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International Journal of Educational Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

The International Baccalaureate's Bilingual Diploma: Global trends, pathways, and predictors of attainment



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 February 2014

Received in revised form 23 October 2014

Accepted 27 October 2014

Available online 19 November 2014

Keywords:

International education

International Baccalaureate

Bilingual education

English as a global language

ABSTRACT

This study explored global patterns and pathways in the award of International Baccalaureate (IB)'s Bilingual Diploma (BD) and examined the relationship between several variables and the award of the BD. The sample comprised students from 139 countries, who earned the IB Diploma between 2007 and 2012. The most common combination of languages studied in pursuit of the BD was English-Spanish. Results of logistic regression analysis revealed that the model significantly predicted whether a student earned a BD and explained an impressive 62% of variance. All seven predictors were significant, while student native language had the most powerful effect: the odds of earning the BD were 17.7 times higher for non-native English speaking students, compared with native English speaking students.

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1. Introduction

The ability to communicate in more than one language is undoubtedly an important resource especially in the context of increasing interconnectedness that defines our global society. Bi-/multilingualism defined as “proficiency in and use of two or more languages by an individual,” (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2008, pp. 4–5) comes not only with the obvious communicative advantage but, as an ever-growing body of research shows, also with a multitude of cognitive advantages. From enhanced creative thinking (Bialystok & Shapero, 2005) and problem solving ability (Bialystok, 2001, 2005), to superior executive functioning and attentional control, bilinguals are found to exhibit enhanced cognitive abilities (Bialystok, Craik, & Ryan, 2006; Bialystok, 2010; Carlson & Meltzoff, 2008; Yoshida, 2008). Moreover, recent medical research reveals that bilinguals also reap health benefits: the onset of dementia and other symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease are delayed in bilingual patients (Craik, Bialystok, & Freedman, 2010; Alladi et al., 2013).

In addition, research on educational performance indicates consistently that students in bilingual programs outperform academically their peers in monolingual programs (McField & McField, 2014; Thomas & Collier, 2002). At the same time, linguistic minority students “taught through a medium of a dominant language in submersion programs often perform considerably less well than native dominant language speaking children in the same class” on tests of dominant language and other measurements of school achievement (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008, p. 117).

This study looks into the bilingual certification of the International Baccalaureate’s Diploma Programme, a program of international education that promotes multilingualism, second language acquisition, and mother tongue maintenance.

Abbreviations: IB, International Baccalaureate; DP, Diploma Programme; BD, Bilingual Diploma; SD, Standard Diploma.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2014.10.004>

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Although not a traditional bilingual program, the Bilingual Diploma allows students to maintain their native language by using it in the curriculum in addition to the language of instruction. This study examines factors that play a role in student attainment of the Bilingual Diploma and explores global patterns of attainment with the hope of providing insights into why some students choose to earn the bilingual certification.

1.1. IB Diploma Programme and its bilingual diploma

The International Baccalaureate (IB) is a non-profit educational organization founded in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland, which works with schools, governments, and international organizations worldwide to offer four educational programs (Primary Years Programme, Middle Years Programme, Diploma Programme and IB Career-related Certificate) to more than one million students aged 3–19 years. Its oldest program, the Diploma Programme (DP), launched in 1968, is a comprehensive 2-year curriculum designed to prepare students aged 16–19 for university and life in a global society. The program is currently offered in more than 2500 schools in 140 countries and has gained recognition from many of world's leading universities (IBO, 2014a). The biggest share of schools offering the DP is represented by the United States (33%) followed by Canada and the United Kingdom with 6% each. While the program is open for authorization and implementation in both state schools and private schools, the rate of state versus private school adoption varies from country to country reflecting specific educational contexts and policies. At present, approximately 50% of all IB world schools are public (IBO, 2014b).

Designed to promote students' critical thinking skills and academic research skills, the DP curriculum also emphasizes international-mindedness, intercultural understanding, and multilingualism (IBO, 2010). Students are required to choose one course from each of the five groups comprising studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, sciences, and mathematics and to complete three core courses: the extended essay, theory of knowledge, and CAS (creativity, action, and service). Additionally, the sixth subject may be an arts course or another course from the initial five groups. At the end of the program, students take written examinations that are marked by external IB examiners. The grades awarded for each exam range from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). Up to three additional points may be awarded for combined results on theory of knowledge and the extended essay. Therefore, the highest total that a Diploma Programme student can be awarded is 45 points. The "Diploma" is awarded to students who earn at least 24 points, subject to certain minimum levels of performance across the whole program and to satisfactory participation in creativity, action, and service.

Currently, DP courses and exams are available in English, French, and Spanish, which are also the official languages for communicating between the IB and schools, and in Chinese and German, as pilot languages. Reflective of the IB's goals of promoting access and multilingualism, students have the opportunity to complete the course in language and literature in their native language/best language. While there is a preset list of 50 languages that are automatically offered, if their native language is not among these, students may request additional languages that serve their needs. The IB arranges for an examiner in the student-requested language and if the school is unable to provide an instructor, the IB provides support for a self-taught course.

With the successful completion of additional language requirements generally consisting of course completion in at least two languages, students are awarded a "Bilingual Diploma," which attests their bi-/multilingual competencies. (Detail on specific pathways and requirements for the bilingual certification is provided in Section 4.2.) As a DP requirement, all students complete a course in language and literature, which can be in the language of instruction or a students' native language/best language. In addition, students can opt for completing other subjects in a language different from the language used in the language and literature course.

Second language acquisition is also promoted in the DP curriculum. Language acquisition and the ability to communicate in more than one language are touchstones of the IB's philosophy surrounding development of intercultural perspectives. The IB recognizes the variety of language backgrounds used by IB students and teachers and the growing need for bi-/multilingual proficiency.

1.2. Purpose of the study and research questions

This study explored global patterns in the award of Bilingual Diploma and relationships between student native language and other variables and the award of the BD. The research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What trends exist in the award of BDs between 2007 and 2012 worldwide and at the country level?
2. What proportion of students earns Bilingual Diplomas through each pathway?
3. What are the most common languages that Bilingual Diplomas earners study?
4. What is the relationship between student language and academic variables and the award of the BD?

2. Theoretical perspectives

2.1. English as a global language

A lingua franca is a language "used for communication between groups who do not speak each other's languages, as well as between native speakers (if any) of the lingua franca and other groups" (Thomason, 2001, p. 269). In general, a lingua

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