

An exploration into the impact of Primary Modern Languages on developing learners' intercultural understanding: Comparing CfE and PYP principles

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Abstract: Intercultural understanding is widely recognised as an invaluable life skill, allowing humankind to appreciate and communicate in the diverse world they inhabit. The International Baccalaureate's (IB) Primary Years Programme (PYP) expresses to learners the clear link between developing intercultural understanding and being multilingual, as learning to speak foreign languages supports cross-cultural interaction and the development of empathy from a shared understanding of experiences. However, the same message is not as explicit in Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) documentation, therefore there is a gap in research regarding the extent to which learners in the Scottish curriculum are developing intercultural understanding through the learning of modern languages. Overall, the findings of this article suggest that both the PYP and CfE can improve how they support learners to acquire the skills needed to thrive in modern global society, in terms of clarifying their principles to support teachers to enact meaningful learning opportunities. This conclusion should be of relevance to the policy-makers and educators of these curriculums, who can impact how learners of all ages develop respect for those from different cultures as well as language skills to communicate and reach a common understanding.

Keywords: Primary Years Programme, Curriculum for Excellence, intercultural understanding, modern languages, global citizenship

Introduction

This article will firstly explore the extent to which modern languages learning in the primary school can develop an ethos of intercultural understanding, enabling learners to thrive as global citizens. A comparison of CfE and IB principles and practice will follow, to evaluate how each curriculum promotes multilingualism as a modern life skill that is integral to developing intercultural understanding.

How learners develop to become efficient global citizens must be an educational priority, as globalisation in recent decades has increased interaction across different cultures and languages, meaning that the ability to communicate and build relationships with others through language is paramount.

This topic is also significant in the current post-Brexit climate, as the UK seeks global connections, which can be enabled through individuals possessing the skills and attitudes needed for cross-cultural communication (Kelly, 2018).

In contrast to the highlighted significance of being multilingual and able to communicate with a diverse world, statistics show that the number of Scottish learners obtaining a foreign language qualification in secondary school is worryingly low (SCILT, 2019).

Clearly, perceptions about modern languages must change for learners to see their purpose as enabling cooperation across issues concerning our shared world (Shemshadsara, 2012). Teachers also play a role in presenting meaningful modern languages learning opportunities that enable intercultural understanding, to inspire a lifelong passion for this subject. However, according to Peiser and Jones (2014), there is evidence that teachers' practice is influenced by personal views and experiences, which will lead to subjective learning experiences and learners' inconsistent development of intercultural understanding. This point highlights the importance of teachers and learners being inspired by a curriculum that has clear messages and a strong conviction in favour of multilingualism and international mindedness. In comparing how CfE and IB meet the needs of modern society, there is also the need to analyse any practical limitations to achieving this in practice.

Background

The Case for Modern Language Learning in Primary Schools

Learning a foreign language, defined by Kirsch (2008) as any language not widely spoken by the general population of a country, supports the development of transferable life skills such as problem-solving, innovative thinking and interpersonal capability (Kuang, 2007). The term 'modern languages' refers to languages spoken in the present-day; French, German and Spanish are the most common modern languages taught in Scotland as they are the three 'working' languages of the European Union (EU), alongside English.

In the late twentieth century, language-learning had the primary purpose of garnering linguistic competence; studying grammar and vocabulary to be able to read in the foreign language (Byram *et al.*, 2013; Piatkowska, 2015). As globalisation increased international trade and travel, expatriation grew in popularity. The purpose of language-learning therefore shifted towards communicative competence, as multilingual proficiency can break down communication barriers and build the international relations necessary to global trade (Byram *et al.*, 2013; Kirsch, 2008; Sharpe, 2001). In addition to this, Byram (1997, p3) highlights the importance of "intercultural communicative competence", as an open-minded and inquisitive attitude to the values and customs of another culture is essential to global citizenship. To participate in global society is to show empathy and respect to others, creating an equitable and inclusive climate enabling all to collaborate in solving common issues (Le Bourdon, 2020).

The transformative potential of intercultural understanding, facilitated through modern language learning, has been recognised by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a key focus of the 2025 Programme for International Learner Assessment (PISA) (OECD, 2021). This triannual assessment is addressed at fifteen-year-old learners, comparing competency in various fields to help participating countries understand the efficacy of their education system. Multilingualism is identified as an essential 21st century skill, as it enhances employability prospects and activates skills applicable across a variety of contexts. In addition to this, it is explicitly highlighted

that multilingualism helps to develop intercultural understanding, necessary to fostering empathetic relationships with others and participating in our interconnected world (OECD, 2021).

Modern Languages Teaching in CfE

Introduced in Scottish primary schools from 2006, CfE places a greater emphasis on the international context and global citizenship by highlighting 'Capacities' for learners to develop across their entire learning experience (Table 1).

Table 1: The Four Capacities of Curriculum for Excellence

Scotland's approach - the four capacities



(Source: Education Scotland, 2023, n.p.)

It is emphasised in the Modern Languages Principles and Practice paper, a document outlining the purpose and practical implementation of the subject in CfE, that learners can develop these Capacities through being multilingual, inspired to utilise their knowledge and skills to make a positive contribution to their local and global society (Education Scotland, 2017).

Further influential to the Scottish context was the '1+2 model' introduced in the EU in 2002. Learners are to study two foreign languages surplus to their mother tongue, obtaining skills to thrive in the EU's multilingual community and build relations which enhance economic progression. Scotland adopted its own '1+2 approach' in 2012, highlighting the same economic and social benefits of multilingualism (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010; Scottish Government, 2012). Learning about the culture of people living in places where a taught language is widely spoken is further beneficial for individuals to develop an understanding and empathy for others, which is the base for

the meaningful intercultural relationships necessary to global citizenship (HMIE, 2010). Exploring different cultures will complement learning about Scotland's own, for learners to conceptualise cultures as multi-faceted and interconnected through their similarities (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010).

Modern Languages Teaching in the PYP

The International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) was founded in 1968, initially comprising of the Diploma Programme (DP) and the Middle Years Programme (MYP), with the introduction of the Primary Years Programme (PYP) in 1997. All IB programmes share a 'mission statement', promoting principles of caring for the world and its people through sustaining a lifelong passion for learning and acting according to moral values (IBO, 2019b).

This mission statement can be addressed through developing international-mindedness, the ability to understand different perspectives and negotiate differences to achieve a common goal (IBO, 2019b). Learners will develop this attitude through the interrelated concepts of global engagement, multilingualism and intercultural understanding (IBO, 2018), as a willingness to explore other cultures helps develop empathy, while communicating in different languages builds relations which facilitate overcoming global issues. International-mindedness is one of the four foundational elements of the PYP, along with the Learner Profile (Table 2), the curriculum and approaches to learning (IBO, 2019b).

Table 2: Learner Profile Attributes and description

Inquirers	They develop their natural curiosity. They acquire the skills necessary to conduct inquiry and research and show independence in learning. They actively enjoy learning and this love of learning will be sustained throughout their lives.
Knowledgeable	They explore concepts, ideas and issues that have local and global significance. In so doing, they acquire in-depth knowledge and develop understanding across a broad and balanced range of disciplines.
Thinkers	They exercise initiative in applying thinking skills critically and creatively to recognize and approach complex problems, and make reasoned, ethical decisions.
Communicators	They understand and express ideas and information confidently and creatively in more than one language and in a variety of modes of communication. They work effectively and willingly in collaboration with others.
Principled	They act with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness, justice and respect for the dignity of the individual, groups and communities. They take responsibility for their own actions and the consequences that accompany them.
Open-minded	They understand and appreciate their own cultures and personal histories, and are open to the perspectives, values and traditions of other individuals and communities. They are accustomed to seeking and evaluating a range of points of view, and are willing to grow from the experience.
Caring	They show empathy, compassion and respect towards the needs and feelings of others. They have a personal commitment to service, and act to make a positive difference to the lives of others and to the environment.
Risk-takers	They approach unfamiliar situations and uncertainty with courage and forethought, and have the independence of spirit to explore new roles, ideas and strategies. They are brave and articulate in defending their beliefs.
Balanced	They understand the importance of intellectual, physical and emotional balance to achieve personal well-being for themselves and others.
Reflective	They give thoughtful consideration to their own learning and experience. They are able to assess and understand their strengths and limitations in order to support their learning and personal development.

(Source: IBO, 2019b, n.p.)

IB principles highlight a clear link between international-mindedness and the learning of modern languages, as the latter provides the individual with communication and relationship-building skills, essential to fostering cross-cultural connections. Each PYP school has the freedom to choose which modern languages to teach, depending on the school's context and community (IBO, 2019a).

Pedagogy of Intercultural Understanding

Learning about culture can be framed through the concepts of “culture with a capital C” and “culture with a lower-case C” (Kirsch, 2008, p157). The former refers to significant events, celebrations and traditions which are often recognised and respected by those outside the culture also, such as Christmas and Ramadan. The latter considers aspects such as cuisine, clothing and lifestyle, which are commonly associated with the culture.

The process of exploring other cultures while simultaneously reflecting on one's own is defined as “intercultural competence” (Kirsch, 2008, p157). This is going beyond a

simple awareness of other cultures to foster self-growth, through understanding other perspectives before reaching one's own (Scarino, 2010). An ability to detach oneself from personal beliefs and inquire into other interpretations is required (Castro *et al.*, 2015; Lomicka, 2009) to develop the sense that there are no 'right' beliefs or values.

The importance of intercultural understanding is evident in PYP literature and explicitly linked to the learning of modern languages. Thus, PYP learners are, in theory, supported to thrive in modern society. In contrast, there is an absence of the term 'intercultural understanding' in CfE when global citizenship is explored. Therefore, there is a gap in literature regarding how CfE learners are effectively developing this understanding within modern language learning, to become efficient global citizens. This article will firstly evaluate the evidence that learning modern languages can impact intercultural understanding and subsequently, through a comparative analysis of the two curriculums, conclude how theory is applied in actuality, identifying the implications for future policy and practice.

What is the impact of Modern Language learning on developing intercultural understanding?

While the link between the two concepts is identified by many (Kirsch, 2008; Kuang, 2007; Sharpe, 2001), culture and modern languages have historically been taught separately, so learners were not invited to explore their interrelatedness (Scarino, 2010). According to Shemshadsara (2012), cultural learning should enhance the connection learners feel to those who speak the foreign language, instilling a positive attitude to others. This results in effective communication, where learners have an understanding and respect of the values and traditions of people.

As conveyed in section 1, the advent of globalisation in the last century has led to large-scale migration, forming societies with different ways of life intertwined. "Intercultural communicative competence" is vital to interactions across multiple languages (Byram *et al.*, 2013, p251) and is fundamental to working together to overcome the increasing number of issues impacting humanity collectively, such as climate change, the refugee crisis in Europe and international conflicts. As these issues have cross-cultural relevance, many perspectives exist and individuals with intercultural understanding possess the open-mindedness necessary to appreciate these and reach a solution through communicating effectively.

Finch, *et al.*'s study (2020) explores challenges to the practical implementation of theory. One of the key issues teachers identified was motivating learners who do not see a direct use for multilingualism in their community, nor a purpose for intercultural understanding. Coleman (2009) suggests that teachers must also grapple with the societal perception of modern languages, which influences the negative status it is given by learners. This suggests that schools must consider how to present the benefits of multilingualism to learners and address any preconceptions. A whole-school approach is required, ensuring teachers are supported by a "community of practice" collectively valuing modern languages and their importance in learners' repertoires (Finch *et al.*, 2020, p637).

How does the CfE Modern Languages curriculum support the development of intercultural understanding?

Despite the lack of mention of the term within policy, the core values of intercultural understanding are implicitly present in CfE through the four Capacities, which learners cultivate throughout their education (Education Scotland, 2019). For example, Hett (1993) describes global-mindedness as a willingness to learn and accept other beliefs, appreciating the contribution different cultures make to the worldwide community. Through these attitudes, learners demonstrate they are ‘Responsible Citizens’ through showing compassion for one another and being inspired to act to achieve justice for all (Education Scotland, 2019; Hett, 1993).

In addition to this, CfE literature implies that to be a ‘Responsible Citizen’ in the global sense requires an exploration of the local environment firstly (Education Scotland, 2019; HMIE, 2010). Learning about one’s own culture is an important element of intercultural understanding, as it supports learners to view the connectedness and interdependence of the world (Lomicka, 2009). Through considering how they can use their learning to impact their local environment, learners understand that they can play their part in making a difference on a wider, global scale (Education Scotland, 2019). The capacity of ‘Effective Contributors’ is consequently developed, as learners use their multilingual skills to engage with cross-cultural issues and communicate perspectives to reach a common understanding.

Further evidence that intercultural understanding is developed through CfE can be seen in the 2018 PISA, which found a higher-than-average level of global competence amongst Scottish pupils (Scottish Government, 2020). In other words, the study found that Scottish pupils conveyed respect for those from other cultures and valued the importance of building mutually respectful relationships. The study also found a general lack of interest in learning about other ways of life, which may suggest that CfE learners possess intercultural awareness rather than the ideal of intercultural communicative competence, highlighted in section 2.1 (Byram et al., 2013). It can therefore be questioned whether CfE is adequately preparing learners to thrive in modern, diverse society which requires open-minded individuals willing to engage with other perspectives.

How does PYP use modern language learning to develop intercultural understanding?

In PYP principles, the role of modern language learning in developing intercultural understanding is made more transparent, as utilising multilingual skills promotes the collaboration needed to seek mutually beneficial solutions for all in our diverse global society.

International-mindedness permeates all components of the PYP, as seen through the Learner Profile attributes, which reflect an internationally-minded individual as a competent “communicator” and “inquirer” (IBO, 2019b, p3) through taking an interest in different cultures and using language to exchange meanings. “Open-minded” is

another attribute fostering international-mindedness, by means of respecting beliefs that may contrast with their own (IBO, 2019b, p3). These characteristics promote international-mindedness through developing critical thinking skills, allowing learners to better understand the world around them. Utilising the ability to communicate with others to seek solutions to pressing global issues effectively promotes the harmonious world the IB mission statement aspires towards (Byram, Holmes and Savvides, 2013; IBO, 2019b; Woodgate-Jones and Grenfell, 2012).

As conveyed by Hacking *et al.* (2017) and the IB itself (IBO, 2009), establishing a clear definition of international-mindedness is an ongoing challenge for policy-makers and teachers. It is an especially significant issue for practitioners new to the PYP, as they cannot be expected to lead good practice enabling critical intercultural understanding without having the wealth of PYP experience which makes teachers better role models (Walsh and Casinader, 2018).

Hill (2012, p259) puts forward a definition emphasising the importance of “critical thinking and collaboration...to shape attitudes leading to action which will be conducive to intercultural understanding, peaceful co-existence and global sustainable development”. Working with this concise definition, practical and actionable links between international-mindedness and the Learner Profile attributes are made explicit (Savva and Stanfield, 2018), thus the mission statement can be achieved as learners and teachers are clear as to how to work towards it.

Conclusion

This article has conveyed the interrelatedness of modern language learning and intercultural understanding, as well as their importance to the modern globalised society. The purpose of the comparative analysis between CfE and PYP principles was to determine the extent to which they promote these essential 21st Century skills and the application of these principles in practice. It can be concluded that both curricula have sound principles to promote the overall goal of global citizenship, but common challenges exist.

The term ‘intercultural understanding’ is absent in CfE and this is reflected in practice, as teachers are challenged with motivating learners to pursue modern languages and recognise the benefits of intercultural understanding (Valdera Gil and Crichton, 2020). Regardless of the curriculum context, the experiences and outcomes of children and young people regarding both modern languages and intercultural understanding depends upon the professional values, creativity of teachers and the quality of their teaching. With the evidence explored, teachers of CfE must consider how modern languages and intercultural understanding can be integrated in a meaningful manner, to engage learners and prepare them to be effective contributors to modern society.

In comparing CfE and the PYP, there is a clear difference in how learners both perceive and utilise their multilingual skills and intercultural understanding, as concluded by the 2018 PISA. In contrast to CfE, multilingual communication is valued by learners as a key skill in their culturally and linguistically diverse school environments (Joslin-Callahan,

2019). The languages taught in the PYP curriculum are determined as those most valuable to the school's locality, therefore the learning of modern languages becomes a tool that instils a sense of community within the school (Joslin-Callahan, 2019).

Therefore, for CfE learners to acquire the language skills and intercultural understanding needed in modern society, the classroom must provide opportunities to learn modern languages through authentic contexts which reinforce the relevance of the topic. For example, Crichton and Templeton (2010) suggest that a greater choice of foreign languages in the CfE curriculum would incentivise learners.

There are also implications for PYP policy, which is currently ambiguous and inhibiting consistent practice in international-mindedness (Hacking et al., 2017). If PYP learners are to achieve international-mindedness, a clearer understanding of how learners can demonstrate their progressive understanding of intercultural understanding alongside their skills in modern languages is required. Hill's (2012) amended definition for international-mindedness connects the key principles of IB education and thus would be beneficial for the IB to promote to educators and learners.

Through revisions to policy and greater consideration of how this is implemented in practice, both curriculums can further prepare learners with essential 21st Century skills, thus becoming reputable and exemplary curriculums which meet the requirements of the 2025 PISA. Learners develop intercultural understanding through the study of modern languages, and comprehend the utility of international-mindedness to their daily lives and how it can be cultivated.

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