

FOR THE
IB DIPLOMA

Language A

CONCEPT-BASED LEARNING

Teaching for Success

Kathleen Clare Waller



SAMPLE CHAPTER



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Studies in Language and Literature

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Concept-based learning (CBL) in Language A

Concept-based learning (CBL)

What is the point of a Language A class, or language and literature, language arts, English or whatever name you call it? What is really at the heart of what we teach? Although we sometimes rightly focus on essay writing, canonical novels or grammar, the purpose goes beyond the skill or the ability to create discourse within an academic realm. We are looking at languages of human communication over time and discovering how to use them as tools to share in our human experience, to appreciate the beauty around us and to engage in debates about ideas. Language A courses should accomplish two main tasks: to appreciate literature as an art form and help students find their voice.

The Indian-born British novelist Salman Rushdie once explained the vast reaches of our discipline: “Literature is the one place in any society where, within the secrecy of our own heads, we can hear *voices talking about everything in every possible way*”. Literature is a place to explore ourselves and the world around us, so there is no reason why it cannot be meaningful to anyone.

Language A courses have been historicized and constrained for a long time. Not long ago, we began to hear minor voices and new perspectives while seeing new types of texts in our classrooms. Recently, in the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB DP), our curriculum has truly been set free. The IB is joining the movement toward concepts.

Not concepts, you might be thinking. Wishy-washy, floaty ideas that do not really accomplish any kind of rigour or knowledge in the English A, Japanese A or Spanish A course. We already have so much added to our plate – text types and genres, works in translation and time periods – how can we ever teach something meaningful anymore?

But this is precisely what conceptual learning can be with the right type of structure to back it up. In its reliance on content and skills, it creates a meaningful learning experience for your students that more readily moves beyond the classroom walls. The term was coined by H. Lynn Erickson in her book *Concept-based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom* (2006) where she passionately and strategically lays out a way to use this method to achieve “Big Ideas” and “synergistic thinking”.

More on that later, but for now, we can understand Erickson’s model as one that brings together skills and content as building blocks toward understanding ourselves and the people and world around us. To achieve these deep, purposeful ideas, both the skills and content must be mastered. To develop a point about new definitions of gender in the world, for example, a Language A student needs analytical skills to provide textual examples, language skills to express the idea and organizational skills to complete the essay or speech to present their ideas. Further, the student needs the content: texts with rich details, examples from different philosophical perspectives and writers from different cultural backgrounds. The skills we teach should help students find content even beyond what we provide in the classroom or as extension resources. The texts we analyse and discuss should help students improve their language and literacy skills. Thus, a reciprocal arrangement between skills and content should be a constant in our CBL classrooms.



Skill blocks build the walls and content bricks create an arch; together they bring us stability toward timeless conceptual understanding.

The IB has used CBL in the Primary Years Programme (PYP) and Middle Years Programme (MYP) for years. Because the nature of these curricula is not prescriptive, there has always been the danger that CBL can indeed here be dumbed down or simplified and create ineffective, lazy approaches to teaching. But the schools who have researched and developed strategies, engaged in workshops with Erickson herself and layered in specific skills and content that students need to learn have created successful programmes for the students. It takes planning and consideration. The autonomy of the curriculum is a challenge, but a welcome one. The teachers I know want to create and be challenged, to design something that works and something that helps students get to the next level.

Let me repeat: concepts are not an attempt to dumb down or simplify your course. On the contrary, they can elevate the motivation in your classroom and the ideas and skills, the full knowledge base, your students take with them when they graduate.

There is another negative preconception that the expertise of subject area teachers is taken away from a CBL classroom, that schools can hire any friendly, literate face to teach conceptual approaches to Language A. Again, the reality is the opposite. For a deep and purposeful understanding of literature and language and their use in our lives, we need highly-trained teachers with strong academic knowledge in these areas, with a desire to continue expanding their knowledge base. But we also need teachers who can put that knowledge into play, who can engage students with it dynamically, giving it meaning. With the more creative shape our courses are moving into, you have more agency and autonomy in designing what you need to reach your students.

You might be reading this book from a variety of perspectives. Maybe you are an experienced IB DP Language A teacher looking for new ways to organise your course. Maybe you are wondering what to do with the extra freedom of less assessment in the new course besides drilling the exams over and over again. Maybe you are new to concept-based learning and have no idea why IB has decided to go in this direction. Maybe you have read the new guide and are stuck on where to begin changing your course. Maybe you are new to teaching either the Language and Literature or the Literature course.

Or perhaps you are completely new to IB DP. You may have come from a state school, or previously only taught MYP at your international school, or perhaps you are coming straight from teacher certification training into your first teaching job. You know how to teach, but there seem to be so many things you need to do well with this DP course. You want to be creative, but you want to prepare students effectively for the exams.

This book is designed to help any of you navigate the new IB DP Language A courses. The learning outcomes and assessments have been streamlined for the Language and Literature and Literature courses, so this single text helps you to understand both, allowing you dexterity in your teaching and the courses you can offer to your principal or in a job interview. This book is an interpreter of the IB Guide. Companion texts in each course, that you can use with your students, directly focus on particular skills related to text type and subject focus areas. It is a primer on creating your course, organising your syllabus and approaching the preparation of students for assessment. But more than that, this book hopes to help you make your course come to life.

The book may also offer a resource for those working in isolation in a small DP programme, helping students with self-taught Language A courses or working in a language that is infrequently taught. This book offers a more English-focused curriculum but includes texts in other languages and activities and timelines that would be useful for any language as well as valuing a multilingual approach in your classroom. The course guides are exactly the same for any language and the new IB online text list streamlines the old multiple PLA and single PLT into a single source. We are often working from the same texts in different languages. Leading several workshops for my current school's Mother Tongue programme (Language A teachers in a variety of languages — Chinese, Italian, Arabic, French, Greek, etc.) opened my eyes to the way we can all collaborate. There may be slight though important differences in ways of approaching reading and writing, with some differences in what examiners will be looking for in written papers, especially with regards to writing style. However, my hope is that this book unites us in creating a global multilingual dialogue of teaching the IB DP Language A course and shall offer several avenues where this dialogue may be realised.

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NEW

Language A

CONCEPT-BASED LEARNING

Teaching for Success

Confidently navigate the new syllabus with a variety of teaching resources to help you plan engaging syllabi, timelines and lessons that are aligned to the concept-based learning approach.

- Confidently teach the two new courses with a clear overview of concept-based learning and inquiry and how these can be aligned to the assessment objectives and learning outcomes
- Easily navigate the new courses and plan your teaching with a variety of templates, timelines and charts
- Develop a concept-based learning course with specific advice and lessons that help students understand the texts and topics more deeply
- Help guide students through the assessment process with advice and examples covering each assessment – Learner Portfolios & the Individual Oral, HL Essay, Paper 1 and Paper 2

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