



International Baccalaureate®
Baccalauréat International
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Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme and Diploma Programme

Language and learning in IB programmes



A framework for understanding multilingual profiles

The language and learning courses and options offered by the IB are comprehensive and complex. However, this can sometimes result in unintended practical complications. Some examples are when:

- schools might be deciding which courses are best for their particular context and there are limited resources
- schools might be planning for long-term language growth for a linguistically diverse cohort of students
- schools might be placing new students who have complex language profiles.

There are also considerations around pedagogy, content and assessment. For instance, different issues arise in relation to the teaching of ab initio Japanese to Spanish-speaking DP students than in the teaching of biology in English to Korean-speaking students.

There can be unnecessary misunderstandings of the role of language in learning unless its range, depth and complexity are recognized. Very often, complex situations are addressed and decisions are made on the basis of teachers' experience and intuition. In many cases, the outcome is most successful. However, occasionally students might have been better served with alternative combinations of courses.

A continuum of language and learning domains

In the interests of providing a comprehensive framework that might enhance teachers' understanding and offer support for language and learning decisions concerning IB programmes, this section presents a model of a continuum of identified domains of language learning. This model may be used, among other things, to plan pathways for student language development. The framework has been informed by various theoretical models as well as research and practice (Inugai-Dixon 2009).

The continuum is structured around Michael Halliday's (1985) description of the three strands of language and learning. They are:

- learning language
- learning through language
- learning about language.

Although grouping some particular language use under the heading of just one of these strands loses the sense of dynamic interplay among all three, nonetheless, identifying the focus in a particular learning situation can help clarify the complex roles of language in learning. The use of the construct in this way does not suggest that this is how Halliday intended it to be used. It is applied here to provide a framework for considering important factors about language that vary in dominance along the learning continuum.

The identified domains in the continuum are:

- discrete skills
- basic interpersonal communicative skills—BICS (Cummins 1979)
- literacy and the art of language

- cognitive academic language proficiency—CALP (Cummins 1979)
- literary analysis
- critical literacy.

The distribution of these domains across the three strands of the continuum, which indicate a particular focus for each one, are shown in the table below. It must be emphasized that all three strands are present in all language learning and that the association of one domain with one strand refers to a particular focus that may be useful in the planning of teaching and learning language only.

“Learning language” focus	“Learning through language” focus	“Learning about language” focus
Discrete skills	CALP	Literary analysis
BICS		Critical literacy
Literacy and the art of language		

The continuum of language domains described in this way is intended as a working tool for practitioners, with the following aims:

- to be a framework for understanding the diversity and complexity of multilingual profiles
- to provide a common language for conceptual understandings that will enable meaningful discussion about how the roles of language relate to IB programmes
- to enhance understanding of the coherence and inherent continuum of language courses in IB programmes
- to demonstrate the depth and breadth of language learning in all IB courses
- to inform pedagogy
- to demonstrate connections across curriculums both within and between programmes
- to clarify and demonstrate the relationship of language to all learning (and teaching).

Learning language

The domains where “learning language” may be a useful focus for consideration are:

- discrete skills
- basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS)
- literacy and the art of language.

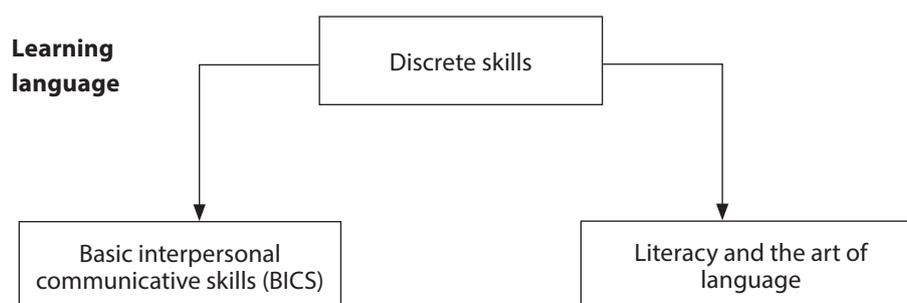


Figure 4
Learning language

Discrete skills

Any language learning requires the development of both receptive (for example, listening and reading) and productive (for example, speaking and writing) skills. The organizing principles, and thus the approaches to teaching, will vary, depending on whether languages are alphabetic, such as the Romance languages, or non-alphabetic, such as Japanese and Chinese. Dependent on the circumstances, skills can be transferred from one language to another.

Basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS)

In richly contextualized situations, young children very quickly acquire vocabulary, syntax, accompanying gestures and an understanding of semantics in the construction of meaningful social interactions. In first-language learning and many introductory second-language learning courses, such early social interactions form the basis for developing what Jim Cummins calls the “basic interpersonal communicative skills” (BICS).

It is sometimes assumed that the development of academic language skills will automatically follow on from fluency in BICS. However, Cummins (2000) has pointed out that this is not necessarily the case. Fluency in BICS—which, as the name suggests, is concerned with social interactions—does not necessarily correlate directly with the development of academic skills. These require a critical level of literacy, as well as sophisticated understandings of language use in increasingly abstract and decontextualized settings. BICS is, however, important for personal development and cultural identity as well as for intercultural awareness.

The acquisition of linguistic, pragmatic and other cultural knowledge through social experience [is] how individuals become socialised into particular identities, worldviews or values, and ideologies, as they learn language, whether it is their first language or an additional language.

(Hornberger and McKay 2010: xix)

Literacy and the art of language

The successful development of students’ literacy in first languages in elementary schooling is characterized by a prolific increase in the reading and writing of a wide range of texts for different purposes and audiences. This is accompanied by an enormous growth in the fluent use of vocabulary and stylistic devices. What is sometimes referred to as the “language arts” provides creative opportunities for learners to gain a broad and deep command of the language and culture; students play with and explore language and discover its expressive, dramatic, poetic and artistic aspects. Michael Worton says that when learning any new language the pleasure in learning to creatively manipulate it:

reveals to us a different culture in its fullest creative complexity as well as often in its most playful and joyful form.

(Worton, quoted in Reisz 2010: 39)

In many instances when learners are literate to this degree in more than one language it might be more appropriate “to talk in terms of multiliteracies rather than ‘literacy’” (Edwards 2009: 54).

A threshold level of multiliteracy or literacy development with the ability to engage with a variety of texts is, however, essential background knowledge necessary for the further development of academic language skills.

Learners need to have extended periods of time to read for pleasure, interest and information, experiencing an extensive range of [...] texts [...] acquire the skills, strategies and conceptual understanding to become competent, motivated, independent readers [and writers].

(Hornberger and McKay 2010: 74)

Early opportunities for literacy development across the curriculum are important for the development of the academic language of abstract conceptualization and associated cognitive development in later schooling. This has implications for those students who transfer from early learning in a first language to a second language of instruction later on. Maintaining and enabling the transfer of knowledge and skills from one or more languages to another is crucial for optimal learning. If the development of literacy in the first language is limited, decisions must be made about how to build up the background knowledge necessary for future successful learning.

Learning through language

Although in any language-learning situation there is inevitably always some “learning through language”, much of it may be implicit and incidental when the emphasis is on “learning language”. In reality, the development of literacy is recursive and continual, but there are some stages of schooling where it is assumed that sufficient language has been learned for it to be a medium of instruction and “learning through language” becomes the dominant focus. As Bernard Mohan (1986: 18) describes it, there is a contrast between “learning to read and reading to learn” or “learning to write and writing to learn”. The academic disciplines of school curriculums make heavy language demands on learners. They must be proficient in the academic language of instruction if they are to have access to the curriculum (O’Neal and Ringler 2010: 50).

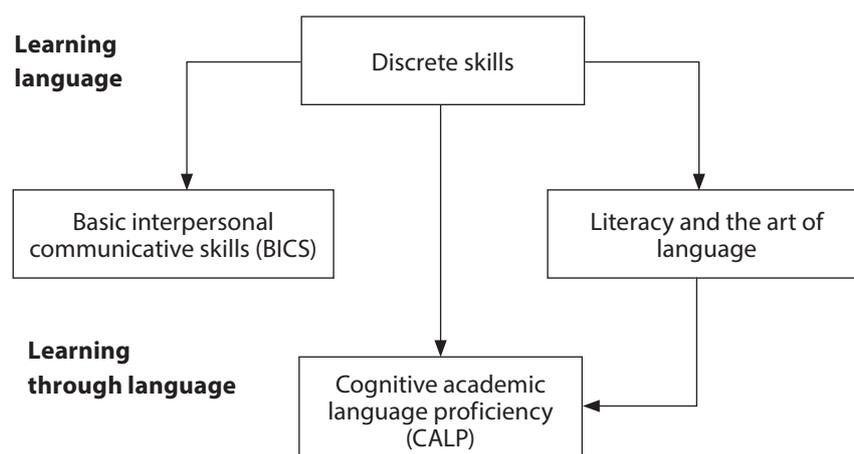


Figure 5
Learning through language

Cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP)

The development of academic language skills required for discourse in abstract and decontextualized settings in later schooling is referred to by Jim Cummins as CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) and is in contrast to the more socially contextualized language necessary in BICS. Ultimately, to be successful in school, students must have a threshold understanding and ability to use a variety of discourses and texts across the many subjects they study. For second-language learners this can be particularly onerous as teaching often assumes a cultural and academic linguistic background common to all students rather than a diversity of complex multilingual profiles, which is increasingly the norm. However, it cannot be assumed that even those whose first language is the language of instruction are familiar with academic language. Some may be fluent in a dialect or non-standard variety, may have had little exposure to reading and writing in the language of the school and may also need to be made aware of the types of discourse necessary for school. Bernard Mohan has pointed out that:

any deficiency in the language of instruction is a fundamental obstacle to education in all subjects.

(Mohan 1986: 10)

The view that every teacher is a language teacher regardless of the aspects of the curriculum for which they have responsibility is important if all students are to have equal access to the curriculum. For example, when teaching science, Jay Lemke asserts that teachers must be aware of the fact that, as well as acquiring new vocabulary, students need to:

learn to use language as scientists themselves do – to name, describe, record, compare, explain, analyse, design, evaluate and theorize.

(Lemke, in Wellington and Osborne 2001: iv)

Academic language is inextricably entwined with academic thinking. Robin Lakoff (in Hornberger and McKay 2010: 57) uses the idea of frames as mental structures to explain how we shape and construct meaning and describe conceptions of the world. As our conceptual frameworks change with cognitive development so do our descriptions. Thinking differently requires using language differently. For example, developments in information technology require us to learn new forms of language. Attending to teacher professional development that raises awareness of how language and thinking are interconnected is important if all students are to be able to have access to the curriculum.

Learning about language

Through an increase in understanding gained from “learning about language” students can have more control over the use of their linguistic resources and can hone their academic skills for “learning through language” across the curriculum. There are, however, some specific areas of the curriculum where an explicit metalinguistic focus is an integral part of the discourse. This is the case for:

- literary analysis
- critical literacy.

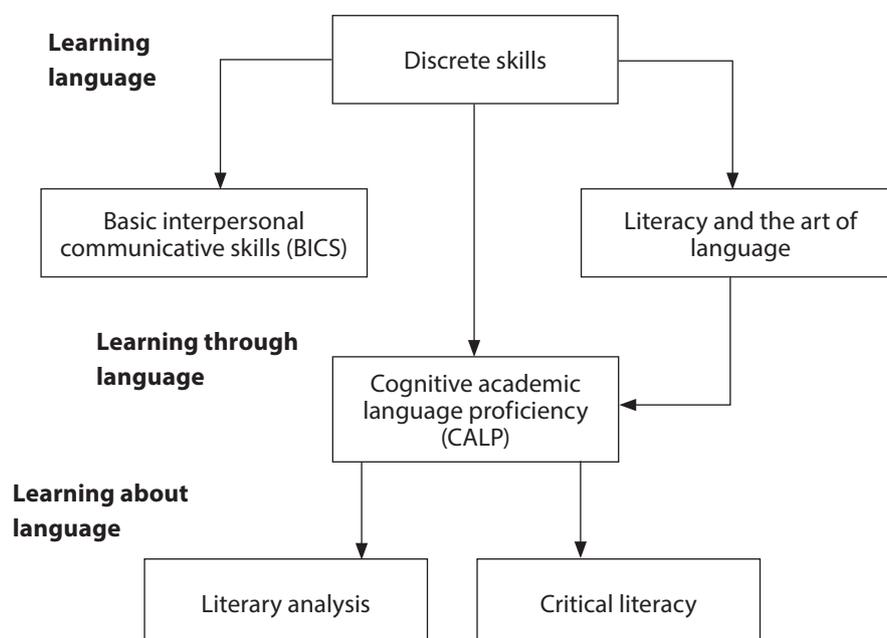


Figure 6
Learning about language

Literary analysis

Literature—traditionally held a central and privileged place in language teaching.
(Hall 2005: 2)

As well as the claim that extensive engagement with literature is effective for language learning, analysing literature also draws attention to how language is used to convey ideas and express the poetic dimension. Interpretation, multiple readings and a consideration of cultural contexts require a study of word choice, symbolism, metaphoric imagery and their associated values. “Learning about language” is a major focus. For this reason, the study of literature is widely recognized as a means to explore other cultures, as expressed by the poet TS Eliot.

For the transmission of a culture—a peculiar way of thinking, feeling and behaving—[...] there is no safeguard more reliable than a language—a literary language, not necessarily a scientific language—but a poetic one.
(Eliot 1948: 57)

It is through exploration of the literature of other cultures that we can further develop intercultural awareness. While reading literature:

we can leave our own consciousness and pass over into the consciousness of another person, another age, another culture [...] reading enables us to try on, identify with and ultimately enter for a brief time the wholly different perspective of another person’s consciousness.
(Wolf 2008: 7)

Wai Chee Dimock describes how literature carries traces from the past through “layers of relations” (2006: 6) and questions sometimes mistaken assumptions about cultural divisions. She suggests that a critical study of literature across time can reveal that we are more connected in the world than we imagine.

Critical literacy

Paulo Freire considered that reading the word cannot be separated from reading the world and challenged the assumption that literacy is simply teaching students the skills necessary for reading and writing. He was interested in the communicative and dialogic aspect of literacy and, ultimately, its power for social action.

True dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking.
(Freire 1970: 73)

Critical literacy has become a generic term that includes the idea of critical thinking. It is associated with a sociocultural approach to language education and is also referred to as “critical linguistics”, “critical language awareness” and “critical applied linguistics” (Hornberger and McKay 2010: 45).

Critical literacy involves a metalinguistic critique of all texts, whether oral or written, and includes literary analyses. It pays attention to the way in which reality is mediated by language and also to the way in which texts are constructed to represent versions of reality. Consideration is given to aspects such as:

- textual purpose
- gaps and silences
- power and interest in relation to purpose
- multiple meanings.

Critical literacy is extremely important in the development of intercultural awareness and international-mindedness and should be a part of learning in all subject areas. The IB Diploma Programme course theory of knowledge (TOK) encourages critical thinking about knowledge itself, asking such questions as the following:

What counts as knowledge? How does it grow? What are its limits? Who owns knowledge? What is the value of knowledge? What are the implications of having, or not having, knowledge?
(IB 2006: 3)

The roles of language

The language domains described here should be viewed as interconnected aspects of a continuum in the holistic process of learning. Any situation that involves language will involve several domains, even if only one appears to be emphasized. The roles of language described in “Section 1” of this document may be better developed in some domains than others. Some suggestions are shown in figure 7. Again, however, it must be emphasized that the roles are interwoven and pliable. Considering where the intended emphases are in specific teaching situations can help inform planning for short- and long-term learning.

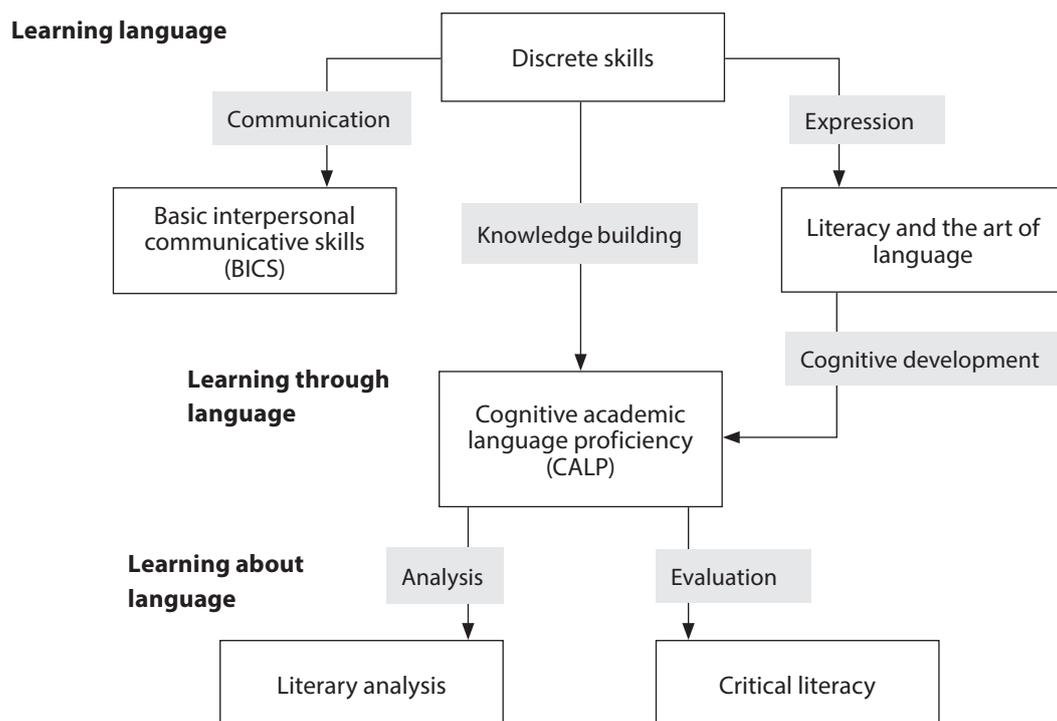


Figure 7

The roles of language across the domains

Language profiles and language mapping

The notion of a continuum suggests and supports the idea of a developmental progression in language and learning. This progression, however, may not necessarily develop in the same way in the learning of all languages. Mapping a multilingual language profile may demonstrate capabilities in all the domains in one or more language, but also one language may be more dominant in some domains and less so in others. For example, someone may be fluent in BICS in English and Japanese but capable of only limited CALP in Japanese. Many academics have high levels of CALP in English but have very limited BICS in that language. Furthermore, language profiles are in a constant state of flux as language learning continues throughout life. Mapping the dynamics of individual language profiles can be useful when planning for future learning.

The multilingual profiles of entire communities may reflect the use of different languages for different purposes. These may or may not relate to legislation or language policies. For example, Putonghua is the official language of China; English is the working language in the IB.

The diverse and complex multilingual language profiles of communities and individuals are a potential resource in curriculum planning for developing intercultural awareness and international-mindedness. “Section 5” of this document looks at the necessary pedagogy and principles of good practice that should be in place so that the potential is realized.