

# Fostering Creative and Critical Thinking Skills – Analysis of the International Baccalaureate’s EFL Approaches -

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## Abstract

In this paper, I focus on the educational methodology used in the foreign language course Language B, which is part of the Diploma Programme (DP), offered under the International Baccalaureate®. I will summarise the findings of my analysis of the learning materials and instruction methods used in this course. A key finding of this analysis is that the course emphasises the nurturing of ‘Higher Order Thinking Skills’ (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), with numerous techniques utilised throughout the course for the purposes of fostering students’ capacity for critical thinking. Although further research is required to establish the degree to which the course succeeds in instilling this kind of thinking in students, I suggest that this focus on critical thinking skill development may have implications for the teaching of English in Japan.

## Keywords

International Baccalaureate, critical thinking, Higher Order Thinking Skills

## Introduction

In recent years the educating of so-called ‘global jinzai’ has become a matter of national concern in Japan. The teaching of English to individuals who will be active on the global stage presents a serious challenge. Bearing this challenge in mind, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) has focused on the importance of IB Programmes, carrying out an analysis of aspects such as instructional content, evaluative content, and methodology. However, while the foreign language course Language B of the Diploma Programme (DP) is considered helpful for teaching English and usable internationally, there is a general lack of knowledge about the educational methodology and actual instructional techniques utilized in the course.

The Language B course incorporates such activities as oral presentations and debates, and the writing of essays on various topics. The intention is to push students to learn how to express their own opinions and thoughts to others in a clear and logical manner.

## 1 Language B Methodology

A principal characteristic of Language B’s education methodology is that it is said to emphasize student activities that are analytical, evaluative, and creative. Analysis, evaluation, and creation fall under the rubric of so-called ‘Higher Order Thinking Skills’ (HOTs), and a key feature of the Language B course is that these HOTs are taught alongside the so-called ‘Lower Order Thinking Skills’ (LOTs) such as memorisation, understanding, and application.

Furthermore, when we compare the learning material which is used in the Language B course to the textbooks approved by MEXT, we can identify the following differences.

(1) The material and topics covered are different. Many of the MEXT approved textbooks are centred on the study of articles, and there are cases where the practical use of learning a topic is unclear. On the other hand, with Language B, the students come across a range of different forms of text (not only newspaper articles, but blogs, letters, pamphlets, etc.), and are required to actually utilise these forms by way of writing.

(2) The learning material for Language B not only includes questions that serve to check a student’s understanding of a section of English text (an understanding of relations of fact), but also has many questions which require the student to express their own opinion or position on a topic, or is set up in such a way as to foster debate on a topic with their fellow students.

By comparison, the main characteristic of MEXT approved textbooks is that they have many questions that are centred on encouraging understanding of the textbook's content, for example, questions whose answers are only found in the provided text. According to Kawano (2016), while with MEXT approved textbooks roughly 94% of questions fit this description, less than 64% do in the case of questions found in Language B course learning material. I suggest that this difference may have an influence on the development of students' critical thinking skills.

## 2 Language B Learning Techniques

Let us now examine some actual study cases used in Language B. For example, suppose that there is a lesson whereby students learn some basic facts concerning fair trade. In a MEXT approved textbook, we would have the following kinds of questions: 'What does the fair trade system guarantee?' Or 'what are fair trade products usually labelled with?' On the other hand, in a Language B course, we find the following kinds of questions: 'what do you see when you look at the logo on the right? Write down the first thing that comes to mind. After that, share your answer with your classmates. Does everyone have the same answer? Why might you see something different?' We can see that this question is prompting students to provide their own opinion or thoughts. It further includes the instruction to share their answers with classmates. The lesson therefore requires students to practice expressing their own opinion to other people in the class. Furthermore, the question is followed by the sub-question: 'Does everyone have the same answer?' The sub-question is set up in such a way that it promotes the realisation that one's own opinion may be similar or different to others', and that each individual has a potentially different opinion or way of thinking about a given topic. We conclude with the final section of the question 'Why might you see something different?' The intention here is to have the students learn to think about why there may be differences of opinion. In this manner, it is evident that the class is structured in such a way that a topic such as Fair Trade is taken up as an opportunity for teaching students to communicate their opinion to others, and to read and listen to the opinions of others.

## 3 Critical Thinking Skills

The Language B course aims to methodically and rigorously enhance the critical thinking skills of students. What does this mean, however, in practice? What kinds of learning activities do students undertake in this course? When the author observed a class at Japan's IB World School, the questions the teacher posed to the students included the following (this particular class was focusing on sports):

'I am going to use a piece of English text to introduce the supposed top five most dangerous sports in the world. However, they are not listed in order of their level of dangerousness. It will be up to all of you to place them in the correct order. When you do this, please use an evaluative method of your own design. Afterwards, let's compare our own individual rankings to the rankings of others. I want you to consider how your ranking method was similar or different to others. The writer we will refer from uses an ambiguous definition to rank these five sports as the most dangerous. The word 'dangerous' will be interpreted differently by different people. Please examine the text in order to uncover the facts or grounds supporting the authors' opinion, drawing a line under these parts'. It is clear how this kind of instruction from the teacher actually functions as a basis for inquiry for the students. Through an English class, the students are able to engage in important aspects of critical thinking, that is, comparison and analysis. They are also able to develop their ability to persuade their opponents utilising appropriate vocabulary and expressions.

### References

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