Issues and Ideas in Education

Content-Related and Methodological Issues in Bilingual and Plurilingual Programmes

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ABSTRACT

CLIL programmes have been implemented in a large number of Spanish schools in the last decades as a means of promoting foreign language proficiency and fostering multilingualism and language diversity in order to meet the new demands of our globalized societies. Although Spain is considered one of the European leaders in CLIL practice and research, it nevertheless faces many challenges caused by teachers´ insufficient training both in the target language and in CLIL methodology. While the language-related shortcomings have been identified to a certain extent and remedied through language immersion courses and language assistant programmes, the content-related and methodological issues are still being largely neglected in spite of the fact that there exists considerable CLIL literature where these issues have been addressed. Renowned CLIL authors such as Do Coyle, David Marsh and Peeter Mehisto stress the importance of high quality teaching as key to the success of the CLIL approach; they claim that good CLIL practice not only broadens conceptual mapping resources by boosting cognitive development and metacognitive skills, but it also encourages active, meaningful, "deep" learning, critical thinking and creative thought with the help of scaffolding techniques that facilitate both language and content learning.

This paper examines the language practices in content classrooms in the bilingual programmes of Castilla la Mancha. With a view to identifying the main difficulties that both teachers and students face. It also explores different ways of approaching these challenges, most of which are bound to be extensive to the Indian context.

1. Introduction

Spain has been struggling hard for the last few decades to follow the European Commission´s recommendations of promoting foreign language competence and language diversity and has managed to implement CLIL programmes in a large number of private and mainstream schools. The mother tongue +2 additional languages policy has been applied to the autonomous regions with 2 co-official languages; however, the monolingual territories are still struggling to breed citizens who are fluent in at least one foreign language.

CLIL, which has been defined by Baetens-Beardsmore as "the growth industry of educational linguistics" (Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010) seems to be a highly appropriate approach to achieve communicative competence in second and foreign languages across the curriculum as it is flexible and open to wide interpretation, allowing language

learning to be embedded in the local learning context (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008). However, the bilingual/multilingual educational project in Spain faces many challenges: research shows that learners who have undergone bilingual education have definitely improved their proficiency in the target language not only concerning their communicative competence but also in each of the 4 skills; in addition, it has also had a positive impact concerning motivation and attitudes towards other languages and cultures. Yet, there is a great concern about the insufficient language level of teachers, who at best are required to hold a B2 certificate in the target language (Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Pérez Cañado, 2011). There is definitely a need to remedy this situation by increasing the number of language maintenance programs and immersion courses. But the language related shortcomings have been identified and there has been some research carried out in this respect. In contrast, the content-related and

methodological issues are still being largely neglected in spite of the fact that there exists considerable CLIL literature that deals with them from a theoretical point of view. There is also a shortage of content-based materials in the language of instruction, which adds considerably to the CLIL teachers' workload (Banegas 2012; Pavon & Rubio 2012).

Renowned CLIL authors such as Coyle, Marsh and Mehisto (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Mehisto, Marsh & Frijols, 2008) stress the importance of high quality teaching as key to the success of the CLIL approach: the pedagogical innovations that should come along with this teaching practice would compensate for the disadvantages that can be foreseen when learning in a tongue in which students are not necessarily very fluent, who are still struggling with some rather basic grammatical structures and who function with limited vocabulary; and the situation is made worse when we consider that many content teachers are themselves facing some difficulties in the target language.

The aforementioned pedagogical innovations are often derived from the need to keep checking student understanding of content and of ensuring that they are consolidating their knowledge of the language and the content taught through it; thus, it can be concluded that good CLIL practice requires the use of achievement builders to ensure effective *deep learning*: these include scaffolding strategies such as brainstorming activities to make sure that new content is anchored into previous knowledge, or chunking and repackaging the didactic material to facilitate the learning of language and content, or the use of learning devices such as concept expander diagrams and the like (Coyle, 2015). All these strategies shape class activities very differently from more traditional, teacher-centered learning which is still very common practice in Spain and elsewhere, and is usually limited to lower order processing, rarely involving any creative or critical thinking. Applying all these pedagogical strategies would automatically turn the learning experience into a dynamic, participative affair that most students find much more meaningful and motivating compared to more traditional learning (Arnold, 1999; Rubio, 2007).

According to experts, CLIL good practice should include the following learning outcomes:

- Boosts cognitive development and metacognitive skills, broadening conceptual mapping resources, by encouraging the development of higher order thinking skills
- Encourages active, meaningful, "deep" learning, as teachers need to
  1. keep checking pupils´ understanding, as they are learning in a foreign language
  2. provide plenty of practice to fix information, as language skills have to develop alongside content learning
  3. use scaffolding strategies constantly: brainstorming, anchoring, chunking, repackaging….
- Content provides a meaningful dimension to language learning; greater motivation, as the language learnt is really necessary for understanding the content (Coyle, 2005)
- Fosters cooperative learning and positive interdependence, as there is a lot of interaction among learners: not only because this is general good teaching practice but also because it increases the pupils´ opportunities to practice language and fix concepts.
- Facilitates applying learning skills to different situations, encouraging relational links between different subjects and real life experiences: CLIL experts agree that content is better learnt when contextualized and related to the students´ life experiences, so that they understand the value of what they are learning and why it is necessary to know it (in contrast with the banking model of learning, where students just store information that often seems meaningless).
- Promotes greater cooperation among teachers and renders the school curriculum more cohesive and meaningful: in CLIL it is important that language and content teachers work together, share problems and stress the common areas of the different subjects to facilitate understanding.
- CLIL invites teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, as they need to adapt and reorganise materials.
- it also promotes first language knowledge through metalinguistic skills development: transfer of skills between languages, and greater awareness on behalf of the students of their own learning process.

The fact that they are learning in another language promotes intercultural competence development, as language and culture are necessarily intertwined (Byram, 2008). Likewise, it encourages cultural awareness and interest in intercultural knowledge and intercultural communication, fostering constructive attitudes towards diversity and a sense of belonging as citizens of the world (Starkey, 2005; Lafraya, 2012). In addition, it offers opportunities to explore and experience diversity first hand and encourages research

skills development, thus promoting learner autonomy and learner responsibility. Last but not least, it often involves the use of new technologies, which makes it doubly motivating for learners. As CLIL is a learner-based approach, pupils are encouraged to be inquisitive and participate in their learning, so they have a greater say in their education.

However, all this would require ideal conditions as well as vast financial and human resources difficult to come across in our current educational systems. From a more realistic perspective, each country and institution willing to introduce Content and Language Integrated Learning in their curricula need to do so flexibly and according to their resources and circumstances.

Spain is still facing many challenges that need to be addressed, particularly if we consider the vertiginous rate in which bilingual education has expanded in all educational levels (Nieto de Diezma, 2017): according to some renowned scholars (Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010) although CLIL has been clearly successful in the sense that it is involving an increasing number of schools, teachers and students, it still has many unresolved issues, particularly related to the scarcity of CLIL-related teacher training. As a result, many teachers feel under-prepared for implementing CLIL pedagogies (Fenandez-Barrera, 2019). Another problem is the absence of studies that focus on content-related results: whilst CLIL defenders often assume that learners in CLIL programmes will do just as well or better in content subjects than their monolingual counterparts -contending that they have more developed metacognitive skills and greater motivation-, the truth is that there is little evidence for clear-cut benefits in non-language areas. As a matter of fact, one of the main concerns of parents and teachers is that CLIL might boost language learning at the expense of content.

As part of a multi-team linguistic ethnography research project entitled '*The Appropriation of English as a Global Language in Castilla-La Mancha Schools: A multilingual, situated and comparative approach*' -**APINGLO-CLM**- (Ref.: FFI2014-54179-C2-2-P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (MINECO), 2015-2018, this paper explores teachers´ and students´ narratives on bilingualism as well as the language practices in the bilingual programmes of three schools in Ciudad Real, Spain. In particular it will analyze a corpus of audiotaped classroom interactions and observation/interview notes in different CLIL content subjects in year 1 and 4 of Spanish Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) with a view to identify recurrent patterns of action in CLIL-type bilingual programs and determine how CLIL-specific methodology is being implemented.

2. Context

Two of the schools involved in this research (San Marcos and San Teo) are state subsidised, privately owned institutions who are thought to offer "bilingualism of excellence" largely due to their English speaking teaching assistants (Relaño Pastor & Fernandez-Barrera, 2018). Both schools fulfil the basic requirements for implementing the Bilingual Programme at the development level: sufficient staff with accredited B2 level in the target language and providing at least two curricular subjects in the target language. San Marcos has lately implemented the "Multilingual/trilingual programme" (Spanish/English/French) which has greatly added to its prestige. The third school, Tower Institute, is public and one of the first educational centres in the area to implement a bilingual programme.

3. Data Collection

Data collection involved class observations, fine grained field notes, audio recorded class interactions in content subjects, interviews with teachers, students and bilingual project coordinators, and focus group discussions.

4. Research Questions

A. Teachers

1. Have teachers received any specific CLIL methodology training?

In general, it was found that there is little awareness as to the importance of a CLIL specific methodology. The prevailing idea seems to be that CLIL consists of teaching just like in mother tongue contexts, but using another language:

-**Miguel Angel**, San Teo school (Social Science teacher in 1º and 2º grade, secondary education):

My main challenge as a teacher of a CLIL programme is to be able to give a comprehensive explanation to the children the same way I would do in Spanish. This is what I believe to be bilingualism: so that they can´t say that I explain 7 ideas in Spanish and in English I only explain 2... The question is to be able to explain 7 ideas in English also… this is what I believe bilingualism to be.. That the kids learn the history of the Carolingian Empire the same way as if they were doing it in Spanish…

(from audio-recorded interview, 24/5/2016)

2. Are they open to teaching innovations?

Generally speaking, teachers seemed eager to receive training to improve their class dynamics, but complained about the scarce support offered by their school or the government. During our informal CLIL methodology discussion groups with the teachers we addressed the main issues related to class dynamics that we believed were interfering with CLIL good practice, such as:

- answering their own questions without giving students enough time to think and reply
- need to check understanding by getting learners to rephrase content taught, in their own words
- insufficient pair and group work
- need to provide context to content to make it more meaningful and give learners opportunities to practice everyday language

These sessions proved to be most fruitful and we observed definite improvement in terms of class interaction in subsequent classes.

3. What are the main concerns in content classes?

Teachers seemed particularly preoccupied with specialised vocabulary and the learning of keywords, often in bilingual lists.

-**Edmundo**, San Marcos school (Physics and Chemistry teacher in 3rd grade, secondary education):

…. It is very hard for me to find some specialized words in English.. Students find it hard to learn specialized vocabulary.. The problem is that students sometimes know the words in English but not their equivalent in Spanish…..

(from class observation/interview notes)

4. Teachers' views on the use of the target language in the CLIL classroom

Although CLIL is an extremely flexible educational approach that contemplates all sort of language use rules in the classroom, the department of Education of Castilla la Mancha decided that in the Manchego bilingual programmes only the target language would be used in CLIL classes:

…..The directive team should ensure that the number of sessions, conducted exclusively in the target language of the linguistic programme, are 100% of the total of the weekly sessions

(Instructions for the Educational Linguistic Programming of Foreign Languages, 2014; point 3.5)

-**Miguel Angel**, San Teo school (Social Science teacher in 1º and 2º grade, secondary education):

….. and to try not to use a single word in Spanish.. this is for me the greatest challenge….. (from class observation/interview notes)

5. Do they feel they have enough knowledge of the language and language resources?

Drawing on our class observations and interviews with teachers, we concluded that there is little awareness of the importance of learner language development, as their main concern appears to be the teaching of vocabulary. Most of the CLIL programme staff in these three schools felt at a disadvantage with native speakers, and were not aware that appropriate methodology to promote language development and integrate language and content would greatly help to overcome the disadvantage of not being a native speaker:

-**Miguel Angel**, San Teo school (Social Science teacher in 1º and 2º grade, secondary education):

….it is impossible…I believe that native teachers get to places we will never get to, no matter how hard we try… the same thing as if I go to the UK and the teacher there… I will get to things in Spanish that the teacher there will not know as well as I, no matter how many MA´s he has is Spanish, he is never going to know like I know, it is impossible…

(from audio-recorded interview 24/5/2016)

-**Paco**, San Teo school (teaches Biology at different levels):

…. It is my point of view…. This is why I am so sceptical regarding bilingualism.. .. But as a starting point.. Look, I don´t have a great level of English… but I am sure that no matter how much English I managed to learn,. B2 level or even C1.. I would never see myself fluent enough in English to speak just like in Spanish about how biology works…

(from audio-recorded interview 24/5/2016)

-**Edmundo**, San Marcos school (Physics and Chemistry teacher in 3rd grade, secondary education):

In spite of having a C1 level it is not at all the same as if I were a native speaker: I will always have to make a great effort, and even so I will never express myself, by no means, as I do in Spanish...

(from fieldnotes 4/5/2018)

It can be concluded that the tendency is for teachers to consider only their general knowledge of English when assessing their capacity to teach in a bilingual program, with little awareness that appropriate CLIL specific training would provide efficient tools to develop students´ language while learning content.

6. Do they think that their CLIL students learn less content than their counterparts in a monolingual programme?

Whilst some CLIL theorists claim that learners in bilingual programmes show higher cognitive development than their monolingual counterparts, it is a fact that many parents and other stakeholders are worried about content learning issues. In the schools involved in our research project some of the teachers were quite pessimistic in this respect:

-**Paco**, San Teo school (Biology teacher at different levels):

…..what I see about the book, for example, is that the level is quite low.. In general I don´t believe in bilingualism.. Taking this as a starting point… Because for a start students.. Biology is quite a technical subject… if you get round to implementing bilingualism as such in the end the students just learn 4 vocabulary words…

(from audio-recorded interview, 24/5/2016)

-**Edmundo**, San Marcos school (Physics and Chemistry teacher in 3rd grade, secondary education):

…..in this sort of programme content is necessarily sacrificed, due mainly to the language deficiencies that both teachers and students have. When I teach both the monolingual and the bilingual group, I try to bridge the gap by slowing down the monolingual group…

(From interview notes 2018)

B. Students

From the classes observed, and particularly from the focus group discussions held at St. Marcos school (1 group of 36 students in a 3rd grade physics class) and at Tower school (1 group of 22 students in a 3rd grade music class and 1 group of 18 students in a 2nd grade music class), the following conclusions can be drawn:

- All students agreed that the being in a CLIL program had greatly helped them to improve their level of English
- Most of them stated that they considered themselves bilingual, claiming that they could express themselves satisfactorily in English even if they made some mistakes
- Most of them agreed that studying in a bilingual program would help them access better jobs in the future and open more travelling opportunities
- When asked about preferred subjects to be taught in the target language, many claimed that the best were those within the field of humanities such as citizenship or art, as they facilitate the learning and practice of useful everyday language, as opposed to subjects such as chemistry which mainly involve technical terms
- When asked about the differences between classes taught in English and Spanish, most of them agreed that the classes in the target language were usually more dynamic and participative
- As to content learning in a CLIL class compared to monolingual classes, there were some contradictory answers: some of them claimed that the books in English are less complex than those in Spanish but contain more practical activities and are therefore more dynamic and stimulating. They also mentioned that they tend to get less homework in the CLIL classes compared to those taught in Spanish and that the exams in English are easier

5. Data Analysis and Concluding Remarks

One of the main issues addressed in this paper is the shortage of teacher training in CLIL-specific

pedagogies. The data we collected shows that most of the teachers interviewed felt underprepared, and some of them were not even acquainted with the most basic guidelines related to this methodology. This could obviously affect the quality of learning in content subjects, as teachers would be conditioned by their language limitations without the benefits of a methodology that uses scaffolding techniques to ensure understanding and to encourage participative, student-led learning that provides plenty of opportunities for communication, thus consolidating their knowledge. On the other hand, teachers showed an open attitude during the informal CLIL methodology discussion groups we held with them, and seemed to be specially interested in learning about ways to improve their class dynamics.

The teachers' limited knowledge of English (most of them are a certified B2 level, and only a few have a C1 certificate) is generally seen as a challenge that puts them at a great disadvantage with native speakers. This, together with their lack of training concerning the development of student language, could explain their tendency to focus on the learning of specific vocabulary, with little attention to structures, functions, pronunciation or to communicative competence. It could also account for a teaching practice that tends to construct knowledge by memorizing key-words, repeating sentences with definitions and reformulating explanations extracted from textbooks, leaving little room for student interaction. Thus, these classrooms often resemble the teacher-led traditional banking system where scaffolding strategies are used rather sparingly and there is little opportunity for practice to fix information and to develop language skills alongside content learning. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to compensate for the disadvantages of learning in a language that both students and teachers are struggling with, as this would require the use of pedagogic tools that many of them are hardly acquainted with. As a result, there is a tendency to simplify the content taught in CLIL programmes, as can be gathered from the data we collected from interviews with content teachers.

As far as staff cooperation is concerned, it is obvious that teachers have an excessive workload and in general the schools do not particularly encourage teamwork. As a result, teachers seem to be working very much in isolation, against the recommendations of CLIL methodology experts.

On the positive side, in spite of all the shortcomings and limitations of the bilingual programmes in the Community of Castilla la Mancha, the students´ communicative competence in the target language is significantly greater than in the monolingual groups, as we could gather from the class observation sessions and focus group discussions with learners. What called our attention in particular was the lack of inhibition and fluency with which the CLIL group spoke in the target language -in spite of the fact that most of them make frequent grammar and pronunciation mistakes- as compared to their peers studying in the monolingual program who tended to be rather shy.

Concerning content-based materials in the target language, even though there is still room for improvement, there has been quite a proliferation in the last few years: now there are CLIL-type textbooks in most subjects that tend to present information from an international perspective, which has contributed to increasing students´ interest in other languages and cultures; consequently, there is a clear gain concerning intercultural awareness. From the data from student focus group discussions, we can see that although the textbooks used in CLIL classes tend to be shorter than those is Spanish, they contain many more interactive activities, creative tasks and hands-on projects designed to develop higher order thinking skills, which increase the motivational impact of the learning material. In addition, this learning material is encouraging the more traditional teachers to change their class dynamics, which contributes to rendering the learning experience much more meaningful and motivating. All this could account for the fact that bilingual programme students tend to obtain better exam results than their monolingual counterparts. But this is a rather complex and controversial issue that according to some scholars involves socio-economic factors and is beyond the scope of this study.

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