



*Ragne (IB1) and her brother Tobias (IB2), students at United Nations International School Hanoi, logging in to Skype Kari, their tutor in Cambridge for their weekly SSST Norwegian A lessons.*

# Mother tongue support within the IB

Mary Langford reflects on the IB's School-Supported, Self-Taught Language A

The importance of continued study of the mother tongue has been acknowledged by the IB Diploma Programme since its inception. One of the six core subjects of the Diploma has always been 'Language A', the student's mother tongue or 'first' language. 'Mother tongue' may be defined in simple terms as the first language learned, the student's native language, or the predominant academic language. Increasingly IB educators are familiar with the work of Dr Jim Cummins and others who have dedicated themselves to research about bilingual learners, the importance of additive bilingualism, and the negative consequences of subtractive bilingualism.

Recognising the importance of maintaining the mother tongue, how in practical terms do international schools facilitate this when they may have IB students who speak a wide range of mother tongue languages? How can schools justify recruiting and employing suitably qualified teachers if

only a very few students are in need of a particular language for a subject which only represents less than one sixth of their IB programme?

It seems that IB schools are responding in a variety of ways. Schools located in cities with a presence of diplomatic missions, universities, media outlets or other global commercial or cultural organisations may find suitably-qualified language specialists capable of teaching IB Language A on a very part-time basis. The IB has, for situations where this is not feasible, created an alternative means within the IB Diploma to facilitate mother-tongue study: 'Where no teacher is available, a student may be allowed to study his or her particular Language A as a school-supported self-taught Language A: literature student.' (SSST) (IB, 2009).

There seems to be no pattern to the number of mother tongue languages taught in schools. The International School of London, for example, boasts the availability of eighteen

languages, while other schools with larger student numbers may offer as few as three, and it seems that up to half of these mother tongue languages can be taught as SSST courses. The most obvious Language A offerings are the language of instruction – often English – and the host country language, such as English A and Italian A at the International School of Milan (ISM), or English A and German A at the International School of Zug and Luzern (ISZL). Additional Language A courses are added as SSST options when required. This clearly represents an additional commitment on the part of the school to managing these students, and the added challenge of supervising the coursework in a language that no-one on the staff understands!

Yet schools do make this commitment to SSST Language A for a variety of reasons. Silke Fox, IBDP Coordinator at International School of Schaffhausen, Switzerland, explains: 'As we have students whose English skills are not developed to an extent that they can follow English Language A, it is important to offer the course in their mother tongue. We only offer English, German and French'. Of the 9 mother tongue languages available, six are offered as SSST. Ian Carter, Head of Modern Languages at Aiglon College, Switzerland, says 'We recognise that there is a danger the students will lose touch with the [home] language and culture given that they spend so much time in Switzerland; we try to avoid that in order to maximise the students' IBDP options'. Martin Peel, Assistant Principal–Pastoral at ISZL, writes: 'This (SSST) is a really important element of the programme for students who are taking it as it allows them access to their home universities. Students who take SSST tend to need it to support a university application to their home country where it is not possible to study in English.'

The 'drivers' behind the mother tongue SSST programmes also vary from school to school. IB Diploma Coordinators, English Language A Coordinators (who may be first to recognise the limitations of the second language speakers who may struggle with IB English Language A), Curriculum Coordinators, and even the IB Middle Years Programme Mother Tongue Languages Coordinators are all named by different schools as advocates of SSST Language A, and the persons charged with responsibility for supervising the SSST Language A programme within the school.

The IB recommends that 'in the likely event that the supervisor is not a native speaker of the self-taught language, then the use of a mother-tongue tutor is highly recommended. This tutor, either working online or within the community, must be able to provide the support that the school cannot provide. Ideally, the tutor will have Diploma Programme Language A1 experience, but this cannot always be guaranteed' (IB, 2009).

Tutors come from a variety of sources. Silke Fox explains: 'As this is our first year for SSST, we were struggling regarding the organization. Families request the support, but school organises (the tutor) at this point'. Susan Round, IBDP Coordinator at the International School of Basel, says 'Some (come) through students who have moved here part way through the IBDP programme and kept working with a language teacher in their previous school. Then having made the contact, I have used these tutors again. Some come through the International Language and Literature Teachers' Cooperative (ILLTC). At UNIS Hanoi, IBDP Coordinator Nick

Whatley will allow the family to propose a tutor, but the school reserves the right not to give approval if they feel the nominated person is not suitably qualified, in which case the school will try to find a different tutor. ISZL adopt a similar approach. At International School of Hanover Region (ISHR), Naomi Resmer says 'We often recruit tutors we have used previously: there have been cases where families also know of potential tutors through their own networks, and the Association of German International Schools is a network I have used to find potential tutors'. ISM Secondary Principal Iain Sachdev finds tutors 'primarily through the International Language and Literature Teachers' Cooperative, unless the student/family have a suitable tutor – perhaps from a previous school'.

Tutors may be either funded privately by the student, or in some cases the school sets a budget to engage tutors, and in other situations the school pays but then includes the cost in the school tuition invoices sent to the family or sponsoring organisation. The advent of the internet and applications such as Skype and Facetime have improved the process, and Susan Round finds that managing contact with tutors via email is easy. Still, Ian Carter adds 'For the more "exotic" languages, we have not found an ideal solution'.

In May 2015 66 Group One languages were examined by the IB, from Amharic to Vietnamese, and 28.51% of the IB Diplomas awarded were Bilingual Diplomas. An additional two languages – Siswati and Afrikaans – were amongst those examined in the November 2014 examination session, where 36.56% of Diplomas awarded were Bilingual Diplomas (IB, 2014, 2015). According to the IB website (IB, 2016a), Language A Literature is available in 55 languages, suggesting that 13 Languages examined in November 2014 and May 2015 were offered by special request.

It is important that IB Diploma Programme schools reflect on how effectively they serve the needs of their multilingual students. The IB's policy of mother tongue entitlement 'promotes respect for the literary heritage of a student's home language'. It is also fundamental in realising the IB mission 'to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect' (IB, 2016b). As the IB points out (2009), acknowledgment of and support for each student's language(s) are essential starting points in promoting such intercultural understanding.

## References

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