sydney, Australia. University of Sydney.

tries to advocate it as the only correct way of teaching. The PYP approach is rather broad and inclusive one, in which “a wide variety of teaching strategies and styles can be accommodated, provided that they are driven by a spirit of inquiry and a clear sense of purpose”.²

No doubts, a new vision on teaching languages requires some considerable changes in daily teaching practices. The degree of change needed to teach language in this way would depend mostly on the individual teacher. In continuation we offer some of the most important changes that are to be produced:

- promoting integrated language development
- language as a transdisciplinary element throughout the curriculum
- additional-language teachers viewed as PYP teachers
- a literature-based approach to learning language
- a teaching approach that sees making mistakes in language a sinevitable and necessary for learning
- reading for meaning
- reading selected according to interest level
- student-selected reading materials
- making world classics available for reading
- making culturally diverse reading and writing
- encouraging appropriate cooperative discussion in the classroom
- students engaged in spontaneous writing
- a variety of scaffolded learning experiences – with the teacher providing strategies for student to build on his or her own learning
- writing as a process
- developing a range of independent spelling strategies
- nurturing appreciation of understanding and exploring
- teaching students to read and research using multimedia resources
- using language for creative problem solving and information processing
- a range of appropriate assessment methods such as portfolios, conferencing, miscue analysis, writing sample analysis, response journals.¹

² A curriculum Framework for International primary education. (2007)The International Baccalaureate Organization, p. 70.

¹ A curriculum Framework for International primary education. (2007)The International Baccalaureate Organization, p. 70-71.