



Curriculum Connection

the quarterly newsletter of Austin International School • Fall 2011



EXPANDING MINDS. BROADENING PERSPECTIVES.

Our Curriculum is the Heart of AIS

by Christophe Bonnet, Head of School

Our school is unique and so is our curriculum. It is based on a French curriculum framework but at the same time is aligned with American standards and develops some language skills in Spanish.

This is our strength, that is, being able to teach a curriculum that addresses the needs of our bilingual (and our bilingual-to-be) students. That is also a constant challenge for our faculty because it requires a lot of time to prepare for and deliver what we call a “seamless curriculum”. I want to thank them for their hard work to make this a daily reality in the classroom. That is what we call “integration” of curriculum across language lines. Three languages, one curriculum.

That is also a challenge because it can appear confusing for you, as parents. That is why we need to be more transparent and keep ourselves accountable. Assessment and communication with parents is key. We have assigned ourselves the mission of establishing clearer standards for students at each grade level that we will share with you and against which we will measure students’ progress. The clearer the communication the better parents and faculty can work together to support and challenge our students.

With our faculty we have designed a process that would help us make progress in both directions: integration and accountability.

We implemented three international working groups: language in PS through GS (led by Teresa), reading in GS through CE1 (led by Christine) and math in CE2 through CM2 (led by Christophe). Fabrice is in charge of helping each group to infuse more technology into our curriculum. Each group is meeting weekly with the same primary objectives: establishing clearer benchmarks, developing assessment tools to measure students’ progress against these benchmarks, and developing a shared methodology in teaching our curriculum to meet the needs of our bilingual students.

This group will work together for three years, reporting to you during our curriculum nights on progress made and to listen to your input and suggestions. Progressively you will see changes implemented in the classroom. The work that your child does will be different (the activities and the assessment) and at the end will give them a greater chance to be successful and to be challenged. Because ultimately our goal is to deliver an excellent curriculum so students can excel and be successful.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christophe Bonnet".

Christophe Bonnet
Head of School



Technology in the Classroom

by Fabrice Raud, Coordinator of French Pedagogy

Twenty-first century technology offers ways to provide engaging instructional material to students in order to deliver excellence in learning and implement differentiated activities:

- Re-think the relationship between students and teachers and the way teachers track progress of students, engage and assess them.
- Broaden perspectives of learning beyond the school time by providing web based instructional content.
- Improve productivity and reliability in communication and data management between students, parents, teachers and the administration

Therefore AIS is developing a three year plan.

During the first year we will continue to put in place solutions for teachers in order for them to:

- Communicate between them to optimise the instructional time (seamless curriculum, share data relative to children, exchange practices and material on line, etc)
- Communicate with parents: report card and progress report have been redesigned in order to become more parent friendly. All classes are now posting homework on a daily basis for the parents to check. Newsletters are now accessible and archived through the school website. Class blogs are put in place in various classes and fed by the children themselves. Cycle 3 class children are using the Internet for selected research, educational games/exercises and to type documents. They will continue to be engaged by feeding the blogs and communicating with peers in France and beyond.
- Explore more of the Google Apps for Education which is the backbone of our intranet.

During the second year, the focus will be on deploying solutions in each classroom in order to provide technology for children from PS through CM2, therefore engaging them in learning activities by either introducing, supporting or evaluating the knowledge acquired during a lesson. We will install on our computers selected software and use online applications that have been recognize for their high instructional value during class time.

During the third year, teachers should be able to create their own rich media content such as online lessons with movies and animation, and also interactive exercises and social media to target the specific needs of our unique school. All this supports activities compliant to benchmarks set by speaking, reading and math working groups. Students will strongly benefit from this integration of technology in our seamless curriculum.



It's All About Reading

by Christine Christy, Coordinator of English Pedagogy, Admissions Director

Austin International School promotes multiculturalism, critical thinking and intellectual curiosity within the language arts curriculum, especially in reading instruction. We believe that the intrinsic value of reading is fundamental to life itself. If we can read, it opens up a world of possibilities and choices. We work towards children going from learning to read, to reading to learn and discover. In today's globalized world, it is important that children are able to access the wealth of information available to them through different mediums such as the internet, books, magazines etc. We want them to develop not only the mechanical skills involved within the art of reading such as phonemic awareness and decoding but also the desire, motivation and ability to read fluently and explore with interest and solid understanding, a wide range of texts written for different audiences and purposes. Developing children's positive attitudes towards literacy is essential and we begin to stimulate early interest as young as three years old. Engaging children in interesting and worthwhile pre-reading activities creates a foundation for good reading.

At AIS, children are learning to read in three languages. Our reading instruction is based on a French framework along with the addition of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. Formal reading instruction begins in kindergarten although Petite Section and Moyenne Section work on pre-reading skills such as phonological awareness – the ability to discern the sounds in words and phonemic awareness – understanding that words are made up of speech sounds. In kindergarten the students continue with print awareness, phonological awareness and decoding skills as well as vocabulary development. Core reading instruction continues through First and Second Grade. Students focus on reading different texts of increasing levels of difficulty more fluently. They begin to use reading to conduct research and to increase their knowledge of his or her culture and that of others. In third to fifth Grade students continue to extend and refine their reading to suit varying purposes and audiences.

This year we are working towards identifying some common methodologies in the teaching of reading across the three languages. For example, our students are used to thinking of more than one word relating to a given object so they are more sensitive to language as a system made up of distinct sounds. This can be transferred to reading as they learn to associate the printed letters with sounds. This same concept can be applied to each

language. It is a transferable set of decoding strategies. Currently we use the AIS language arts curriculum as a way to determine what we expect of students at each grade level. We will identify clearer and more explicit benchmarks for each grade level in each specific area of reading from K-2nd grade. i.e. phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary, comprehension and fluency. We will communicate these benchmarks clearly to parents. These areas of reading are essential cross-curricula skills and are not confined just to language lessons. They relate to the teaching and learning of the curriculum as a whole in every subject area. Assessment tools will be designed at grades K-2nd for each area of reading in order to monitor progress in reading accurately. Effective assessment is both simple and purposeful.

We will communicate the results of the assessments to parents e.g. through parent-teacher conferences, report cards, progress reports etc. The results of the assessments will be used to inform the future instruction of our students e.g. to continue to set high expectations for reading progress and to provide appropriate challenges or support. This assessment for learning plays a vital role in enhancing the learning experience for all students at AIS. All that we aim to do with reading instruction is underpinned by research on being a bilingual reader. Looking at how children acquire two language systems is very important in the development of AIS' reading curriculum. It is important to remember that we are looking to improve the quality of what exists in our school rather than bring in lots of new elements of change.

One of the questions asked at Curriculum Night was about AIS' approach to teaching reading in terms of methodology e.g. phonics based, whole language etc. While the content of the instruction is the same in each class, one of the things which makes AIS unique is the diversity of background, training, experience and educational philosophy of our teachers. We have teachers who teach from both a phonics-based and a whole-language perspective. We talked about how, especially in a school such as AIS, we often need to use a combination of different approaches depending on each child as an individual learner. We also discussed the fact that there is always some phonics instruction as part of a whole-language classroom and within phonics based instruction there is always the need to remember what we call "tricky words" by sight as we do not have complete one-to-one sound/symbol correspondence in each language.

Another question related to when we start to differentiate the needs of each student in reading and how we would go about doing this. We begin to do this as soon as reading instruction begins. A beginning reader would work on initial sounds, listening to the teacher saying the sounds and saying the sounds individually. Children who are ready would work on blending and segmenting the sounds e.g. "m-o-m", "v-a-n", segmenting words into individual phonemes. The students who need the biggest challenge would work on manipulating the sounds e.g. sound changing games such as "say "mom" without the "m" sound". As children become more proficient readers, we can differentiate through word analysis and vocabulary, simple comprehension skills, or more complex literary responses depending on the required learning experiences that meet and challenge each student's needs.

We look forward to presenting our further progress to you in this area in April next year.



Learning with the Common European Framework

by Teresa Gisbert Pomata, Spanish Teacher, Coordinator of Spanish Pedagogy

It was a pleasure for me to present during this first curriculum night the work that the language workgroup is going to do during the next three years. The group is composed of all the cycle 1 teachers, allowing us to have a clear perspective of our work in each grade level as well as to develop strategies to better deliver a seamless curriculum in the three languages. All our work is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). This document, that may sound new for many people, has become an important reference for any school that offers language learning around the world. The Council of Europe created this language framework as the main part of the project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" between 1989 and 1996. And its main aim is to provide a method of learning, teaching and assessing that can be applied to all languages in Europe.

Our school is working hard to establish expectations or benchmarks for each grade level, and the European framework provides clear scales to measure the language knowledge level in the four competences (writing, speaking, reading and listening). The Common European Framework divides learners into three broad divisions, which at the same time, can be divided into six levels (two levels for each division):

- A Basic user
- A1 Breakthrough or beginner
- A2 Elementary
- B Independent user
- B1 Threshold or intermediate
- B2 Vantage or upper intermediate
- C Proficient user
- C1 Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced
- C2 Mastery or proficiency

Based on this document, the language workgroup is working simultaneously in two closely related plans:

First, we are creating a Language portfolio for the students, which is a personal document where students can describe their language and cultural experiences and reflect on how these experiences influence their language learning. This portfolio has three parts: passport, language biography and dossier.

The passport is a document where students can describe their most significant linguistic and intercultural experiences (for instance: family members who speak in other languages or activities, including games, movies or holidays, that allow them to practice other languages) as well as take record of formal language qualifications based on the European framework scales.

The language biography is designed to be a more detailed look at the student's personal language learning experiences. In this document, we try to encourage students to look at their own individual learning styles and reflect on personal language learning objectives, usually by listing them. In order to reach that objective, students are going to self-assess their learning by using grids (often called My Learning Progress) and score charts to check their progress throughout the course.

The dossier is a collection of learners' work from throughout the course, including examples of work that best represents his or her personal achievements as well as a big store of souvenirs, keepsakes, etc. that have made possible interaction with other languages or cultures.



The language portfolio's purposes are:

- to help students learn in a reflective way (How, when)
- to let students and parents know clearly what their objectives are and what skills they need to master in each grade
- to encourage self-evaluation
- to encourage parental involvement
- to increase learner responsibility and motivation for languages
- to promote interest and respect for other languages.

Secondly and simultaneously, and as part of the creation of this language portfolio, the language workgroup is establishing clear objectives and benchmarks for each grade level in the four language competences (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and designing assessment units for each of them.

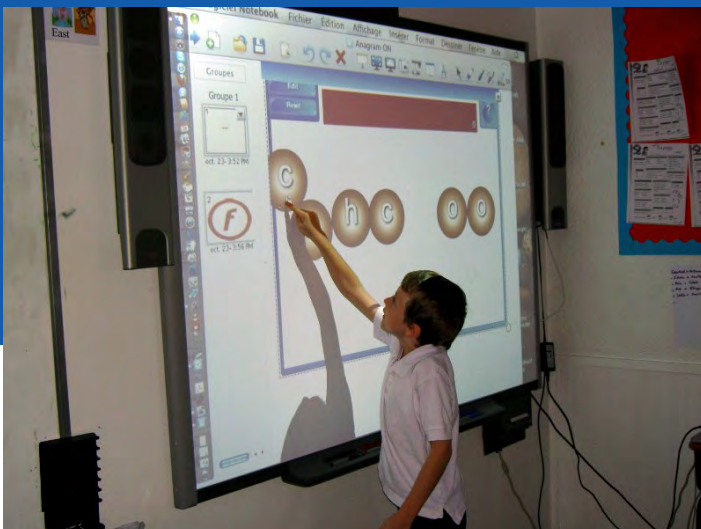
This year, our goal is to create a pilot document for the language portfolio, and start using and reviewing that document during the following two years. At the same time, during these three years, we will continue working to clarify the benchmarks and objectives in each competence and in each language, creating assessment tools that can help us monitor the work of students with difficulties, and setting up a powerful system of support, so that all the students in AIS can succeed and reach the same objectives in language.

The parents who attended my presentation really appreciated the opportunity to participate in a meeting where they were explained our next initiatives for the school in the area of language learning. They showed great enthusiasm for the

projects that we are developing, and many of them also expressed their satisfaction with the introduction of the European Framework, which was a new element for most of them, as a valuable planning and assessment tool in our school language planning. They liked the idea of establishing clear expectations for each grade level in the four language competences (reading, writing, speaking and listening).

Regarding the language portfolio, participating parents thought it was a great idea and could be a fantastic tool to increase student motivation and parental involvement, as well as to give a new dimension to the international and multicultural nature of our school.

Finally, I would like to express my most sincere gratitude to all members of the language workgroup. The implementation of this project would not be possible without their hard work, commitment and enthusiasm.



Curriculum Connection is the quarterly publication of Austin International School and appears three times per academic year.



12001 Oak Knoll Drive, Austin, TX 78759 • Phone: 512.331.7806 Fax: 512.219.5201
www.AustinInternationalSchool.org