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Innovations and Challenges in Attending to Diversity through CLIL

With content and language integrated learning (CLIL)¹ programs being increasingly introduced in mainstream education, the onus is now on catering to diversity² and on ensuring CLIL enhances content and language learning in over- and underachievers alike. This is no mean feat, particularly considering that strong claims have been made for the lack of egalitarianism that certain authors consider inherent in CLIL.

This article explores this issue closely, providing an overview of what research has revealed vis-à-vis the effects of CLIL on the achievement of diverse types of students. It then classifies the different special needs that should be accounted for in the CLIL classroom and offers practical specifications to respond to them to ensure that CLIL education is truly inclusive and can be applied across the board.

Introduction

The European approach to bilingual education—Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)—has been enthusiastically embraced as a potential lever for change and success in language learning and has become a

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“a well-established part of education systems across Europe” (Surmont, Struys, Van Den Noort, & Van De Craen, 2016, p. 320). Numerous scholars (e.g., Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Marsh, 2002; Pérez Cañado, 2017) have also considered CLIL to make bilingual language learning more accessible to all types of learners, as it has been held to afford all students, regardless of social class and economic consideration, the opportunity to learn additional languages in a meaningful way. Many authors have thus maintained that CLIL promotes social inclusion and egalitarianism, as the introduction of this approach in mainstream education provides a greater range of students with opportunities for linguistic development, which they were previously denied. In this sense, Marsh (2002, p. 10) claimed that “egalitarianism has been one success factor because this

approach is seen to open doors on languages for a broader range of learners.” Coyle et al. (2010, p. 2) also underscored that CLIL is appropriate “for a broad range of learners, not only those from privileged or otherwise elite backgrounds.”

However, the initial *mise-en-scène* of CLIL in public schools across Europe points to a very different reality. Indeed, one of the chief concerns repeatedly underpinning CLIL discussions affects the lack of egalitarianism, which, according to authors like Bruton (2013, 2015) or Paran (2013), is inherent in the application of this approach. Certain European countries have established admission criteria for CLIL in mainstream education, taking into account students’ subject knowledge (e.g., the Czech Republic or Bulgaria), the target language level (e.g., France or Romania), or both (e.g., The Netherlands or Hungary). And in those countries that have no such admission criteria (e.g., Spain or Germany), bilingual schools have set up parallel CLIL and non-CLIL streams that co-exist within each grade. In this sense, a notable set of scholars have sounded a note of caution regarding the level of self-selection in CLIL strands, with its corollary inadequacy for attention to diversity (Lorenzo, Casal, Moore, & Afonso, 2009). Mehisto (2007, p. 63) warned that “CLIL can attract a disproportionately large number of academically bright students,” a point on which Bruton (2013, 2015) and Paran (2013) are particularly adamant. They argued that CLIL branches normally comprise the more motivated, intelligent, and linguistically proficient students and that these differences are conducive to prejudice and discrimination against non-CLIL learners. Bruton considered the latter “remnants” (2013, p. 593) and maintained that CLIL favors elitism: “Implicitly, CLIL is likely to be elitist and cream off certain students” (p. 595); “rather than increasing the equality of opportunity, CLIL in certain contexts is subtly selecting students out” (p. 593).

This concern acquires a particularly sharp relief now that CLIL embeds itself in mainstream education. A new CLIL scenario has firmly taken root across the continent, where the move is being made from bilingual sections to fully bilingual schools. In

other words, there are no longer CLIL and non-CLIL groups in bilingual centers: all those public schools that have been implementing CLIL programs for several years now only have CLIL classes, so there is no distinction between monolingual and bilingual strands. This is happening, to take a case in point, in Andalusia, where the *Plan Estratégico de Desarrollo de las Lenguas en Andalucía* (Junta, 2017) has established a target number of 1,500 fully bilingual schools by 2020. Thus, now all learners experience foreign language learning both in language-driven and subject content classes and it consequently becomes incumbent on practitioners to cater to diversity and to ensure CLIL enhances language and content learning in over- and underachievers alike. As Durán-Martínez and Beltrán-Llavador (2016, p. 88) put it, educators are now faced with the “difficulty of catering for inclusive alternatives for special education needs (SEN) children and the need to become fully confident and proficient in their use of English.”

It is precisely on this burning issue that this article focuses. It provides an overview of what research has revealed vis-à-vis the effects of CLIL on diverse types of students. It then classifies the different special needs that should be accounted for in the CLIL classroom and offers practical specifications to respond to them to ensure that CLIL education is truly inclusive and can be applied across the board.

Lessons Learned From the Research on Attention to Diversity in CLIL

Although research into catering to diversity within CLIL programs is still very much at an embryonic stage, it has been stepped up of late on three main fronts. An initial batch of publications (Araque & Barrio, 2010; Bunch & Berruezo, 2008; Ferrandis, Grau, & Fortes, 2010) involves essentially *theoretical accounts* that canvass the different lines of action that can be set in place within CLIL programs to cater to diversity. Even though some interesting organizational strategies have been adopted, including flexible groupings within the same level, groups are usually split according to student capacity and/or curricular competence criteria and remain the same

throughout the year. Even if the school's overall plan provides numerous adaptations in basic elements of the curriculum (changes in objectives, content, assessment, activities and methodology), there are teachers who do not introduce any type of adaptation into their classrooms. With regards to specific ways of attending to diversity, schools apply most of the following procedures: repeating school years, adapting and enriching individual curriculum for students with special educational needs, articulating educational compensation class workshops, implementing vocational preparation and programs for students with SEN associated with mental health disabilities.

In turn, a second set of *qualitative* studies have monitored stakeholder perceptions of the ways in which CLIL programs work and of the main teacher training needs generated. They have canvassed the opinions of key players in CLIL settings (e.g., students, teachers, parents, coordinators, principals, or vice-principals), employing a qualitative methodology and instruments including interviews, questionnaires, or observation. Four main studies can be detected where the topic of attention to diversity comes to the fore. In Northern Europe, Mehisto and Asser (2007) polled 41 teachers, 180 parents, 4 principals, and 4 vice-principals involved in Russian CLIL programs in Estonia to gauge their perspectives on program management. Although their study did not focus on catering to diversity in CLIL, their investigation did allow them to ascertain that attention to diversity transpires as one of the key challenges for the practitioners involved. These authors concluded that

addressing the needs of students who lack motivation, pose discipline problems or are academically weak is a challenge for the program at large and requires an organizational response both to help ensure that students' needs are met and that teachers build their repertoire of related skills. (p. 693)

They strongly vouched for the need to clearly define strategies to meet the needs of these mixed-ability groups. In Spain, Pena Díaz and Porto Requejo (2008) probed teacher opinions in the community of Madrid through two

questionnaires. They questioned the desirability of including students with special needs in the bilingual program, as the practitioners documented difficulties rooted in materials and resources to face up to this challenge. More recently, Fernández and Halbach (2011) polled 56 teachers in 15 schools using questionnaires. The outcomes of this latest study dovetailed with those of previous ones in the insufficient resources and problems with mixed ability groups, special needs students, and latecomers to the program. Finally, a European study with 706 pre- and in-service teachers, teacher trainers, and coordinators determined that, among the main CLIL teacher training needs, adequate materials design and methodological guidelines for catering to diversity figured prominently as lacunae to be addressed (Pérez Cañado, 2016a, 2016b).

The final research strand *quantitatively* gauged the impact of variability in CLIL programs, an issue identified by Pérez Cañado (2018) as being in dire need of research and that has only very recently begun to be addressed. To begin with, at tertiary level, the empirical-descriptive study by Julius and Madrid (2017) demonstrated the great variability within CLIL students. They documented varying linguistic levels in English as a second language among students who have studied bilingual university degrees; diversity among students who have had private classes throughout their secondary education and their different levels; the variety of trips to countries where the L2 is spoken; the various reasons why they chose to study a bilingual degree and the problems; and challenges they have had to overcome during their bilingual education.

In turn, Anghel, Cabrales, and Carro (2016) focused on the Natural Science knowledge of primary education learners within the first cohorts of students following CLIL programs in the autonomous community of Madrid (in the academic years 2004–5 and 2005–6). They factored in parents' educational level and found significantly negative effects in the content learning of Natural Science for the children of less educated parents. Fernández-Sanjurjo, Fernández-Costales, and Arias Blanco (2017) again focused on Natural Science and on primary education. They

also factored in socio-economic status (SES) as a co-variate, with largely concurrent results. According to their outcomes, students learning contents in the first language (L1) obtained slightly higher scores than those who do so through CLIL in the second language (L2). In addition, statistically significant differences were found in favor of those students with a higher SES. Also focusing on SES, Rascón and Bretones (2018) found that students with a higher status outperform those from a lower socioeconomic background in terms of L1 and content learning at the end of primary education, and in both bilingual and nonbilingual streams. However, their results evinced that this tendency is countered in the long run for bilingual students, where SES does not yield statistically significant differences at the end of compulsory secondary education.

Another intervening variable that has been the focus of attention is social milieu. Alejo and Piquer-Píriz (2016) found social milieu (urban vs. rural) to be strongly related to overall academic achievement, in the L2 in this case, as urban learners outstrip their rural counterparts on the grammatical and lexical aspects sampled in two secondary schools in the monolingual Spanish region of Extremadura. Finally, considering type of school, Madrid and Barrios' (2017) results showed differences in performance and between school types—particularly at secondary level and in favor of bilingual private and public schools. Thus, all these studies documented variability, as statistically significant differences have been found between CLIL and non-CLIL groups in terms of all the intervening variables considered (in favor of urban contexts, students with a higher socioeconomic level, and in private and public bilingual schools).

This overview of prior research allows us to derive several overarching conclusions. First and foremost, we have ascertained the still meager amount of research that has thus far been conducted on attention to diversity in CLIL. Qualitatively, studies have mostly polled stakeholder perspectives of the way in which CLIL programs are playing out and attention to diversity has surfaced as a key challenge. In turn,

quantitatively, research has explored how CLIL is working in diverse social contexts, socioeconomic levels, and types of school, evincing great variability in terms of these intervening variables. Consequently, a closer inspection of what diversity entails and how it can be catered to is fully warranted.

An Approximation to Diversity: Types of Special Needs in the CLIL Classroom

What types of special needs should be accounted for in the CLIL classroom? Two essential and complementary principles of a democratic school and society should be combined: the *principle of attending to diversity* and the *principle of integration*. These principles make it clear that all people have the right to basic learning,³ through equal opportunities, the same curriculum and a formal school setting (Ainscow, 2001; UNESCO, 2004).

Diversity is an inherently human trait. It is based on respect for individual differences; diversity in prior ideas, experiences, knowledge and attitudes; different learning styles and multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993); different learning methods; varying achievement levels, learning paces, and intellectual capacity; diverging interests, motivations, and expectations; and different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds that affect the lives of students (Arnaiz, 2009; Julius & Madrid, 2017). In a broad sense, attending to diversity encompasses all activity that responds to students' educational needs, especially those that need tailored responses due to sociocultural disadvantage, health restrictions, high intellectual capacities, special language requirements, disabilities, or serious personality disorders (León, Estévez, & Crisol, 2016; Monclús & Saban, 2012).

The second principle that helps promote equal opportunities among the student body is *inclusion* (Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2010). Inclusive education is an educational model that aims to respond to the learning needs of all students with a special focus on those who are at risk of marginalization and social exclusion. It is based on the principle that every child has characteristics,

interests, capacities, and distinct learning needs, and that the educational systems should design themselves around the vast diversity present in those characteristics and needs.

Both inclusion and attending to diversity are associated with the phenomenon of *integration*, which is a consistent response to the diversity of student needs. These needs are met in the school and social setting through greater participation in learning (León et al., 2016; Stainback & Stainback, 1999). As Madrid Manrique (2014) has acknowledged, inclusive education has become an influential movement in the 21st century. It is currently treated as a priority among most governments worldwide. As a consequence, educational reforms in various countries are attempting to achieve this integration and social cohesion among their populations.

From Theory to Practice: Examples of Attending to Diversity in CLIL Programs

How does one go about integrating these diverse types of students in inclusive, mainstream CLIL programs? We propose a varied set of both general and specific lines of action to facilitate inclusion and attention to diversity based on the current legislation and official guidelines in Spain and the European Union (European Commission, 2016; LOMCE, 2013; Royal Decree, 126/2014), proposals drawn up by specialists in this area, and strategies used by teaching staff in primary and secondary schools.

These actions include splitting the larger group into smaller, flexible groupings for activities, to avoid segregation and discrimination against the most vulnerable so that the highest level of collaboration is reached among students (Muntaner, 2014). Other proposals (Ainscow, 2001; Arnaiz, 2009) involve offering an inclusive curriculum that breaks down barriers, incorporating principles (valid for all) that facilitate accessibility for all students in all subjects, and making the methodology flexible to include learner autonomy in learning and the human support that students need to reach their goals.

El Homrani, Peñafiel, and Hernández (2017) also advocated organizing subjects by subject area to achieve greater accessibility, building a student-focused curriculum that prioritizes the students' participation, simplifying learning situations, adapting content to student abilities to help encourage comprehension, and providing support by having a second teacher in the classroom.

According to León et al. (2016), a great emphasis must also be placed on organizing suitable free-time activities (promoting reading, recitals, or documentary screenings), offering elective subjects that students can choose in line with their interests and requirements, and offering support programs and curricular adaptations.

More specifically, in the area of CLIL, the following strategies have proved to be efficient (Barrios, 2010; Madrid & Hughes, 2011; Madrid & Julius, 2017): gathering information from parents on the academic difficulties that their children experience, negotiating joint intervention strategies, and adapting content and tasks according to students' capability, intelligence, personal abilities, learning methods, and multiple intelligences.

As Madrid (2002, 2004) suggested, it is essential to demonstrate certain personality traits and personal qualities in the classroom that are attractive to students (e.g., being upbeat, optimistic, gracious, kind, tolerant, flexible, friendly, and attentive). Comprehension can be adapted to students with special needs and motivation can be favored by integrating subject content and linguistic aspects from the language of instruction in a very simple way, adapting input to the comprehension level and learning pace of students, and including a considerable variety in exercises, activities, and tasks that attract students with different interests. It is also important to encourage and motivate students, highlighting their achievements, however small they may be, and minimizing their failures and mistakes.

Recent research (Madrid & Julius, 2017; Ortega Martín, Hughes, & Madrid, 2018) has also revealed that students value their teachers' use of a variety of audiovisual material and realia adapted to student capacities and the use of ICTs to facilitate learning. They equally appreciate constant feedback to check

how well content has been understood and to detect misunderstandings, confusion, and mental blockages among students. Comprehension of students with learning difficulties can also be enhanced by employing abundant photos, summaries, images, diagrams, and similar techniques that provide obvious links to the topic and promote understanding by representing and clarifying information.

Studies on CLIL classroom teaching (Madrid, 2004; Ortega Martín et al., 2018) show that students need the teacher to speak slowly, clearly, and in a suitable volume for the group, exaggerating pronunciation, being careful to adapt oral communication to the level of students, and stressing particularly difficult L2 phonetics.

Finally, among the variables that exert a notable influence on the quality of CLIL programs and satisfy the students' personal needs (Madrid & Julius, 2017), the students highlight the importance of nurturing an affective teacher-student relationship (*rapport*) and displaying understanding and patience in teaching and learning processes. Other significant aspects mentioned include employing the L1 in class to clarify concepts that are not clear in the L2, promoting extracurricular activities that support learning, encouraging trips and exchanges with native speakers, and organizing activities that interest them (e.g., games and sports).

Conclusion

Attention to diversity in CLIL is undoubtedly one of the hot topics on the present and future CLIL agenda. Now that CLIL programs are being mainstreamed and extended schoolwide, catering to diversity, inclusion, and integration receive greater priority within bilingual education scenarios. Against this backdrop, the main findings from descriptive, quantitative, and qualitative studies have been canvassed; the most outstanding types of special needs have been glossed; and the chief actions that are being set in place have been signposted. This rundown has revealed that, although there is an increased awareness of the

pressing need to cater to diversity in CLIL, studies are still very much in their infancy and the effects of the pedagogical strategies deployed have not as yet been examined. Thus, further research into how (and whether) CLIL works across diverse levels of attainment and into which materials, methodologies, or types of evaluation are more successful to cater to diversity (preferably from an international comparative perspective) would be greatly desirable in the very near future. It is only by implementing measures such as the ones proposed herein and investigating their potential success that headway will be made in this area and that educators will be able to guarantee that learners receive "the best linguistically rich learning experiences they can possibly have throughout their schooling" (Coyle, 2010, p. viii).

Notes

1. Content and language integrated learning is considered the European approach to bilingual education: a "European solution to a European need" (Marsh, 2002, p. 11). It strives to upgrade foreign language (FL) standards by increasing the amount of exposure to the target language through the teaching of certain content subjects in that FL, so that language can be picked up in a meaningful, authentic, and subconscious way while concomitantly learning academic content. The integration of language and content is pivotal, with foreign language teaching and content lessons being timetabled alongside each other.
2. Diversity is understood here as an inherently human trait, based on respect for individual differences and learning styles (Gardner, 1993); varying achievement levels, learning paces and intellectual capacity; and different motivations and socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds which affect the lives of students (Julius & Madrid, 2017). See section on *An approximation to diversity: types of special needs in the CLIL classroom* for a more detailed characterization of *diversity, inclusion, and integration*.
3. Basic learning needs "comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy, and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills,

values, and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their full capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions, and to continue learning” (WCEFA, 1990, p. 11).

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Additional Resources

1. van Wechem, M. & Halbach, A. (2014). *A Parent's Guide to bilingualism and bilingual*

***education*. Madrid, Spain: British Council and Macmillan Education.**

This book provides essential pedagogical tips for educators and parents to assist in

their students/children's bilingual education. It is based on recent research on bilingualism and bilingual education, as well as opinions by experts in bilingualism, and follows a very didactic and straightforward question and answer format. Issues pertaining to children with specific language impairment (SLI) and typical language development (TLD) are explicitly broached and useful tips are provided to support children in and outside school and before and during bilingual education.

2. El Homrani, M., Peñafiel, F. and Hernández, A. (2017). *Entornos y estrategias educativas para la inclusión social (Educational contexts and strategies for social inclusion)*. Granada, Spain: Comares.

This book is a comprehensive contribution to inclusive education that includes 66 chapters written by more than 100 authors. It deals with a great variety of topics concerning school, society and families as inclusive agents, new technologies, and nonformal educational contexts.

3. Benito, I. (2014). *On the use of CLIL at inclusive education*. Valladolid, Spain: Universidad de Valladolid.

This paper proposes some CLIL techniques to deal with inclusive education in the Spanish region of Castilla y León. Among the proposed strategies, the use of ICTs and other integrative techniques are recommended. The author suggests that attention to diversity has to be integrated within CLIL programs involving students, teachers, and the school.

