

# The International Baccalaureate French Language B pilot project (1991–1995)



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## Introduction

IB? Where does it all come from? At the end of the second world war, when international relations adopted a more civilised and positive outlook, the mobility of diplomatic personnel on cultural, scientific and commercial missions increased tremendously as well as the volume of exchanges between the European, American, Asian and African continents. Professional people and their families moved around the world. Schooling was a problem; the solution was a network of international schools which would offer a similar or common curriculum. The United Nations supported such a venture and in a school in Geneva a new curriculum and assessment model were elaborated.

This new development converged with a new ideological thinking formulated by an Oxford don, Alec Peterson, among others, on the necessity to broaden the base of educational scope for the post war generations, go beyond nationalistically insular schemes and provide a genuine international education. From humble beginnings in the 1950s, the International Baccalaureate is now available in 60 countries and offered in more than 450 schools throughout the world, and in UK more than 30 schools and colleges are following the IB programme.

## The IB programme

The IB diploma, a pre-university post-16 programme, over two years like the A level, is a compromise between generalisation and specialisation, unlike the A level. Candidates take six subjects, three at a higher level (*HL/Option forte*) arguably similar to A level standard, and three at subsidiary level (*SL/Option moyenne*). It is undoubtedly a demanding curriculum whose characteristic feature is an additional and compulsory course on

the Theory of Knowledge which is meant to occupy 100 hours' teaching time.

'the purpose of the programme is to stimulate critical reflection on the knowledge and the experience of students both in and outside the classroom. The programme is thus philosophical in the sense that it is meant to encourage students to acquire a critical awareness of what they and others know, through analysing concepts and arguments and the bases of value judgments.'<sup>1</sup>

This subject cannot be compared with the study of philosophy as, say, in the French baccalaureate. The IB programmers will argue that although it looks like a disguised course in epistemology, it is not meant to be an historical study of the various schools of thought, like empiricism or rationalism, nor an investigation into the great thinkers since Plato. But the stated aims of the programme are to lead candidates to engage in reflection on and the questioning of the bases of knowledge and experience, to be aware of subjective and ideological biases and to develop a personal mode of thought based on critical examination of evidence and expressed rational arguments. Because the aim is to facilitate integration of what the student knows, the emphasis is less on content and new knowledge than on understanding of what they have already learned and there is a permanent connection between the Theory of knowledge and the other components of the IB curriculum.

## Modern second/foreign languages in the IB programme.

The Language A2 programme which combines literature and language is designed for bilingual students, or students who have lived for a great part of their lives in a country where the

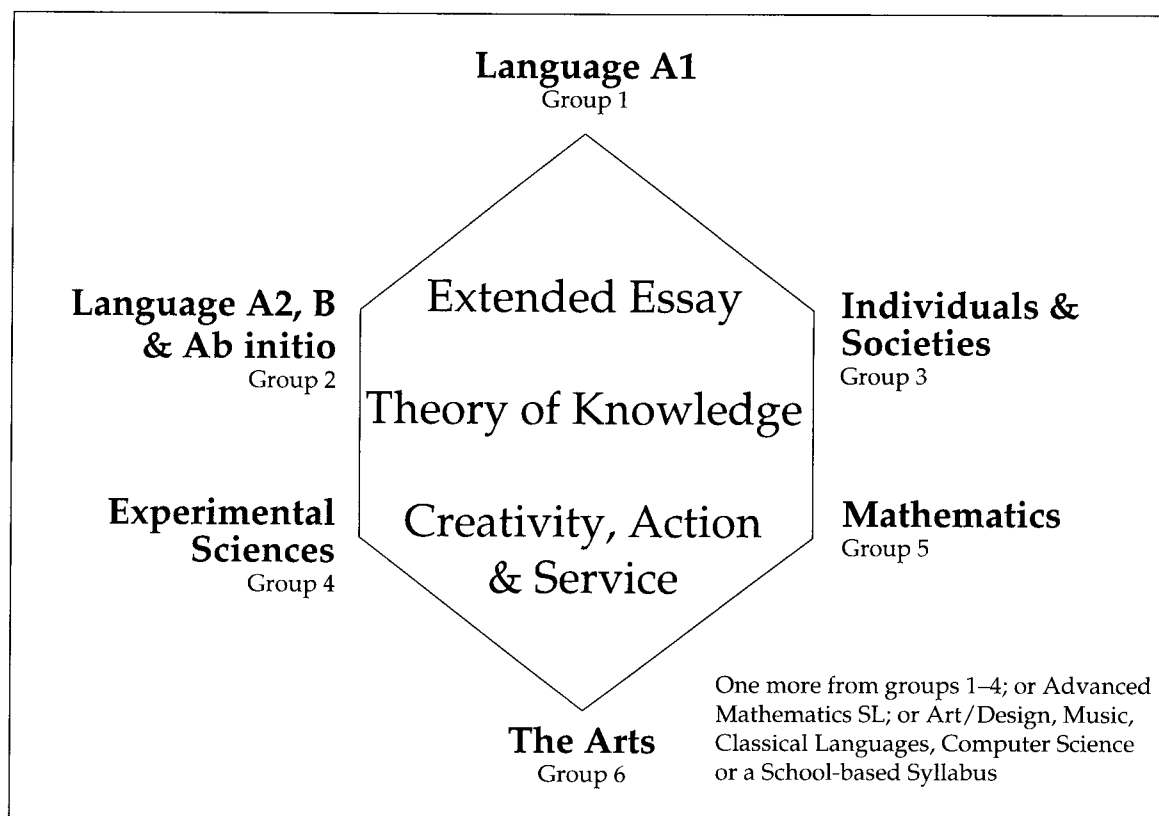


Figure 1

## Text-handling

The text-handling part of the examination was a new feature in the Language B programme and the written production was going to be clearly linked with it. Guidance notes for teachers mentioned 'higher order skills of information processing, making logical connections and communicating ideas' and the analysis of the text handling skills to process both written and spoken information show a clear commitment to communicative learning and learning strategies: extensive and intensive reading, functional comprehension (prediction, purpose, generalisation, description, definition, clarification, hypothesis) work on lexis, syntax and text structure. The vocabulary used to describe the language skill round-up is now widely familiar to the present-day modern language teacher:

Transcoding information into and from diagrams, tables, charts. Handling discourse by initiating, maintaining and terminating dialogues. Scanning . . . Skimming . . . Reducing. Identifying . . . Recognising and using indicators. Interpreting texts by reading between the lines using appropriate grammatical/lexical cohesion devices . . .<sup>3</sup>

## Written production

The skills of processing written and spoken texts are applied by the students in writing their own texts 'in a purposive, coherent, logical, sympathetic way.'<sup>3</sup> Guidance is given, too, for practice activities in controlled and free writing which again are not unfamiliar to the practising foreign language teacher: short description, text completion, model texts, interpretation of a flow chart, creative writing.

## Oral

The next two elements concerned the oral interaction and the student's own project or personal portfolio. At the outset, the principle is accepted that whether taught or assessed the standard format for oral interaction is the group discussion. For some of us for whom oral examination has always been essentially a cross-examination by someone who asks all the questions of someone who is expected to know most of the answers, the format was a refreshing and controversial innovation. The sample comments of Language B teachers consulted bear witness to this 'My first reaction to the change in the oral exam was one of horror. How could a fair assessment be made with four students at the same time? Yet we did the oral together, the advantages were obvious from the assessor's viewpoint and the students'.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of the two stage oral is to provide for a group discussion of prepared topics as an opportunity for multiple interaction. The standard format, whenever possible, is four students, one 'animateur' and the assessor. The assessor chooses the students according to the topics prepared in their portfolios and the teacher/animateur coordinates and guides the discussion. Each candidate presents a short résumé of his/her project and answers queries and questions.

The second is on a one-to-one basis between the assessor and the candidate who is discussing another topic and follows familiar routines. At higher level it is normally based on an imaginative, literary theme taken from the text studied; at subsidiary level on one of the three themes of the course. What is assessed in the second stage is the ability to handle and present information logically, coherently and clearly.

## Portfolio

The last innovation in the learning and assessing process was the student's own project and recorded in a personal portfolio dossier. The topic was chosen by the student after discussion in class and related to the three themes; this was a requirement of the course but not automatically assessed during the oral interaction part of the examination.

## Trials and mock examinations

This was basically the plan sent to the 17 schools worldwide which were willing to participate in the pilot in 1991. The languages taught in the pilot were French and English. Why only two, why only these two? They would be manageable in a pilot project and hopefully transferable to all the other languages.

The next important landmarks, and sometime turning points

in the project were the results of language testing at the beginning of the 91-93 course, and then the mock examination taken in April/May 1992, as comprehensively analysed in Brendan J. Carroll's Consultancy Report to IB in August 1992.<sup>4</sup> At both stages, language testing and mock examination, teachers' views were sought before setting the new revised programme and examination. In both cases central and local assessment were balanced as much as possible; avoiding overloading in the case of the teacher while moderating procedures done centrally would ensure that personal idiosyncracies were compensated for. But transparency was again the overriding principle. Statistical evidence was used extensively at this stage of the pilot in test runs to ensure the reliability of the assessment: the tests had to be shown to be stable and comparable, however different the measures of the assessors were. They also had to show that they were effectively measuring what they were supposed to evaluate, predictively, descriptively and selectively – in other words establish their validity. This was indeed a complex, demanding, wide-ranging enterprise.

The first school-based language testing experiment, admittedly in a small sample in English as well as in French, showed there was no apparent major difference between Higher and Subsidiary level scores at the beginning of their courses. At the same time, the range of language mastery was extremely wide with the 584 students surveyed populating all categories of the six grades used: from rudimentary minus to very good and above.

In the mock examination of April/May 1992, the three externally-assessed parts were

- Text-handling (Reading and Listening tests)
- Written production
- Individual oral proficiency

The internally-assessed parts, relating to the Work Units proposed at the beginning of the course related to the three themes, were

- Intensive text-handling
- Follow-up writing and
- Group oral proficiency

Students were also invited to prepare a portfolio. In the 14 pilot schools used, some had done all the parts of the examination, others one or two parts. The bigger groups were in English Higher and French subsidiary. And as far as results were concerned the externally-assessed text-handling was the most important, whereas for the portfolio, fewer than 100 were available. The data were not comprehensive enough in this first attempt to draw definitive conclusions. Nevertheless some lessons were learned from the examination contents about what specific language areas might be taught and tested in the revised curriculum with the key areas of academic studies, social communication and the more diffuse 'experiencing how users of other languages think'. In view of the wide range of linguistic competence and expectations, conflicting pressures and widely different contexts in the IB schools involved worldwide, the recommended solution in the first report was to give discretion to the teacher and student as to the choice of texts and how to treat them:

'If a teacher feels that extensive exposure to classical literature or advanced scientific writing will best achieve the IB's three objectives, then he or she should be free to follow that path . . . on the other hand, if teachers feel that classical poetry, drama and novels are beyond the linguistic group of the student and, unrelated to their aspirations, provide little motivation or language improvement they should be allowed to devise alternative path to reaching the three objectives'.<sup>4</sup>

The setting out of clear and user-friendly performance scales was the next important issue and task that emerged from this experience. Their usefulness as a permanent basis to reach value judgements for assessors or appropriate targets for learners is self-evident. Formulating them in such a way as to avoid tautology as found in descriptors that remain vague in norm-referencing grading types of assessment, is another matter. The aim in the performance scale approach is to give firm clues about the objective level reached in the different language skills tested. Everyone involved in the examination, students, teachers, assessors, moderators, are all circulated with these scale descriptors.

The revised language programme has five bands of performance levels; labelling will change from 'very good' (to become 'highly proficient') to rudimentary. Each 'horizontal' level of