Language teaching strategies and techniques used to support students learning in a language other than their mother tongue

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Abstract

This research attempts at exploring language teaching strategies and techniques that can be used in classroom settings to improve student learning in a language other than their native languages. This paper aims to investigate the previous research on models of learning and raise teacher awareness of language learning and create a resource bank of language teaching strategies, ideas and techniques for teachers to use when implementing units of inquiry.

Keywords: Language teaching, learning strategies and techniques, mother tongue, student learning.

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1. Introduction

In today's global society, many learners are facing the challenge of accessing an International Baccalaureate (IB) programme in a language other than their mother tongue. To enable learners to fully participate in both the academic and social aspects of school life, educators need to recognise how this phenomenon impacts on teaching and learning and identify ways to support language development.

Learners who are learning in a language other than their mother tongue will often have a wealth of knowledge in a language other than that of the classroom. However, these students will often not have been introduced to the vocabulary and concepts of the new language necessary for comprehending content. Cameron (2000, p. 40) comments, '…if they are not understanding, they cannot be learning'. As it can take up to 7 years for learners who are using a language other than their mother tongue to attain the same levels of academic language proficiency as those expected for learners learning in a mother tongue, the implications of this in relation to learning are paramount.

The *Learning in a Language Other than Mother Tongue* Document (International Baccalaureate 2008, p. 6) states, 'A threshold level of proficiency in cognitive academic language is essential for the learner participation and engagement that is necessary for subsequent success in an IB programme'. Ways to develop this proficiency seemed to be a question of many during a Primary Years Programme (PYP) workshop that the researcher attended. The issue of how to teach the PYP to children who did not speak English or the language of instruction was a common problem identified by many. Based on this issue, a research investigation with the aim of raising teacher awareness of the strategies and techniques that could be used to support the language development of young learners was conducted.

2. The research investigation

In 2010, a research project funded by a grant from the Jeff Thompson Award was conducted to identify ways in which language support could be provided when teaching a Unit of Inquiry in the PYP to children who did not speak English or the language of instruction. The objectives of this research investigation were as follows:

1. To observe, record and analyse the strategies and techniques PYP teachers use to implement their unit of inquiry to children learning English as a foreign language or additional language.
2. To create a resource bank of language teaching strategies, ideas and techniques for teachers to use when implementing units of inquiry.
3. To help raise teacher awareness of language learning through the programme of inquiry.

3. Overview of participants and class information

Ten teachers, nine working in the European region and one in the Pacific region volunteered to participate as case studies for this research investigation. All the participants worked in schools which were implementing the PYP and the language of instruction at each school was English.

Teacher	Gender	Age Range	Number of Years Teaching	Language Teacher Training	English as a First Language	Number of Students in Class	Number of Boys in Class	Number of Girls in Class	Number of Nationalities in class	Number of Languages Spoken by Students
Teacher One	Male	21–30	2	No	Yes	13	6	7	11	6
Teacher Two	Female	20–30	6	No	Yes	18	8	10	11	10
Teacher Three	Female	51–60	26	Yes	No	14	10	4	11	8

Teacher Four	Female	31–40	14	Yes	Yes	12	7	5	12	8
Teacher Five	Female	31–40	8	No	Yes	15	11	4	10	10
Teacher Six	Male	61+	38	Yes	Yes	14	9	5	10	7
Teacher Seven	Female	31–40	6	No	Yes	16	8	8	11	9
Teacher Eight	Female	20–30	8	Yes	No	16	8	8	9	6
Teacher Nine	Female	31–40	9	No	Yes	15	7	8	9	8
Teacher Ten	Female	51–60	30	Yes	Yes	19	11	8	12	11

4. Data collection methods and procedures

For this research investigation, the term *strategies* was defined as, '…the approaches that can be used across curricular areas to support the learning of students' (Herrell & Jordan 2004, p. 5) which '…may be used only on occasion' (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011, p. 48). While techniques was defined as 'The body of specialised procedures and methods used in any specific field' (Dictionary.com). However, due to the difficulty in establishing and distinguishing between the two during one lesson observation, the researcher decided to make the two terms interchangeable.

The tools used to collect information were lesson observations, teacher interviews, PYP Co-ordinator interviews and field notes.

Observations of Unit of Inquiry lessons were selected as a tool for data collection in order to gain insights and practical ideas of how teachers were providing language support and developing student's language skills in the classroom when teaching. An audio recording ofthe lesson was made during the observation and used to make a transcription. This transcription enabled the researcher to tally the strategies and techniques that each participant used during the lesson observation.

The following three questions were designed to provide a focus for lesson observations and help with the development of lesson observation tools.

- What types of language are teachers using to help students negotiate meaning and understand their environment?
- How are teachers modelling language and helping young learners to acquire the target language?
- How are teachers making learning experiences meaningful and comprehensible for children in the classroom?

Teacher interviews were used to encourage teachers to reflect on their beliefs and language teaching practices. Participant's perceptions of how language should be taught and how languages are learned were also of interest to the researcher. It was hoped that these might provide the researcher with a possible understanding of the reasons for different language and activity choices made by a teacher (Wallace, 1998).

Field notes pertaining to the classroom and school environments were used to record techniques, strategies and ideas that schools were using to support English language learners in the PYP programme.

The PYP Co-ordinator interview was designed to enable the researcher to build a profile of the school and to facilitate a discussion on the strategies and policies, the school was using to support

English language learners. Stake (2006, p. 23) comments, 'An important reason for doing the multi-case study is to examine how the programme or phenomenon performs in different environments'.

The researcher felt it was important to use a variety of means to collect information about the teacher and school to help create a more in-depth view of each school's programme.

Although all the participants worked in schools which were implementing the PYP and the language of instruction at each school was English, variables of this were examined to see if they impacted on the types of language used by a teacher or the strategies and that they employed.

The variables considered included the language learning and training experiences of each participant, participant's language teaching and learning beliefs, the types of interaction that occurred during the observation between the teacher and students, and finally the language levels of learners in the classes participants taught.

5. The findings

The following graph illustrates the overall way in which language was used during the lesson observation by all the participants.
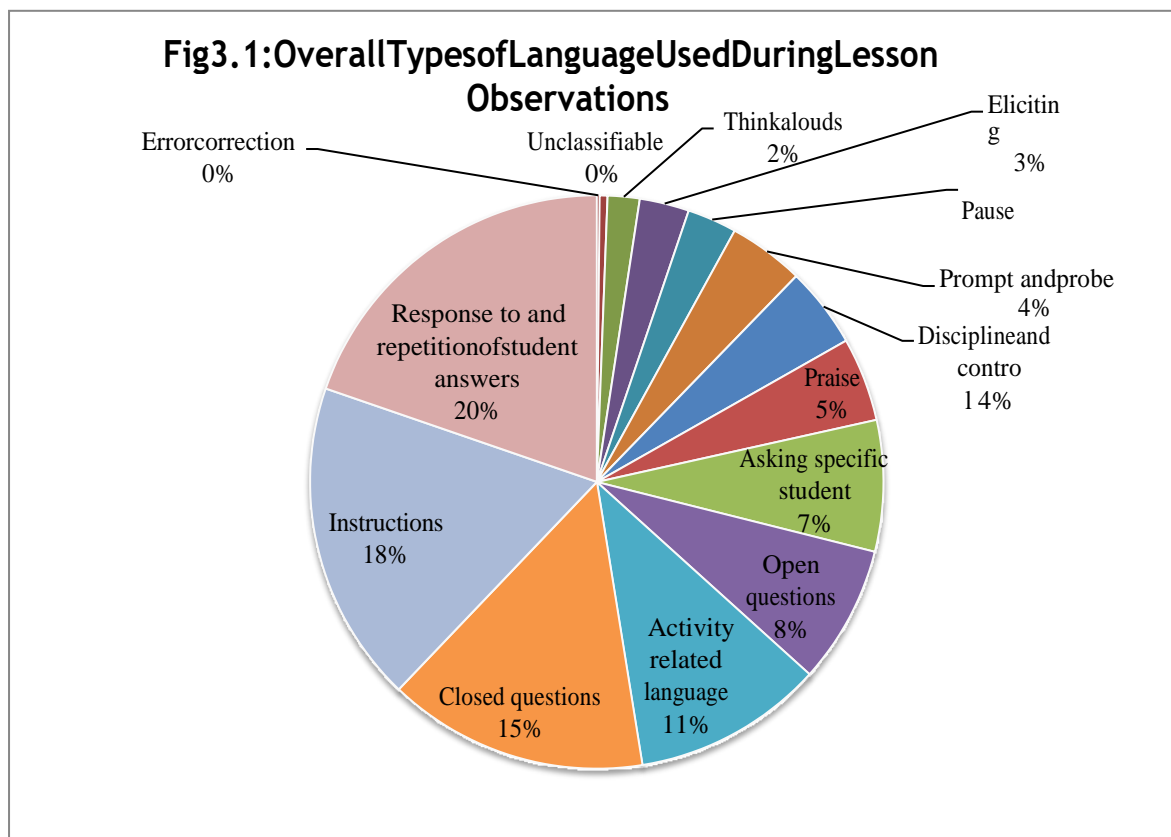

Figure 1. Overall types of language used during lesson observations

During lesson observations, all the 10 participants were seen to be using the following types of language asking open and closed questions, responding to and repeating student answers, giving instructions, using activity-related language and directing specific questions to individuals.

5.1. Asking open and closed questions

Closed questions accounted for 15% of language use during the observed lessons and open questions 8%. These results appear to be in line with research which has shown that closed questions tend to be used more frequently than open questions (Nunan, 2000). Closed questions appeared to be used during lessons to identify what students knew and were usually asked in a quick and successive manner. It would also seem that these questions were used when the teacher had a particular idea or answer that they wanted the students to come up with.

Open questions were often displayed in the classroom and related to the unit of inquiry. In discussion, they were often used to discuss the unit of inquiry students were working on. The use of open and closed questions during a lesson may have provided participants with an insight into what individuals in their class knew and could have helped to activate individual's prior understanding and knowledge of a particular concept. Cameron (2001 p. 4) comments '…the child is an active learner and thinker, constructing his or her own knowledge from working with objects or ideas'. This knowledge may be organised into a schema (Fisher, 2005), a conceptual framework that continually modifies and grows according to the ways in which a learner construes and personalises information based on previous experiences (Bennett & Dune, 1994). Determining what an individual knows may, therefore, have helped participants to develop the schemas of their learners which can be partially formed, incomplete, unclear or inaccurate (Bennett & Dunne, 1994).

Participants also used questions to check if students knew what they were expected to do and asked students to re-tell instructions to a partner to help reinforce their instructions and what learners had been asked to do. Language learners '…actively try to make sense, i.e., to find and construct a meaning and purpose for what adults say to them and ask them to do' (Cameron, 2001, p. 19). Checking the comprehension of instructions would appear to be an important strategy to use in the classroom and may provide the teacher with an indication of how much learners have recalled from discussion, instruction or previous lessons.

5.2. Asking a specific student

Asking individual student's specific questions accounted for 7% of language use. Using questions to encourage a more in-depth response from a student may be '… a way of extending dialogue with children' (Fisher, 2005, p. 26). Rather than accepting short answers, we support learning if more extended answers are sought. Therefore, directly asking an individual a question may be a useful technique to employ when wishing to help develop an individual student's language skills. It might also be useful in teacher-fronted interactions to help distribute response opportunities widely to ensure that all the learners are kept alert and given an opportunity to respond (Nunan, 2000).

5.3. Response to and repetition of student answers

The category of *Response to and Repetition of Student Answers* amounted to a total of 20% of participants language use during lesson observations. The types of responses to student answers that participants used varied from one word responses, such as yes, yeah and okay, to instances where the participant would repeat a student's answer to reinforce a key concept or point. On occasion, a student would provide a teacher with a one or two word answer. A teacher would respond to this by providing a full sentence with the student's answer incorporated.

5.4. Giving instructions

Giving instructions accounted for 18% of language use during lesson observations. Instructions were observed to be given for a variety of purposes, such as for a teacher to state their intentions, to

prepare students for an activity, to organise students into groups or pairs and as a part of the management of the class.

5.5. Activity related language

Nearly, 11% of teachers language use was activity related language. This type of language use was felt to be of great importance by several participants as they believed it helped the students to make meaningful connections and enabled them to learn about the language through the language. Nunan (2000, p. 189) adds, 'Teacher talk is of crucial importance for the processes of acquisition because it is probably the major source of comprehensible target language input a learner is likely to receive'. Using this type of language may provide students with a type of scaffolding, which is essentially a way to nudge a student towards higher level performance and may help them reach the goal of being an autonomous learner. As every individual interprets a learning experience in a way that is meaningful to them (Williams & Burden, 1997), students may need support in finding ways of constructing links and communicating their understanding and experiences to others (Bennett & Dunne, 1994). 'Learning to do things and learning to think are both helped by interacting with an adult' (Cameron, 2002, p. 7). 'With language development, this can be done by modelling correct grammar or pronunciation, asking challenging questions or providing direct instruction" (Hill & Flynn, 2006, p. 16).
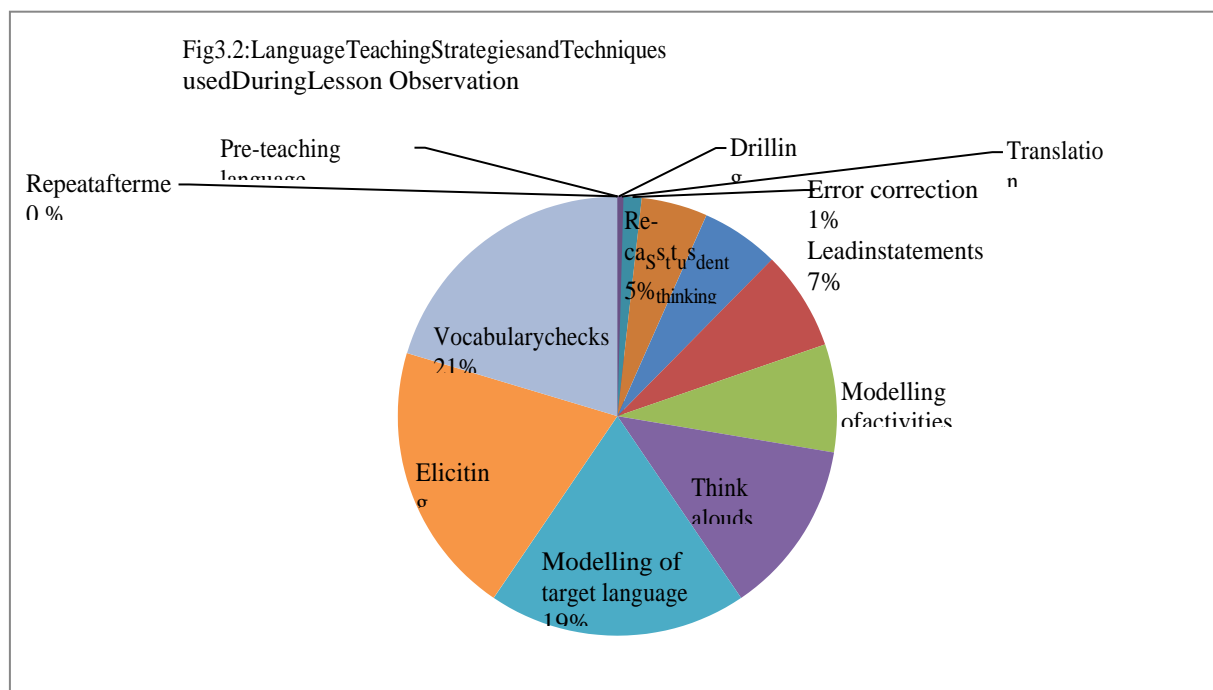

Figure 2. Language teaching strategies and techniques used during lesson observation

5.5.1. Language teaching strategies and techniques

In addition to identifying the types of language that participants used, the researcher was also interested in the specific language teaching strategies and techniques that were being used during a lesson. The following graph illustrates the overall strategies and techniques that participants were observed using, by the researcher, during the lesson observation.

5.6. Vocabulary checks

At 21%, the language teaching strategy of vocabulary checks was used the most by teachers and in several different ways. One participant predicted that the students in her class would not know what a

particular word meant which was crucial to the students understanding a story. The teacher chose to show the class a picture of the word. This is a strategy that might have helped to make the word easier for students to understand and remember (Bloor, 1991). Vygotsky (1978) adds that for young learners in the early stages of development, there is a close bond between what they see and meaning.

Several teachers took time during lessons to check that students had understood the meaning of key words or concepts. This strategy may have enabled individuals to connect new vocabulary with words that they already knew in their first language (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 2004). Participants often used questions to check that students had understood the meaning of key words or concepts. Brewster et al. (2004, p. 81) suggest that, 'Providing examples of words, their meanings and demonstrating how they might be used when beginning to learn a language may be more important than attention to the grammatical components and spelling of vocabulary' (Brewster et al., 2004, p. 81). It may also be of importance to note that, 'The acquisition of word meanings takes much longer than the acquisition of the spoken form of the words, and children use words in their speech long before they have full understanding of them' (Cameron, 2001, p. 73).

Another strategy teachers used to check vocabulary understanding was to review and recycle previously discussed vocabulary associated with the Unit of Inquiry or from prior lessons at the beginning of a lesson. This may have provided learners with the opportunity to re-hear words and possibly helped with the retention of these words in their long-term memory. Brewster et al. (2002, p. 63) add 'Children constantly need to recycle what they have learned so they don't forget, and to perceive progress, maintain motivation and aid memorisation'.

5.7. Eliciting

Eliciting was a technique that was used a total of 20% in lesson observations. This strategy helps a teacher to bring forward student's ideas and extend and sustain discussion which Fisher (2005) considers to be an important function of a teacher. Conversations that extend past a single exchange may help a learner's language development as it could provide a more realistic model of how an authentic conversation occurs (Wells, 1986). This kind of discussion might also help to reveal to a teacher '... the framework the children are using to interpret new information' (Wells, 1986, p. 115) and might possibly provide children with some of the language and ideas they will need to complete subsequent activities.

5.8. Modelling of target language

The modelling of target language was a strategy that accounted for 19% of the strategies and techniques used during lesson observations. Hill and Flynn (2006, p. 23) suggest that 'Language structure and form should be learned in authentic contexts rather than through contrived drills in language workbooks'. The modelling of target language would seem, therefore, to be an extremely important strategy for teachers to use, as these models may be a student's only guide on how the additional language is used in a natural environment.

5.9. Think alouds

Think alouds were a strategy and technique that were noticed a total of 13% of the time during lesson observations. A think aloud can be defined as the offering of a teacher's inner dialogue or opinions out loud for students to hear their thoughts, ideas and to model self-regulation of the thinking process possibly through questions, such as: 'What am I going to do now?', 'What is my problem?', 'I wonder what would happen if…'. Fisher (2005:47) suggests that the strategy of thinking aloud provides teachers the opportunity '…to model the world as we understand it in words'. The use of such a strategy may enable learners to hear more authentic and broader examples of the target

language (Nunan, 1991) and possibly help to scaffold and develop their own thinking skills (Fisher, 2005).

5.10. Modelling of activities

The modelling of activities accounted for 8% of the strategies and techniques used during lesson observations. Dorney (2001, p. 58) comments that the criteria for the successful completion of an activity need to be explicitly clear to all the learners although for some a discussion about these will not be enough. The use of live demonstrations and the presentation of examples of other student's work may provide a more complete description of the standard of content and presentation that is expected for a particular activity and possibly help to ease learner anxiety caused by not knowing what to do (Cameron, 2001).

5.11. Student thinking time

Student thinking time totalled 6% of observation time. This strategy was employed by participants after they had asked a question. Students need to be provided with the opportunity '…to think about questions after they have been asked before attempting to answer them' (Nunan, 2000, p. 193). In a research investigation, it was shown that by extending thinking time from 3 to 5 seconds after asking a question, there was a rise in student participation (Nunan, 2000, p. 193) and a significant increase in the quality of student answers (Fisher, 2005, p. 23). It would seem therefore by consciously allowing silence after asking a question a teacher may be fostering an environment more conducive to thoughtful responses and allowing language learners more time to connect to what has been asked.

5.12. Re-casts

Re-casts were a strategy observed to be used a total of 5% of all the strategies and techniques. A recast, that is, the repetition of a student's utterance making changes to convert it to a correct phrase or sentence (Lightbown & Spada, 2006) may provide a teacher with the opportunity to model how a sentence or phrase should be used without having to obviously highlight the student's error.

For example:

18:44 Student Eight   The trees are cutting down and ah, for another house.

18:47 Teacher Four   Excellent, Student Eight. They're cutting down the trees and they are going to build a new house.

'As no two students who are learning a language will have the same amount of grounding in their native language, or are at the same stage of English language acquisition' (Flynn & Hill, 2006, p. 3), it would seem that this type of modelling of language is, therefore, of great importance.

5.13. Error correction

At 1%, error correction was the least frequently used language strategy during the observed lessons. Hill and Flynn (2006, p. 32) suggest that 'The best way to provide corrective feedback when grammar or pronunciation errors are made is simply to model the correct English without overtly calling attention to the error'. Lightbown and Spada (2006, p. 190) add that this corrective feedback should also be provided in a clear and precise way, e.g.,

23.04   Student Two   I did choose caring.

23.06   Teacher One   Pardon, pardon?

23.08	Student Two	I did caring either.
23.09	Teacher One	You did caring as well.
23.11	Student Two	Ah ha.

It is important to note that this type of correction might only be beneficial if a student is at that current level in their grammatical development; a child who is not, is unlikely to automatically use the correct form (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 190). Nunan (2000, p. 198) also suggests teachers '...need to monitor not only how and when such feedback is provided, but also whether the feedback is positive or negative, and who receives the feedback'.

5.14. Incorporating small group and pair work in lessons

During lessons students were often given opportunities to work in small groups and with a partner which according to Hill and Flynn (2006, p. 55) may be '… a powerful tool for fostering language acquisition'. 'Research has shown that learners use considerably more language, and exploit a greater range of language functions when working in small groups' (Nunan, 2000, p. 51). Small groups also enable participants to hear language from each other, therefore, a different source of input from the teacher. This might help to make students feel more comfortable and relaxed and possibly reduce the anxiety related to attempting the target language (Hill & Flynn, 2006).

5.15. Elaborated input

During lessons, some teachers used Elaborated Input that is the use of '…repetition, paraphrasing, slower speech contains redundant information, the redundancy being achieved through repetition, paraphrase, slower speech and so on' (Nunan, 2000, p. 191) and according to the research may be more effective than a teacher using simpler syntax and vocabulary (Nunan, 2000, p. 191). The use of this type language with actions, illustrations, context or prior knowledge, is a key factor in helping children to learn a second language (Brewster et al., 2002).

6. Data analysis

6.1. What types of language are teachers of the same class level using?

Overall, it did not appear that teachers of a particular class level used different types of language more than other teachers teaching a different class level. Both the teachers of the classes of 10- to 12-year old used the same types of language in exactly the same order. However, two teachers of the 6- to 8-year old classes also used these types of language. All the teachers had the language type of *response to and repetition of student answers,* in their four most frequently used types of language during the observation. The language type categories *of instructions* and *closed questions* featured in nine out of ten teachers most frequently used language types. Six out of ten teachers used the same four language types in varying orders of frequency, during their lessons. These types of language were *response to and repetition of student answers, instructions, closed questions* and on *task discussion.*

6.2. Do teachers of a particular class level use more strategies or techniques than another?

Teachers in the Lower Primary used more *Modelling of target language, Recasts, Error Correction, Think alouds, Modelling of activities and Vocabulary checks and definitions* than teachers in the Middle and Upper Primary. In the Middle, Primary teachers used higher levels of *Eliciting* and *Student thinking time.* The Upper Primary group was not seen to use any strategies and techniques more than the Lower and Middle Primary Groups. However, the number of teachers in each group needs to be

considered as a factor for this. The Upper Primary group consists of only two teachers, whereas the Lower and Middle Primary groups each have four teachers.

It would seem that the strategies and the techniques that the Lower Primary group used more frequently than the Middle and Upper Primary groups are more suited to catering for the developmental and linguistic needs of students of the 6 to 8 year age. While the type of lesson occurring during lesson observations may help to account for slightly higher use of the strategy *Eliciting* by the Middle Primary group which saw teachers trying to establish what students understanding of a particular concept or topic was.

The greatest difference of strategy and technique use between the three class level groups was in the category of *Modelling of target language,* where the lower primary's average use was 18 instances, while the middle and upper primary instances were 2 and 3, respectively. The gap in this figure can be explained by a large number of instances in one participant's lesson where this strategy was used in a phonics lesson. During this lesson, the teacher repeated several sounds and words with the focus sounds in order to reinforce student's knowledge of these particular sounds. The instances where the teacher modelled target language in this lesson amounted to 54 which greatly distorted the overall figures.

6.3. Possible factors for specific types of language use and choice of strategy and techniques employed by teachers

The level of language learners, whether participants had participated in any language teacher training, the types of interactions during the lesson between the teacher and students and teacher beliefs were all considered as possible reasons why teachers might be choosing to employ a particular type of language or strategy and technique.

The level of language learners was presented as a possible factor for consideration as different types of language and strategies/techniques may be more useful for learners at various times of their language learning development. It was found that some connections between language use and the level of language of students in a class could be made but whether this was deliberate and planned for, by the teacher, was very difficult to determine and examine therefore making this a tenuous link.

The types of language teacher training participants have had was the next factor to be analysed. Five participants of the 10 identified themselves as having had language teaching training. However, all the participants showed they made some accommodation for language learners in their lessons by the language they used and the strategies/techniques they demonstrated during the observation. Overall, the differences between those with language teacher training and those without were not as marked as the researcher had predicted they would be. It was suggested that this might be attributed to the types of professional development that those teachers with language teaching undertook and whether or not this was a sustained learning experience with professional support and follow up or if this was a one off course. Research (Meiers & Buckley 2010) has shown that the former is more likely to lead to greater improvements in student learning and teaching skill. One possible reason for the similarities between the two group's use of language and strategies and techniques may be that all of the participants were working in the PYP in an IB authorised school and had completed the initial IB *Making the PYP Happen* Workshop at the time of their lesson observation. In addition to the *Making the PYP Happen* workshop, each participant on average had completed another two workshops run by the IB. These workshops may have helped to standardise participants' understandings of the PYP. However, not all the participants had completed the language based workshops offered by the IB perhaps due to the category level of these workshops and that the aim of one workshop is to create a language policy.

The types of talk that took place between teachers and students was also investigated to see if there was any correlation between this and the types of language and the strategies and techniques used during their lessons. Some lessons observed demonstrated a more teacher centred approach,

while others a more learner centred approach. Lessons at the beginning of a Unit of Inquiry often involved the teacher front loading information and were, therefore, more teachers centred while those lessons that were observed towards the end of the unit involved students working independently on inquiry and were more learners centred. The context of the school might also determine whether a lesson is more teachers centred and may be a requirement of the particular setting they are working in. Overall, a high number of learner centred lessons were observed which would appear to be in line with the philosophy of the PYP that teachers should be facilitators of learning. It was concluded that language learners need to be exposed to different types of language and working with students in different ways, such as whole class, pair and group or individually provides the greatest method of doing this.

Finally, teacher beliefs were considered as a factor which might influence the types of language and strategies and techniques that a teacher used. The teacher interview identified several beliefs that were consistent with key notions in language teaching theory, such as, *meaningful and real life contexts should be used, language needs to be modelled and reinforced by the teacher, language needs to be scaffolded and ideas elicited from students and students need to be exposed to a variety of activities.*

In conclusion, although teachers are working from the same framework, certain contextual factors will influence how the programme is implemented. Individual teacher beliefs, their education and experience of teaching and language teaching, the language levels of students and the types of interaction in the classroom that take place between the teacher and student are all the aspects that may contribute to the types of language that teachers use and the strategies and techniques they choose to employ in the classroom. 'Teaching is a very personal activity, and it is not surprising that individual teachers bring to teaching very different beliefs and assumptions about what constitutes effective teaching' (Richards & Lockhart, 1996, p. 36).

7. Recommendations

7.1. For teachers

From the data collected during observations, it would seem that teachers are using some language teaching strategies and techniques but this is an area that requires further development. The *Learning in a Language other than Mother Tongue in IB Programmes* (IB, 2008) would be a good starting point for those wishing to further develop their understanding of language teaching and emphasises the importance of using such strategies and techniques as scaffolding and drawing upon prior knowledge. The following strategies and techniques could be incorporated more into practice by teachers to further improve the language support given to learners:

1. *Thinking Time*—Teachers should try to consciously allow at least five seconds of silence after asking a question to allow language learners more time to connect to what has been asked and provide all students with the opportunity to think and answer.
2. *Elaborated input*—Teachers need to consider the ways that they speak to students and try to repeat key instructions or points, paraphrase, use slower, clear speech and visual aids to help students better comprehend what is being said.
3. *Re-casts*—If a student makes an error when speaking the teacher should repeat what the student said providing the correct model without overtly drawing attention to the error.

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4. *Questioning*—Teachers should be trying to ask more open ended questions to their students and directing these questions to specific individuals to ensure all the students have the opportunity to participate.
5. *Increase verbal interaction*—Teachers should provide opportunities to increase verbal interaction in classroom activities to help ensure that students are exposed to as many different types of authentic language as possible and allow students opportunities to practice using the target language. Planning for more group and pair work during lessons would help to do this.

7.2. For the IB organisation

Language is highlighted as an essential element of the programme and schools are required to have a policy in place to support this. However, there may need to be an extra training element added to the IB's professional development programme to help schools and teachers understand how to put their language policy into practice. Opportunities for teachers to share good practice and for on-going continued support might be key elements in developing the support that the participants of this research investigation were hoping to receive.

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