

Summary

Optional theme - knowledge and language

Subject	Year	Start date	Duration
Theory of Knowledge	IB2	Week 1, November	6 weeks 12 hours

Course Part

Optional Theme

Description

The famous Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde once said that language was ‘the parent, and not the child, of thought’. Thus, according to Wilde, knowledge is not possible without language.

Is this claim true?

The extent to which Wilde was correct or incorrect will be a large focus of this subtopic. You will also investigate and analyse the ways in which language influences, expands and articulates knowledge.

Consider all the knowledge that you have acquired in your life. What percentage of that knowledge would you estimate was gained via language?

Evolutionary biologists, sociologists and archeologists believe that the invention of language is the greatest invention the world has ever known because it is language that has enabled humans to expand their material world from sticks and stones to spacecraft and sprawling suburbs. Experts believe that language was developed and refined in order to share knowledge – in particular, the knowledge of tool making. Many theorise that language development was the key to *homo sapiens* overtaking Neanderthals as the dominant hominid species on the planet because language allows the cumulative aggregation of knowledge to be shared with others. Evolutionary language expert, Dr. Mark Page goes as far as claiming that, ‘language has played a more important role in our species’ recent (circa last 200,000 years) evolution than have our genes’.

Inquiry & Purpose

Inquiry / Higher Order Questions

Type

Inquiry Questions

Concept-based

How language began?

Curriculum

Aims

The aims of the TOK course are:

to encourage students to reflect on the central question, “How do we know that?”, and to recognize the value of asking that question

to expose students to ambiguity, uncertainty and questions with multiple plausible answers

to equip students to effectively navigate and make sense of the world, and help prepare them to encounter novel and complex situations

to encourage students to be more aware of their own perspectives and to reflect critically on their own beliefs and assumptions

to engage students with multiple perspectives, foster open-mindedness and develop intercultural understanding

to encourage students to make connections between academic disciplines by exploring underlying concepts and by identifying similarities and differences in the methods of inquiry used in different areas of knowledge

to prompt students to consider the importance of values, responsibilities and ethical concerns relating to the production, acquisition, application and communication of knowledge.

◇ Objectives

Having completed the TOK course, students should be able to:

demonstrate TOK thinking through the critical examination of knowledge questions

identify and explore links between knowledge questions and the world around us

identify and explore links between knowledge questions and areas of knowledge

develop relevant, clear and coherent arguments

use examples and evidence effectively to support a discussion

demonstrate awareness and evaluation of different points of view

consider the implications of arguments and conclusions.

📖 Syllabus Content

Optional theme: Knowledge and language

Language is an essential part of our daily lives, with most of our knowledge coming to us linguistically encoded. It plays an important role in communicating and sharing knowledge and has a significant impact on the way that we experience the world. However, some see language as having an even more central role, arguing that language doesn't just describe our experiences of the world but, in fact, actually structures those experiences, limiting and shaping what we know.

This theme provides an opportunity for students to reflect on the role that language plays in our lives, and the influence it has on thought and behaviour. It also encourages students to draw on their personal experience of language-learning as part of their DP studies.

For example, students could reflect on what knowledge of a language consists of, and how that is similar to, or different from, other forms of knowledge. They could also consider the extent to which how we know and what we know is dependent on, and differs according to, the language that we use.

This theme encourages students to reflect on the role of language in allowing knowledge to be shared with others. Language plays a key role in the communication and dissemination of knowledge; it also enables knowledge to be accumulated for, and passed down to, future generations.

Language is also key to how claims are exposed to public scrutiny; it enables what we think to be communicated, debated, confirmed or refuted. These characteristics provide extremely rich material for TOK discussions.

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One interesting focus for discussions in this theme could be language and power. For example, students could consider the role of language in sustaining relationships of authority by considering how control of written language can create or reinforce power structures, or by considering the way that we change our language depending on who we are speaking to. They could also consider the role of language in creating and reinforcing distinctions of class, ethnicity and gender.

Another interesting example that could be discussed in this theme is non-human communication. For example, students could explore how technological developments have affected the ways that language is used and the ways that communication takes place, or the nature and qualities of “machine language”.

This could also include wider discussion of what qualities and features other forms of communication, such as animal communication, might need to have in order to be considered a language.

It is crucial that discussions within this optional theme stay focused explicitly on knowledge rather than consisting of general discussions about language. The following examples of knowledge questions can help to ensure this focus.

Scope

Can all knowledge be expressed in words or symbols?

Is it possible to think or know without language?

Is being able to speak a language an example of “knowing how” to do something?

What role does language play in allowing knowledge to be shared with future generations?

Are there differences in how knowledge itself is conceived of, or presented, in different languages?

Is it the case that if we cannot express something, we don't know it?

To what extent does language allow us to make our private experiences public?

How does language allow humans to pool resources and share knowledge?

Perspectives

Does the transmission of knowledge from one person or generation to another depend on language?

What knowledge might be lost if the whole world shared one common language?

If a language dies, does knowledge die with it?

How do our values and assumptions influence the language in which we express our ideas?

Is ambiguity a shortcoming of language that must be eliminated, or can it also be seen as making a positive contribution to knowledge and knowing?

Do all people share some innate linguistic knowledge? If the categories that we use necessarily empower or marginalise, is it ever possible to produce knowledge that does not either reflect or challenge existing power structures?

Methods and tools

How are metaphors used in the construction of knowledge?

If language works according to sets of rules and conventions, how much scope do we have as individuals to break the rules or challenge these conventions?

In what ways do values affect our representations of the world, for example, in language, maps or visual images?

To what extent do the classification systems we use in the pursuit of knowledge affect the conclusions that we reach?

In what ways can language be used to influence, persuade or manipulate people's emotions?

To what extent do the names and labels that we use help or hinder the acquisition of knowledge?

Ethics

Does ethical language differ in any significant way from other types of language?

How can we know if language is intended to deceive or manipulate us?

Do ethical statements simply convey our feelings/emotions rather than making claims?

If ethical terms and concepts cannot be easily defined, does this mean that they are meaningless?

Can we define words such as good and bad in terms of objective features of the world?

Do professional interpreters and translators have any special ethical obligations?

Making connections to the core theme

If you speak more than one language, is what you know different in each language? (scope)

Do people from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds live, in some sense, in different worlds? (perspectives)

What are the implications if we do not produce knowledge in language that respects people's preferred modes of self-identification? (methods and tools)

Who decides whether language should be censored in films and TV shows, and using what criteria? (ethics)

ATL Skills

Approaches to Learning

Communication

- In this unit, we will

ask students to explain their understanding of a text or idea to each other

construct a task around the use of different vocabulary and examples when speaking to different audiences

have students give an oral presentation without reading from their notes

construct a task so that students practise their listening skills

assess or give feedback on speaking or writing concisely

provide opportunities for students to read and understand different types of texts

Developing IB Learners

Learner Profile

Communicators

IB DP IB2 TOK Class (IB2)



Open-minded