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Communication as a Teaching/Learning Strategy in Bilingual Education

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This paper is based on my experience as a member of the coordinating team of the Plurilingual Education Programme (PEP) at the School of Education, Universidad de Cadiz (Spain). We have been working with a group of 23 subject-matter teachers belonging to up to 13 content areas and three target languages: English, French and German. The main purpose of the project was to train lectures on the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodological approach. We have focused our training on content and communication (based on Coyle (1999)'s four C's framework) with an emphasis on constructing the communicative channels appropriate to convey content with language as a medium of communication, not as an aim itself. As communicative exchanges will be between non-native teachers and non-native students, teachers have been trained on some communicative strategies typical of the CLIL approach in order to improve the teachers' communicative competence. In this paper, some of these strategies and their benefits will be depicted : using the foreign language as the language of communication in the class, improving clarity of speech, enhancing oral interaction with/among students, visual aids, rephrasing, reformulating, redundancy or content reduction are amongst the most essential strategies to improve communicative exchanges in bilingual settings.

Keywords: communication, communicative strategies, communicative competence, oral interaction, teacher training.

1. Introduction

The development of a Plurilingual Education Program (PEP) aims to respond to the needs of a society in which the quality of communication is presented as an essential factor affecting both interpersonal relationships and the development of appropriate professional profiles in the context of a globalized world. In contemporary society there are many reasons to implement communicative educational strategies based upon a thorough command of at least two foreign languages

which, together with the learner's command of her mother tongue, promote the integration of individuals within the 21st century society.

The PEP is aimed primarily at enhancing the level of vehicular languages by using them for specific content learning in undergraduate studies taught at the School of Education. First among these languages is the learner's mother tongue, whose proficient command is taken as a reference point, and as the first language of communication, understanding advanced mastery of it as a priority

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objective facing the exercise of any profession. Hence, all subjects in the learner's curriculum should take a part in improving the learner's communicative competence in her mother tongue (Méndez and Pavón, 2012).

Furthermore, the PEP takes up the challenge of developing the plurilingual and pluricultural competence of learners. Plurilingualism conveys pluriculturalism¹ and interculturality (Trujillo, 2002, p. 109), thus integration of content and languages involves cultural integration between the cultural background of the language of instruction and that of the learners' native language, whether it is the language of instruction or not. Currently, university students are aware of the importance of mastering languages, in general, as an integral part of their academic training, given the nature of contemporary society and specifically as a potential expansion of career opportunities.

The following are just some of the many reasons for designing a curriculum that develops plurilingual and pluricultural competences:

- The position of the university in the international arena requires the use of strategies of mutual approach in which the knowledge of a second or foreign language is a must.
- Linguistic diversity is a social reality considered as a valuable resource by national and supranational institutions to develop plurality policies that the university is called to accept and strengthen (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002).
- Foreign language knowledge greatly improves the profile of university students and teachers in the face of different types of actions (mobility, research, etc.).

Moreover, the resolutions adopted by the Andalusian University Council regarding the implementation of official teachings under the European Higher Education Area, promote

the inclusion of foreign language learning as a transversal competence across the curricula (Consejo Andaluz de Universidades, 2009). Finally, the University of Cádiz Governing Board approved the *Language Policy Framework Document* (Universidad de Cádiz, 2011) which considers different aspects of language learning including the broad concept of plurilingualism (see note 1 below).

It was in this context that we started working with lecturers from a variety of content areas such as: Music, Physical Education, Mathematics, Psychology, Didactics, Sociology, etc. (Herrero et al., 2012, p. 66). The main purpose of the project was to train lectures on the CLIL methodological approach. CLIL stands for Content and Language Integrated Learning. It refers to teaching subjects such as science, history and geography to students through a foreign language. This can be by the English teacher using cross-curricular content or the subject teacher using English as the language of instruction. Both methods result in the simultaneous learning of content and English. The term CLIL was coined by David Marsh, University of Jyväskylä, Finland (Marsh, 1994, 2000):

“CLIL refers to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language”.

2. Communication within the CLIL approach

As the main purpose of the project was to train lectures on the CLIL approach, following Do Coyle's four C's framework (content, communication, cognition and culture), we have focused particularly on content and communication with an emphasis on constructing the communicative channels

appropriate to convey content with language as a medium of communication, not as an aim itself. *On introducing how communication should be treated in CLIL, Do Coyle stated that*

“Language is a conduit for communication and for learning which can be described as *learning to use language and using language to learn.*” (Coyle et al, 2010, p. 54)

In fact, this is how authentic communication works: using language as a vehicle to exchange information, with the additional benefit that in bilingual educational settings, learners improve their knowledge of the foreign vehicular language (L2) with learning subject-matter content.

Communication in this sense goes beyond the grammar system, but at the same time does not reject the essential role of grammar and lexis in language learning. It involves learners in using language in a way which is often different from more traditional language lessons. It is perhaps useful here to differentiate between language learning (often with an emphasis on grammatical progression) and language using (with an emphasis on the communication and learning demands of the moment).

CLIL is innovative as a didactic approach because it has the benefits of integrating content and language as a strategy into the education programs bringing together a variety of previous educational approaches and proposals. Thus, CLIL is deeply rooted in the tradition of Piaget’s constructivism and Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and his concept of the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. Vygotsky “...theorized that learning occurs through participation in social or culturally embedded experiences.” (Raymond, 2000, p. 176). In Vygotsky’s view, the learner does not learn in isolation. Instead learning is strongly influenced by social interactions, which take place in meaningful contexts. In academic bilingual settings these contexts will be provided

by the particular nature of subject-matter content (Rubio, 2011). Access to these contexts will be supported by building *scaffolds*, that is, by breaking down a task or activity into manageable steps and using appropriate skills and strategies to complete the different steps successfully. Oral interaction is one of those contexts in which scaffolding takes place: pair or group work activities are situations in which learners tend to communicate naturally as they are dealing with content through language.

Recalling Cummins division between BICS (conversational language) and CALP (academic language), Walqui (2007, p. 207) proposes that the spoken language of conversations among students can be used as scaffolds for academic discourse. The more opportunities we give our students to interact in pairs or groups, the greater their linguistic, cognitive and academic development. CLIL also has similarities with the communicative approach, CBI (content-based instruction), and TBI (task-based instruction), as all of these approaches explore the relationship between language learning and the content within which it is situated. CLIL integrates content learning and language learning so that both are important. (Coyle, 2010, p. 54). It thus represents a step forward in the evolution towards a more communicative environment for language learning. In Table 1, we sketch the three main steps in the evolution of language learning in academic settings, with CLIL as a major turning point, as previous approaches had been language-centered whereas the new approach is content-centered.

Communication strategies should be adapted to the limited and/or specific communicative needs of teachers and learners within each particular learning environment. At the School of Education’s PEP coordinating team, we have been trying to meet communicative needs of the teachers involved in the plurilingual program in order to improve their communicative competence

Table 1. Evolution of foreign language teaching/learning methodological approaches

Audio-Lingual & Grammar Translation (1960's)	Communicative Approach (1970's – 1980's)	CLIL (1990's – Today)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More attention paid to correct syntax and pronunciation. • Text books • Homogeneous learning • Grammar and lexis • Imitate native speakers • Mainly individual work • Repetition and drills • Fluency favours correctness • Assessment: syntax and pronunciation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of appropriate social language • The target language is the language of communication • Simulations of real-life communicative contexts (role-plays, games, etc.) • Mainly pair or group work • Correctness favours fluency • No specific language model • Assessment: skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicative context is provided by subject-matter content • Content is the target • Academic context • Non-native • Multiplicity of resources and activities • Grammar and lexis are subsidiary to communication • Individual, pair or group work • Correctness favours comprehension • Assessment: subject-matter content
LANGUAGE-CENTERED		CONTENT-CENTERED

in the foreign language they have chosen as their language of instruction. First and foremost, the L2 should be the language of communication and instruction. Therefore, we encouraged our teachers to use the four communicative skills (speaking, reading, listening and writing) with the aim of providing a *natural* learning environment. Oral interaction between teacher and learner and amongst learners should also be encouraged. Communicating becomes more important than correctness.

3. Initial problems and their solutions

Teaching in a foreign language at our School of Education is mainly motivated by the fact that we are training students to become primary school teachers. Many of these prospective teachers will be working at schools with bilingual sections, that is, schools where some subjects are partly taught through a foreign language, mostly English and French. Thus, teachers should feel motivated to adopt CLIL as part of their teaching methodology. However, teachers at the School of Education showed many insecurities and fears with the very thought of planning a didactic unit

in a foreign language, even though some of them had a high command of the language. In order to cope with this initial situation, the coordinating team of the PEP, whose members were all foreign language and teaching methodology specialists, devised a work schedule consisting in regular meetings between content area teachers and language specialists. In those meetings, content teachers were given some guidelines on how to structure and plan a didactic unit within the CLIL approach, part of their work had to be presented to their fellow mates at monitoring workshops².

Below, we show a short list of their worries about planning and implementing a CLIL session and how we have been mitigating them as we proceeded with our project. Their main concerns and insecurities aroused on the one hand because they did not feel sufficiently competent to adapt and/or reduce teaching materials and resources in a foreign language, especially when dealing with content which might require high cognitive abilities from the learners. On the other hand, they did not feel confident with the fact of having the foreign language as the language of communication. At the coordinating team we

came out with some remedial strategies to cope with these insecurities.

Different levels of command of the foreign language by teachers. At the beginning, most teachers were not sure about their level of command of the foreign language, and only a few had gained a CEFRL certificate in English or French. So here we faced an initial concern affecting the basic linguistic competence of non-language teachers in the foreign language. The initial command of the foreign language ranged from very basic (A1-A2) to advanced (B2-C1). Throughout the different projects, teachers committed themselves to attend both free general language courses at the university's Center of Modern Languages and tailor-made subject-specific courses based on the CLIL approach. Planning of didactic units was done in coordination with a language specialist, and, to dissipate fears, only content objectives were set and the exposure by learners to content in the foreign language was adjusted to the teacher's degree of manipulation of that language.

Another of the initial fears of teachers was whether content would be satisfactorily conveyed to learners as they might have missed much of their explanations or they may feel that essential knowledge might have been left out for simplicity. One of the CLIL principles that teachers should take into account is that they are not supposed to check or control the use of the foreign language but the acquisition of academic knowledge through the L2. From the very beginning we made them aware of the fact that class time should be devoted to content, not language. On the other hand, simplifying contents does not mean leaving out crucial concepts as simplicity is balanced by scaffolding. Some of the scaffolding techniques that teachers learned to use in the monitoring sessions were redundant presentation of information in a variety of formats, e.g., slideshow, audio/video recording, journal articles,

etc.; rephrasing and reformulating new ideas or concepts, providing previous knowledge clues, administering introductory activities or pre-tasks to be completed before the CLIL session, etc. All these strategies help make input more comprehensible and teachers more confident with achieving set objectives.

Teachers also felt insecure regarding communication and oral interaction in the class. Because they felt they had to conduct a lesson in a foreign language, they thought they might go through anxiety and stress as they were going to teach outside the comfort zone provided so far by teaching in their mother tongue. First of all, we made them aware that CLIL is not just teaching academic content in L2 in the same way as they teach that content in their mother tongue. CLIL is a learner-centered approach as opposed to traditional teacher-centered instruction. The new approach should thus be more participative by enhancing oral interaction between students, so that they become more active and the teacher stands behind as a helper or resource provider, thus focusing the students' attention on their tasks and their mates, and not just on the teacher (Bonwel et al, 1991; Scott Armstrong, 2012). Learners should learn by taking an active part in their learning process by applying appropriate communication skills. There is nothing prejudicial in getting out of the comfort zone. There must be a change of attitude towards the teacher's part in the lesson. He/she should feel that he/she is the conductor in full command of the communication situation and of his/her performance. Short pauses, speaking at a slow pace, gesturing and use of the blackboard will contribute to make teachers more confident.

Because both teachers and learners shared their mother tongue, they feared that communicating in a foreign language would be felt as an unnatural setting and even completely unnecessary, slowing down the pace of the lesson and making it unattractive for learners, so

that some of them may 'disconnect' from what is going on. Remedial strategies were administered once both teachers and learners were aware of the sociological context in which today's teaching takes place, as we are immersed in a globalized world with millions of international exchanges. Moreover, a huge amount of up-to-date academic and professional information is provided in English and other languages, most of which may be accessed on the Internet, strongly encourage by social networks. The use of more than one language is essential to feel that you are part of that context. This context is sufficiently motivating to start acquiring at least part of the specialized knowledge learnt at the university in a foreign language. Our experience tells us that communication works smoothly after a couple of CLIL-oriented bilingual sessions between teachers and learners and amongst learners themselves, as the learning atmosphere created makes the class "community" partly unconscious of the fact that they are talking about a subject or a topic in a foreign language. Obviously, there may be some short breaks in which the learners might require the help of the teacher with some expressions or key words and, in this case, clarification may mean switch to the mother tongue. These breaks are perfectly normal during a bilingual session, and they are highly recommended, at least at the initial stages, where language command and subject-matter knowledge are scarce. These breaks make both teachers and learners feel more relaxed and confident to immediately go back to the foreign language environment as they feel that they are really improving, not just content, but also improving their command of the foreign language.

Teachers with a good command of the L2 might tend to speak so fast that learners might miss the comprehension of part of the content. This is where communicative strategies come

into action. Faerch and Kasper (1983, p. 16) view communicative strategies as "systematic techniques employed by a speaker to express his meaning when faced with some difficulty and the difficulty here refers to the speaker's inadequate command of the language used in the interaction". We have been training our teachers in some of the communicative strategies we have considered more suitable to bilingual settings. We have adapted these strategies with one common goal: making communication real and input comprehensible. Improving clarity of speech helped with face and hand gestures is a basic communicative strategy. Mehisto et al (2008, p. 226) recommended a balanced pronunciation of lower-pitched vowels and higher-pitched consonants, speaking at a slow pace and keeping closer to the listener.

Other strategies we recommended our teachers are: rephrasing and repeating utterances, framing teacher performance with visual supports, encouraging learners to take part in the communicative exchange by organizing their activities into pairs and groups, naturally allowing code-switching between L1 and L2. The teacher's discourse should be supported by using hedges or introductory utterances, such as "We all know that", "Perhaps you did not know that", "by the way", "I believe", "you should be aware of", etc., (Peccei and Stilwell, 2001) together with concept checking questions, i.e., those questions made by the teacher to elicit simple answers from learners in order to check that they follow the thread of her explanation. *Yes/No* questions such as "Do you understand?", "Is this clear?", or more specifically, "Should medication be administered on the first stage?" may be used though feedback from learners is very poor with this type of questions, as most of them will reply with a handy though useless "Yes". Instead, we encourage teachers to use *wh*-questions to elicit more elaborate answers from learners,

so questions such as “How does this work?” or “How often should you administer medication?” are more appropriate and communicatively enriching, though more cognitively demanding than *Yes/No* questions.

The use of L1 structures interfered communication in L2 making content transmission difficult for learners. Interlanguage interferences have been dealt with at length in second language acquisition research (Bhela, 1999; Horwitz, 2008; Richards et al, 1992; Swan and Smith, 1987). Interference mainly affects productive communicative skills such as speaking and writing. Remedial strategies concerning interference or negative transfer consist in turning language interference into interlanguage strategies (Selinker, 1972, 1992). One of these techniques is language and content reduction. Faerch and Kasper (1983) introduce the concept of ‘avoidance behaviour’, when classifying communicative strategies, as consisting of formal reduction and functional reduction strategies. “Formal reduction strategies could be phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical strategies. Learners tend to use formal reduction strategies either to avoid making errors and/or they want to increase their fluency (Faerch and Kasper 1983, p. 40; quoted by Al Maamari, 2010). On the other hand, functional reduction strategies include reduction of speech act and reduction of propositional context and these two are used by learners to reduce their communicative goals in

order to avoid problems in interactions (ibid: 43; quoted by Al Maamari, 2010).

Conclusion

After three academic years training teachers on the CLIL approach, we are plainly satisfied that most of the objectives for the different projects have been accomplished and we have conformed a faculty team ready to cope with teaching at the initial stages of our PEP. First and foremost, content teachers feel more at home with teaching in a foreign language, communication strategies have been very valuable to control the pace of the lesson. Formal and functional reduction of both language and contents facilitates understanding. Learners’ exposure to discourse in the foreign language has been gradual, starting at a more passive, receptive level, just limited to listen to the teacher’s instructions and simple concept checking questions, with the scaffolding of short-length texts, vocabulary lists, information organizers and visual aid. Active learning and oral interaction should be encouraged by making learners work in pairs or small groups. Progress in the acquisition of subject-matter contents is necessarily slower in L2 than in L1. Both teachers and learners should be motivated by feeling that they belong to a speaking ‘community’ in the foreign language whose boundaries are the physical limitations of the classroom, the particular features of the conceptual framework of each academic discipline and the pace of oral interaction.

¹ The terms *plurilingualism* and *pluriculturalism* are used in the context of the CLIL approach, as the prefix *pluri-* is understood as the integrated learning of languages and cultural aspects conveyed through those languages. Within this approach, learners will acquire knowledge within the communicative, cognitive and cultural environments of the languages of instruction, which will be at least two: the learner’s mother tongue and a second or foreign language.

² All the details about the organizational structure of the teacher-training programme are depicted in the unpublished Plan de Lenguas de Centro (Plurilingual Education Programme) draft document approved by the School of Education Sciences’ Board at the University of Cádiz.

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Коммуникация как обучающая стратегия в билингвальном образовании

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Данная статья основана на личном опыте члена координационной команды Полилингвальной образовательной программы (Plurilingual Education Programme (PEP)) в школе образования университета г. Кадис (Испания). Была проведена работа с группой из 23 преподавателей, 13 различных предметов и 3 целевых языков: английского, французского и немецкого. Главной целью проекта было преподать методологический подход предметно-языкового интегрированного обучения (CLIL). В работе отражены некоторые коммуникативные стратегии, типичные для вышеобозначенного подхода, и их преимущества.

Ключевые слова: коммуникация, коммуникативные стратегии, коммуникативная компетенция, устная интеракция, обучение преподавателей.
