Immersion and CLIL in English: more differences than similarities

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In ELT literature, the reader often finds the terms Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and immersion used interchangeably, even though there are important differences between them. These two labels usually appear as generic terms covering any kind of teaching in which an L2 is used to teach content. In this article, we attempt to unravel this ambiguity from the Spanish context, describing from a psycholinguistic and methodological point of view the aspects they share and, above all, their main differences. Although CLIL can be implemented in different foreign languages, the fact is that English is the language overwhelmingly used as a means of instruction in most European countries (Eurydice. 2006. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at School in Europe. Brussels: European Commission).

Introduction

Education departments throughout Europe are working hard on ways to improve foreign language learning in schools. As a result of this, the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes is becoming commonplace, in the belief that this kind of approach is the best way to increase students' foreign language proficiency without it taking up additional time in an already crammed curriculum. The teaching of foreign languages only as a subject is not bearing the expected fruits and, moreover, research has shown that there is no linear relationship between instruction time and learning achieved: the knowledge or skills acquired in a formal learning context reach a plateau or ceiling, and additional exposure does not automatically equal increased learning (Collins, Halter, Lightbown, and Spada 1999; Rifkin 2005; Heining-Boynton and Haitema 2007). More and more European schools and universities are offering courses taught in a foreign language, and more often than not that language is English. In fact, English is becoming pre-eminent in all these programmes (Wilkinson 2004; Eurydice 2006).

As intensive foreign language learning does not seem to be the solution, the CLIL approach may prove a far more productive way to increase students' foreign language capabilities. But what exactly does CLIL involve? The terms CLIL and immersion are often used indiscriminately, although in reality there are more differences than similarities between the two. This terminological confusion is not trivial since the label CLIL, understood as an approach that integrates language and content, coexists with a plethora of terms that range from the bilingual integration of language and curricular

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subjects, to content-based language teaching, theme-based language teaching, or content-enhanced teaching. After analysing CLIL programmes in 30 European countries, the Eurydice study concludes that different labels are used in different contexts. Thus, CLIL can mean many things and create much confusion in the mind of the reader (see, for example, Coyle 2008 and Marsh 2008).

Similarly, the confusion between CLIL and immersion creates problems for the teacher wishing to become better acquainted with these approaches, as literature on the subject uses these terms confusingly. For instance, the last two letters of the Spanish acronym *AICLE* (the Spanish version of CLIL: *aprendizaje integrado de contenidos y lengua*) sometimes refers to 'language' and sometimes to 'foreign language'. The European Commission (Eurydice op.cit.) translates *LE* into 'languages' (which also includes other Spanish minority languages such as Basque, Catalan, and Galician), whereas the great majority of publications by Spanish authors (Lorenzo, Casal, de Alba, and Moore 2007; Muñoz 2007) interpret those last letters as *lengua extranjera* (foreign language) represented fundamentally by the English language. The same happens with the acronym in English, CLIL, where the reader might expect to find the word 'foreign'.

If we look at the definitions put forward by two of the main advocates of the CLIL approach, David Marsh and Do Coyle, it is clear that this confusion is far from being resolved. Below is one attempt by Coyle to elucidate (EMILE—*Enseignement de Matières par l'intégration d'une Langue Etrangère*—is the French acronym for CLIL):

> According to Marsh (2002: 15) CLIL/EMILE is an umbrella term which refers to a 'dual-focussed educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first foreign language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content'. This broad definition serves to differentiate CLIL from bilingual or immersion education and a host of alternatives and variations . . . (Coyle op.cit.: 97)

In our opinion, this definition does little to convey the distinction between immersion and CLIL. Similarly, the European Commission, in its study entitled *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at School in Europe* (Eurydice op.cit.), considered immersion programmes as being the historical precursor of CLIL programmes. Nevertheless, in the study the acronym CLIL:

> is used as a generic term to describe all types of provision in which a second language (a foreign, regional or minority language and/or another official state language) is used to teach certain subjects in the curriculum other than language lessons themselves. (Eurydice op.cit.: 8)

In this definition, the foreign language is put on a par with local languages when these languages are used for teaching curricular content. In this way, it is given to understand not only that CLIL and immersion are equivalent terms but also that CLIL embraces immersion programmes. In all the aforementioned examples, the word 'language' can be taken to mean local/regional languages and foreign languages, which will more than likely disorientate all those involved in different language programmes. Although

this may seem a minor issue at first sight, it has important implications. Whether the language concerned is a local or a foreign language has direct effects on both language objectives and language outcomes, which is why a clear-cut distinction is needed.

For this reason, we have set out the methodological principles shared by immersion and CLIL and, more importantly, examined what differentiates them. These dissimilarities serve as the argument in favour of a clear distinction between immersion programmes and CLIL. For this purpose, reference to questions regarding teacher training, the sociolinguistic context, the methodological aspects—such as the materials used in the classroom—and the linguistic objectives to be achieved in both types of approach has been considered. Although this paper is focused on the Spanish context[1], the issues put forward concern all those other countries in which foreign languages are used to teach content (CLIL approach) in addition to the minority or regional language (immersion approach), such as Latvia, The Netherlands, and Austria in Europe (Eurydice 2008). Similarly, the differences between these two approaches also apply to those countries in which regional or minority languages are taught at school, such as Italy, where French and German are used in immersion programmes implemented in bilingual regions, whereas CLIL programmes in English have been put into practice in other monolingual parts of Italy. The objectives of immersion and CLIL in the same country cannot therefore be the same. And this very same circumstance applies to any other country where CLIL programmes are implemented, as a lack of awareness of these differences may lead to unsatisfactory results and a backlash against the CLIL approach. There is a long tradition of immersion programmes in many different parts of the world (Australia, Canada, Finland, Spain, and the United States, to name a few), whereas CLIL programmes are in their infancy in many educational systems worldwide. Therefore, research studies focused on the CLIL provision are needed urgently.

If the terms CLIL and immersion are used interchangeably, teachers, learners, and researchers will become confused, as we will endeavour to make clear in the following sections. There are thus important differences to bear in mind; otherwise, the general objectives set out in CLIL programmes may be unrealistic, CLIL teachers may be put under too much pressure, students may be required to meet language objectives beyond their reach, researchers may arrive at misguided conclusions, and, last but not least, the uncritical analysis of the linguistic and non-linguistic results obtained in immersion programmes may guide CLIL stakeholders in the wrong direction.

The implementation of CLIL programmes is growing rapidly not only in Spain but throughout Europe, and terminological accuracy is necessary so that research can be clearly delimited and the findings become relevant. This is important if teachers are to make the most of their readings in this field, so that they can implement successful and appropriate ideas in their everyday teaching.

Similarities between CLIL and immersion

Although different immersion models exist, we can say that some features are common to all of them (Arnau, Comet, Serra, and Vila 1992). The

following five principles encompass clear psycholinguistic and methodological elements not only of immersion programmes but also of any CLIL programme:

1. The final objective of immersion programmes is that the students become proficient in both the L1 and the L2, without any detriment to the acquisition of academic knowledge.
2. The language the students are taught in must be new to them, so that its learning resembles the L1 acquisition process.
3. Parents of students choose immersion programmes because they believe they are the best L2 learning option.
4. The teaching staff must be bilingual, both to be able to implement the programme with the greatest guarantee of success and to ensure that throughout the school day all school activities can be smoothly carried out in the L2.
5. The communicative approach is fundamental to all immersion programmes. The objective is to obtain effective communication. For that reason, it is essential to have a learning environment that motivates students through significant situations and interlocutors who are really interested in their development and linguistic progress.

Differences between CLIL and immersion

In spite of the above similarities, several issues need to be addressed that will help to highlight the differences between CLIL and immersion programmes.

Language of instruction

The language used in CLIL is not a language spoken locally: unlike immersion programmes, which are carried out in languages present in the students' context (be it home, society at large, or both home and society), the languages of instruction for CLIL programmes are foreign languages and many of the students only have contact with them in formal instruction contexts. In fact, in sharp contrast to countries in northern Europe, the great majority of Spanish students do not come into contact with the foreign language outside school. Thus, although nowadays access to satellite television broadcasting in English is much easier and more widespread than a decade ago, most Spanish students (let alone the Spanish population in general) hardly ever use it. At the University of the Basque Country, for example, students enrolled in the English Studies degree are required to fill out a questionnaire at the beginning of the academic year and those who report watching television programmes or films in the English original version represent less than five per cent (data gathered in the last five years) and this despite having chosen to study this particular degree, namely English Studies (see http://spanish-podcast.com/2008/02/24/dubbing-movies-in-spanish/ or http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Dubbing-(filmmaking) for further evidence).

This is not the case with languages used in immersion programmes implemented in Spain since even students whose parents do not speak the minority language of the community (be it Basque, Catalan, or Galician) have ample possibilities to use this language outside school. Consequently, this is a key issue, since immersion students have many more opportunities to use the local language in both formal and, above all, informal communicative situations. Let us take the Basque Autonomous

Community (BAC) in Spain as an example. Even in places where the minority language is not usually spoken—like parts of Álava, one of the three provinces that make up the BAC—students who are fond of sports follow the broadcasts of their basketball and football teams in Basque, as these are only scheduled in Basque by the regional television channels. The same can be applied to some cartoons, youth programmes, etc.

Teachers

A high percentage of the teaching staff in immersion programmes is made up of native speakers who have an excellent command of the language of instruction, whereas this is not usually the case in CLIL programmes. Moreover, Spanish immersion teachers have undertaken specific university training in order to prepare them for the needs of this kind of programme. However, the vast majority of Spanish university teacher training courses aimed at both primary and secondary education do not include any kind of training for CLIL programmes. This is a highly topical issue, as the new university degrees are currently being designed with a view to matching the future implementation of the European space for higher education in 2010. One of the main objectives of this process is to increase the international competitiveness of European universities through a wide range of actions, such as promoting the mobility of citizens, designing joint study programmes, establishing networks, exchanging information, or teaching the languages of the European Union. This process is closely linked to the use of foreign languages in the curriculum as a key way of promoting citizens' mobility and employability and therefore contributes to the continent's overall development. Language learning has undeniably gained additional momentum through its paramount role in this process, both at pre-university and university levels.

It is therefore necessary to provide future teachers with training not only in the specific subjects but also in the methodology that will allow them to teach these subjects effectively in a foreign language. The different regional educational authorities endeavour to make up for this lack of training among in-service teachers through specific measures, such as methodology courses, language courses in English-speaking countries, or seminars and conferences in which experts participate. However, the future needs of CLIL programmes demand a more planned course of action concerning both teacher formation and in-service teacher support. Since the degrees that will be in force from 2010 onwards are now being established, it is very important to consider the new training requirements put forward by the CLIL approach.

Starting age

The vast majority of immersion programmes are of the early (starting age) immersion type, whereas the CLIL approach shows certain similarities with the late immersion programmes implemented in secondary education in Canada. This means that the amount of exposure to the local and the foreign language is far from comparable. In fact, CLIL programmes endeavour to develop the language skills of students who have had traditional foreign language teaching throughout their primary education. As noted before, English is the overwhelmingly dominant foreign language both as a subject and as the means of instruction in CLIL programmes in Europe and the world over.

Teaching materials

Our previous experience as teachers in different Spanish secondary education schools, as well as participation in several research projects carried out in the BAC and Catalonia, seem to confirm that the materials used in immersion programmes are aimed at native speakers, whereas CLIL teachers often use abridged materials. In the BAC, a bilingual community in which both Basque and Spanish are official languages and therefore taught at school from the outset, those students whose L1 is Spanish and those students whose L1 is Basque are enrolled in the same class and utilize the same materials. Consequently, the textbooks are the same irrespective of their being native or non-native speakers of the co-official language concerned. This means that immersion teachers in Spain utilize materials aimed at native speakers since Basque/Catalan/Galician speakers share their classrooms with Spanish-speaking students (no group distinction is made depending on their L1) and the amount of contact the former have with the regional language is massive when compared to the exposure to the foreign language. To give a concrete example, the science book in the second grade of secondary education (13- to 14-year olds) in Basque, Catalan, or Galician immersion programmes is the same for both L1/Spanish and L1/regional language students. In contrast, the materials used in CLIL programmes are not the same as those used to teach a subject in an English-speaking country, as CLIL on many occasions requires a pedagogical adaptation, especially in the initial stages.

Language objective

The goal of immersion programmes is to reach an L2 proficiency similar to that of native speakers, whereas CLIL programmes cannot have such a far-reaching objective. For example, by the end of secondary education, the Basque Department of Education has established the B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Basque (C1/C2 is expected by the end of post-secondary education). The CEFR describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and language skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. In the case of English as a foreign language, students are required to reach just level B1 by the end of secondary education, the level they are asked for in Basque once they finish their primary education. Moreover, the CLIL type of provision will not pave the way to the much lauded aim of European multilingualism, as in the vast majority of European educational systems both students' and parents' interests 'would not be met by taking any other European language but English to teach a content subject' (Klippel 2003: 78). Conversely, the array of languages used in immersion programmes all over the world is much wider.

Immigrant students

Immigrant students are usually enrolled in immersion programmes in all Spanish bilingual autonomous communities, whereas they seldom (or, more often than not, never) take part in CLIL programmes. In the BAC, to give one example, immigrant students have not been able to take part in experimental CLIL programmes implemented in some schools and are therefore excluded from these experiences and their purported benefits. Up until now (2008/2009 academic year), students willing to join the CLIL

classes on offer were assessed in Basque, Spanish, and English beforehand, and immigrant students find it difficult to reach the minimum Basque competence required.

In this way, these innovative CLIL experiences are in danger of becoming elitist, as not all students—particularly immigrants—are allowed to participate. Like their classmates, immigrant students have to take the language proficiency exams, but the latter have two hurdles to overcome: (a) the regional and (b) the English language tests. Since many of them arrive after having studied for a few years in their home countries, they cannot often reach the required level of competence in the regional language and are therefore unable to overcome the first hurdle.

Research

The bulk of CLIL programmes in Spain are experimental, whereas immersion programmes have been in force for more than two decades and can rely on a significant amount of research into both their linguistic and non-linguistic effects. Much research is still needed on CLIL programmes, as they lack longitudinal studies to provide researchers with significant empirical data. CLIL programmes are rather new not only in Spain but also in Europe, due to the fact that, until very recently, most European schools were not allowed to teach in languages other than the official ones in the country concerned. In fact, whereas very few voices would nowadays dare to cast doubt on the positive linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of immersion programmes due to the vast amount of bolstering empirical evidence available, this is not the case of CLIL programmes (see Nikula 2007).

Conclusion

English has become the predominant foreign language in European CLIL programmes. The CLIL approach stems from immersion programmes, and the psycho-pedagogical foundation, methodological principles, successful implementation in a wide array of contexts, and quantity and quality of research have established immersion as a significant element in the improvement of language teaching.

That said, we strongly believe that there is a compelling need to distinguish between these two types of programme because, as we hope to have demonstrated in the previous section, their differences are remarkable. That is why research and teaching practice have to focus on the contributions of each approach and, above all, the idiosyncrasy of teaching content in a foreign language such as English in most European countries. This leads us to conclude that further research into CLIL is of great importance, as these data will help to improve this type of programme (Lasagabaster and Sierra 2009). The establishment of reasonable language objectives considering the characteristics of each particular context would make a very useful contribution to CLIL programmes.

A good example highlighting the need for well thought out and properly planned CLIL programmes can be seen in the fiasco of 'Education for Citizenship', a subject which the Valencian Community (Spain) Government decided to teach in English. This was done by using two teachers in the classroom, the subject teacher presenting the subject matter in Spanish, and an English teacher acting as an interpreter, translating it into English. It was a total failure, which did not come as much of a surprise,

but helped create misgivings regarding CLIL that may be detrimental to future implementation. Particular episodes that generate wide media coverage—such as the Valencian one—can unfortunately undermine all the efforts made so far to apply pedagogically sound and successful CLIL programmes. Thankfully, the enthusiasm of CLIL advocates, mainly teachers and researchers, should help to sustain and develop appropriate strategies.

The benefits of bilingual education seem well established, mainly due to the success of diverse immersion programmes throughout the world. At the same time, learning English as a school subject has not borne the expected fruits (Collins *et al*. 1999; Rifkin 2005; Heining-Boynton and Haitema 2007). Based on this information, it is quite apparent that further research into the specific characteristics of efficient CLIL programmes is needed, as CLIL may prove very effective in producing proficient foreign language speakers.

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Note

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