

Literature in the International Baccalaureate: an alternative for Sixth Form English

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In the light of recent and continuing debates about English Literature A Level, it is perhaps surprising that there has been little published reference to the other option currently on offer in England for the study of literature in the Sixth Form. The International Baccalaureate (which I have taught, in a comprehensive state school sixth form, during the last decade) provides an interesting alternative model for literary study at this level, and a comparison with the A Level model is enlightening. The I.B. has, of course, been a major influence on the deliberations of Tomlinson's 14-19 working group, and so it is perhaps timely to use I.B. English as a starting point for a consideration of what the subject might look like in the proposed new diploma.

The I.B. option is not at present available to many. Although the diploma has been in existence since 1968, it was only available, in Britain, in a handful of international schools until about ten years ago. During the last ten years or so it has been introduced in a number of state and independent schools, though still a small minority. It is now taught in around fifty institutions in Britain - half of them international, private or public schools, the other half state school sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education colleges.¹

The I.B. diploma demands the study of six subjects (three at 'higher' level and three at 'standard' level) including, compulsorily, the study of one's native literature (English literature for students whose native language is English), maths, a modern foreign language, a science subject, and a social science subject. In addition, all students must take a 'theory of knowledge' course (philosophy to accompany learning), write a dissertation on a topic of their choice, and complete an extra-curricular programme of 'creativity, action and service.' Its increased popularity is largely a result of growing concerns about the lack of breadth in A Level, but can in part also be accounted for by the diploma's international vision – embedded in the curriculum, as well as in the institution - and by the integrated nature of the diploma with its emphasis on the cross-curricular and extra-curricular.

Despite these highly attractive elements, there are a number of features of the programme which make it unsuitable for widespread adoption, especially for the broad and inclusive purposes intended by Tomlinson's working group. Even as a model of study for the most able it presents problems. Although the breadth of study which students undertake is considerable, there is a certain narrowness in provision: 'English' in the I.B. (for those whose native language is English) means 'literature,' for instance, and there is no option to study language or media (although, theoretically, schools can have courses of their own design validated by the I.B. organisation). There are other problems. However, it is not my purpose here to investigate the diploma as a whole, but rather to present the I.B.'s English syllabus for consideration as a model for literary study.

Perhaps the best way to give an overview of the I.B. English syllabus is to set out a concrete example. The following is a programme recently taught to English students, at higher level, in my school:

- **Part One: World Literature (Chosen Region/Theme: Post-colonial Africa)**

Ngugi wa Thiong'o: *I Will Marry When I Want* (Kenyan play, written in Kikuyu)
Naguib Mahfouz: *Miramar* (Egyptian novel, written in Arabic)
Tayeb Salih: *Season of Migration to the North* (Sudanese novel, written in Arabic)
(Assessed by written coursework (20%) - one comparative essay; one other piece)

- **Part Two: Detailed Study**

Drama - Shakespeare: *Hamlet*
Prose Fiction - Austen: *Pride and Prejudice*
Poetry - Hughes and Plath: Poems
Prose Non-fiction - Orwell: *Homage to Catalonia*
(Assessed by oral examination (15%) – commentary on a passage from one text)

- **Part Three: Genre Study (Chosen Genre: Drama)**

Jonson: *Volpone*
Wilde: *The Importance of Being Earnest*
Stoppard: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*
World Literature: Ibsen: *Hedda Gabler*
(Assessed by terminal written exam (25%) – one comparative essay in 2 hours)

- **Part Four: School's Choice (Chosen Theme: Place, Nation & Writing)**

Graham Swift: *Waterland*
Tony Harrison and Seamus Heaney: Poems
Contemporary Scottish Writers (Gray, Kelman, Morgan, Welsh, Lochhead)
World Literature: Marquez: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
(Assessed by oral coursework (15%) – comparative assignment)

- **Part Five: Unseen Commentary**

An extensive selection of short prose (fiction and non-fiction) and poetry texts and extracts from Old English to the present day.

(Assessed by terminal written exam (25%) – 2 hour commentary on one unseen text)

Some of the features which differentiate the I.B. from the A Level syllabus, and which might be considered improvements on the A Level syllabus, can be seen immediately: the wider range of texts covered; the presence of literature in translation, and non-fiction; the centrality of comparative and contextual study through emphasis on genre, theme, place and period in a highly structured syllabus; the variety of assessment methods (including 50% coursework, of which half is conducted orally), leading perhaps to a greater variety of types of textual study and response; a compulsory unseen close reading exercise; exams which allow more adequate time for response.

There are further advantages. For instance, there are no set texts – only wide-ranging lists of set authors within the structural limits of the syllabus; and in the 'School's Choice' element, there is complete freedom of choice in constructing a coherent unit of study (within a conventional definition of the literary.) Assessment opportunities are enticing: for instance, in the World Literature section students are

encouraged to offer a piece of 're-creative' writing based on one of the texts studied; and oral coursework provides the opportunity for students to give a presentation to the class. In addition, all students have the chance (and many take it) to write their I.B. dissertation (the 'Extended Essay') on a topic of their choice in English Literature; and the cross-curricular 'Theory of Knowledge' course, in its consideration of issues such as aesthetics, linguistics and cognition, provides many opportunities for students and teachers to make connections with English.

With fifteen texts to cover, and the unseen element to prepare for, many teachers are naturally concerned about covering the syllabus (especially since the I.B. exams take place at the beginning of May in Year 13) – and it is certainly a challenge. The independent reading load can be reduced considerably, by ensuring that poetry, drama and short stories – much of which can be read and taught simultaneously in class – form a substantial proportion of the syllabus, ensuring that there are not too many long novels for students to cover independently. Nevertheless, it's a tough course, in terms of the amount of work there is to do – especially in the context of five other subjects and a cross-curricular and extra-curricular programme - and students do need to be self-disciplined in order to read a good number of the texts independently and within fairly tight deadlines.

In my experience this is not usually a problem given careful planning and the relatively high levels of student motivation the content and pace of the course engender. Furthermore, for me, the relatively short period of time to study each text (on average four weeks, with fewer lessons each week than A Level students) is in fact one of the most liberating aspects of the course. It banishes the A Level 'ploughing through the text' syndrome (which many teachers and students find unsatisfactory, but into which they feel they are forced by the nature of the assessment) and encourages a faster pace and a more flexible relationship between close reading, on the one hand, and holistic textual and contextual understanding on the other.

This might not be possible were the assessment scheme not so flexible: crucially, not every text is formally assessed, and the variety of assessment types is such that not all texts require comprehensive close reading. Much of the power of the I.B. syllabus lies in the emphasis on generic and contextual understanding, rather than a comprehensive but atomistic knowledge of each text studied – and the standard assessment tasks reflect this, often taking the form of generic questions which ask students to bring together their knowledge of two, three or more texts in order to support a broad argument about a genre or a culture, or commentaries on (sometimes previously unprepared) single passages from texts they have studied in which they are to show their knowledge of the whole (and remember – there hasn't been time to study every bit of the text!)

There is a strong emphasis on close reading in the syllabus too; the unseen commentary, for instance, which is compulsory in I.B. English, has proved to me the immense value of that exercise – when placed in a context where students have a broad experience of texts within a syllabus which gives them an effective framework to support their developing literary knowledge. It is this lack of a well-structured framework which makes the A Level course seem so unsatisfactory in comparison. In I.B. English, close reading is put to work more effectively than at A Level, with

students consistently expected to show that they have extrapolated from one text to another of the same (or a different) genre or culture, and from one passage of a text to another of the same text.

The example book list given above is fairly heavily weighted towards the twentieth century and thus perhaps lends itself more to an approach such as I have described; but it would be entirely possible to construct a manageable course, within the limitations of the syllabus, which was more weighted to pre-twentieth century texts. Indeed, the combination of flexibility and structure offered by the I.B. syllabus is one of its great attractions, and it is possible to envisage many very different-looking courses within the same structure. There is a strong sense of ownership of independently constructed courses amongst I.B. English teachers who, when left to develop their own course outlines, are rather like excited children with a room full of new toys. Thus, many fascinating ideas for text combinations and teaching methods have been developed by the international I.B. community, especially in the area of World Literature, which is so central to the philosophy and culture of the programme. These ideas are often developed and promulgated through the international workshops which many I.B. teachers attend annually, providing a forum for some very inspired and experienced teachers, mainly from international schools.

My own approach to the development of a course outline was fired by the syllabus's commitment to World Literature. I quickly became aware of the power of teaching literature in translation (which is explicitly banned in A Level English Literature) and from a variety of cultures, especially non-European cultures. Our unusual course in post-colonial African literature, which had been set up by a colleague,² had as its centrepiece the study of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ground-breaking play *I Will Marry when I Want*, which we were able to set in the context of his imprisonment by the government of Kenya and his consequent writings on literature and decolonisation.³

The play itself recounts – from the perspective of Kiguunda, a factory worker – the story of the Mau Mau's fight against British colonialism, the eventual independence of Kenya, and what Ngugi describes as the 'neo-colonial' regime of Daniel Arap Moi. Using free verse throughout, Ngugi employs native speech rhythms, imagery, proverbs, and song, the discourses of political protest, and a series of flashbacks to tribal ceremonies and rebellions, to tell the story within a conventional three-act structure. In *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngugi gives a fascinating account of the process which led to his imprisonment and eventual exile from Kenya: the abandonment of English as his literary language in order to re-establish an African literary tradition for African audiences; his work with a community centre in a working class town near Nairobi to write and produce the play - a community drama - which allowed ordinary people to tell their story and express their views; his consequent arrest and year-long imprisonment without trial by Daniel Arap Moi's government.

Before I took on the teaching of this course, I knew little or nothing about African literature, and thus part of the pleasure of teaching this text was the pleasure of learning myself. However, the benefits for students were, I think, considerable, and reminded me of my own experience as an undergraduate, when I found that my sharpest insights into the European tradition of tragedy came from reading Japanese Noh drama. Studying unfamiliar conventions and language from unfamiliar cultures teaches not only about those cultures, but also about one's own culture. The explicit

combination of literature and politics, both within the literary text and in Ngugi's non-fiction writings, was also highly motivating for students, and raised a variety of important issues about the way in which literature functions in society, the relationships between literature, language and power, and the cultural politics of a post-colonial world.

I determined to deepen the cultural investigation offered to the students here, by using the 'School's Choice' element of the course to look at post-colonial cultural tensions within Britain as manifested in twentieth century literature from Ireland, Scotland and England, guided partially by Robert Crawford's analysis of recent trends in British poetry. Crawford writes of '... a widespread wish in recent poetry to be seen as in some manner barbarian, as operating outside the boundaries of standard English and outside the identity that is seen as going with it,' and continues:

Such a wish unites post-colonial writers such as Les Murray and Derek Walcott with writers working within the 'Anglo-Celtic archipelago.' It joins the post-colonial and the provincial.⁴

Poems by Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, studied either as separate 'set' texts, or as preparation for the unseen commentary, were useful in establishing this concept with students – building on ideas with which many students are already broadly familiar from their study of English poetry from 'different cultures' at GCSE.

I also decided that the freedom offered by this part of the syllabus to offer an idiosyncratic text should not be passed up, and devised a short anthology of contemporary Scottish literature (a particular interest of mine), focusing on a sequence of poems, short stories and extracts by James Kelman, Irvine Welsh, Liz Lochhead, Tom Leonard, Alasdair Gray, and Edwin Morgan, which (along with the African literature) opened a rich vein of study in the conceptual area of literature's connections with language, class, culture and politics – a hugely motivating area for students of all abilities, I have found, as it explicitly addresses issues of cultural and social difference and value which concern them very directly.

Topics covered in this unit of work included the question of swearing in James Kelman's prose and his refusal to collect the Booker Prize for *How Late it was How Late* (drawing on a BBC documentary, newspaper reports from the time, and a wonderful *Private Eye* spoof news report headed 'Incomprehensible Glaswegian Wins Booker Prize'); the use of non-standard first and third-person narrative voice in his fiction; the contrast between his fictional narrative voice and his erudite essay-writing voice; the mixed use of standard and non-standard English narration and dialogue in both Kelman and Irvine Welsh; the differences between spoken and written English, and the uses of both in literature; the imposition of non-standard language onto standard forms, as, for instance, in Edwin Morgan's 'Glasgow Sonnets'; the implications of the magic realism of Alasdair Gray's short stories; the history of Scots as a separate language from English; the role of writers in cultural debates and developments such as those Scottish debates occasioned by Glasgow's year as capital of culture and the Edinburgh Festival, as discussed, for instance, in essays by Kelman and poems by Liz Lochhead; the idea of nationalism, considered partly through extracts from Gray's polemic *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland*; the cultural implications of devolution; and so on.

It was through teaching this unit that I began really to appreciate that cultural and social context of the broadest kind can be a highly effective stimulus for students at this level, enabling them to objectify, apply and assimilate literary knowledge acquired through close textual study. I also became clearer about the value of abandoning the exclusive study of whole lengthy texts at this level, in favour of a rich range of short texts and extracts from a broad spectrum of text types; and of course I was reminded of the value of allowing greater freedom and choice to teachers – albeit within a prescriptive framework.

My particular choices of text and topic are, doubtless, idiosyncratic – though I would maintain that the aspects of literary study I chose to highlight are vital, and would like to see areas such as genre, narrative, discourse and culture become central focuses of students' learning, rather than vague outposts. Even when interpreted in a more conservative way, however, I feel that the structure of I.B. English allows for a type of study that is essentially broader and more 'synoptic' than even the post-Curriculum 2000 A Levels. There is, notionally, nothing to stop A Level teachers constructing similar frameworks for literary study, embedding the A Level texts within them. Unfortunately, the modularity of the new A Level English Literature, whilst largely failing to provide attractive and coherent study units, also appears to make such independent attempts at broad coherence more difficult. And there remains the problem of the A Level Literature examination itself, which so undermines the assessment objectives.

Feedback from a number of university English teachers has shown that they welcome I.B. students because of the breadth and connectedness of their ideas; and certainly my experience of teaching the I.B. English syllabus has shown that it can be made to do much more, more readily, than an A Level course in this respect. I also feel certain that it can help to prepare those who are going to read English at university rather better for the kind of study they are likely to encounter there. Indeed, it seems to me that, for many of the same reasons mentioned above, this approach might be of greater benefit to *all* students than the A Level *status quo*, whether they are going to read English (or even go to university) or not.

Despite its relative flexibility, the I.B. English syllabus is in some ways still very traditional, and certainly does not represent the kind of theoretically 'grounded' course which some would advocate at this level. However, in encouraging breadth of textual experience, an international outlook, and a structured, comparative and generic approach to literary study, it provides the groundwork for a broad understanding of literature as a social, cultural and linguistic phenomenon – useful for everyone - and hence for later possible encounters with literary and cultural theory – useful for those going to read English at university.

Perhaps a glimpse of what is possible in the I.B. will inspire A Level teachers to question further the kinds of approaches to texts, and to the structure of literary study, which the A Level course promotes. And perhaps, too, it will inspire the creators of the new version of English which will emerge from the deliberations of Tomlinson's working group.

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¹ The I.B. World Schools Directory, and other information about the diploma, is available at www.i.b.o.org.

² I would like to acknowledge the work of my colleague, Fiona Swanson, on the development of this unit.

³ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *I Will Marry When I Want*, London: Heinemann, 1982;
Decolonising the Mind, London: Heinemann, 1986.

⁴ Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature*, Edinburgh University Press, 2000.