

An Encounter with CLIL in Argentina

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Introduction

Through my teaching of a course for third-year university students focusing on 'World Education', I have the opportunity to find out about the educational experiences of various international students who join the course. One such student during the 2019-20 academic student is from Argentina. When I referred to CLIL, it appeared to be familiar to her. I therefore carried out an interview based around eleven questions (see Appendix A), to see to what extent her experience could be seen as related to CLIL and to gather her impressions about that experience. The interview was carried out on 20th November 2019. Quotations are given verbatim.

Background on Argentinian Education

Although Spanish is the official language in Argentina and dominates in all spheres of life, the country includes descendants of many ethnic groups reflecting its long history of immigration. In spite of not being a British colony, Britain played a large role in the country's development, in areas such as railways. As Ferguson (2004, p. 244) states, "The immense amounts of capital sunk into Latin America, for example, gave Britain so much leverage – especially in Argentina and Brazil – that it seems quite legitimate to speak of 'informal imperialism' in these countries." As a result, English gained a position as a prestigious language and a somewhat different role for a location which would nominally be seen as part of Kachru's 'expanding circle', according to his model, referred to by writers including Elmes (2001, pp. 103-104).

Various ethnic groups set up schools for their communities, with what became known as 'English schools' dating back to "as early as 1820." They are now largely described as 'bilingual schools' (ONESTOP). A key association for such schools is ESSARP, the English Speaking Association of the River Plate, which was originally founded in 1926 as the British Scholastic Association, to encourage communication between heads of such schools in Argentina and Uruguay (EASARP). It is a largely urban phenomenon, as, "about 80% of them" are "in the City of Buenos Aires and the "Gran Buenos Aires" area (ONESTOP).

One student’s experience

Turning now to the student’s specific experience, I will draw on her answers to explain to what degree her experience actually connects with CLIL.

Firstly, the school’s learning environment can be gathered from her answers to the first six questions. Her school was a privately-operated school with students attending from kindergarten through primary school to high school, a period of as long as fifteen years. She specifically spoke about the year when she was thirteen/fourteen and an experiment was carried out, with the aim of moving the school from ‘semi-bilingual’ to ‘bilingual’ . This can be seen in the relationship between morning and afternoon classes, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Pattern of classes (five days)

AM	Regular	classes	in Spanish
Early PM	Classes	in English	in language,	literature	and maths
Later PM	Preparation	for	Cambridge	examinations	Mock Exams

In answer to question 3, concerning the two parts of the day, she said, “No, no relationship. It was like two different schools. In the morning, we had one director and in the afternoon another one. So, it changed completely.”

For the year in question, the content classes (see Table 1) were added and the time for examination preparation was shortened. The content classes were literature, language and mathematics. In answer to a point of clarification, she indicated that the literature was not local Argentinian literature, but centered on British literature. Regarding amount of time (question 5), the afternoon was split into two hours for content classes and two hours for examination preparation (Cambridge examinations from KET to CAE levels), with the content subject alternating from day to day.

In answer to question 6 concerning class size, in spite of the time which had elapsed, she stated that there were precisely 17 students. This is below the average lower secondary class size of 23 in Argentina in 2016 (OECD, 2018). As with the elementary school CLIL program involving mathematics focused on in Chapter 12, she described a degree of selectivity. Joining these afternoon content classes involved a placement test, consultation with parents and being in approximately the top quarter of the year’s students.

Moving on to language use, a key feature of CLIL is the potential for translanguaging (use

of both the mother tongue and the target language), with varying degrees of mother tongue use denoted by classifications such as 'soft' and 'hard' or 'light' and 'heavy' CLIL. However, with regard to this, she said that, "You couldn't talk in Spanish... . We had like a little song that we sing to everyone that talked in Spanish. We all in the class stood up." The purpose according to her was to make that student feel "a little bit ashamed." According to her, that strategy "worked", i.e. it was successful.

Given its position as a content subject clearly separate from English, unlike 'language' or 'literature', I focused on mathematics in drawing out her answer to question 8. Although she was then at high school level in her school, she described mathematics as easier than her morning mathematics classes in Spanish. As she said, "They were teaching us how to say 'plus', 'minus' It started really from the basics because it was a trial, so it was really basic mathematics."

Turning to positive and negative points (questions 9 and 10), the first positive point which she indicated was that, "My school before doing this thing for subjects, it was just preparation for the exams and general English. And if you have this separate subject, you know more about the specific vocabulary of the specific subjects. It's different, so you know how to say some things in mathematics or some things in literature." She also felt positive because combined with examination preparation later in the afternoon, it meant that the whole of each afternoon involved English. The negative points actually concerned mathematics, which as a subject which is distinct from English appears to make it the most 'CLILlike'. This negativity appeared to largely come down to two connected factors: 1. The teacher, who was described as less involved and with less authority and dynamism compared with the teachers of the other subjects, and 2. The level and depth of the material. As indicated in the previous paragraph, the level was quite low. Although recycling material which has already been covered is often seen as a positive CLIL strategy, it would appear that, in this case, it was taken too far. While recycling may have a role, there is also a need for innovation. Writers who claim success from CLIL approaches, such as Young (2018, p. 37), who introduced a CLIL approach by teaching Italian to elementary school level learners in Scotland, epitomizes this, with her findings that, "CLIL had a strong impact on motivation to learn a language at that moment in the classroom. Pupils found the lessons much more engaging and enjoyable" and "thus were more likely to participate in learner activities." She also referred to her students' comments such as, "I enjoyed the lesson because it was something new and exciting." (35) However, in this case, the student described how the teacher, "just stood up and writes some things in the blackboard... . She gave us activities to fill in." Thus, it appears that the focus was on L.O.T.S. (Lower Order Thinking Skills), rather than the H.O.T.S. (Higher Order Thinking Skills), which are seen as a key benefit of CLIL approaches. As Ting (2017, p. 14) clearly states, not just

with CLIL but more widely in education, “schooling is an exercise in higher-order thinking.”

I followed up that question by asking additionally, “Was it good having just half a day compared with a whole day?” Her response was, “A whole day of English? I don’t know if it would work. In Argentina, you can use English, but you have to learn Spanish too... . You have to have the history of Argentina. The geography of Argentina is really important, too.” However, it reminded her of a friend who is studying in a bilingual school, with a greater amount of time in English. Finally, though, she thought that she had experienced “a balance” and also felt positive about possible future children following in her footsteps.

Relevance for Japan

While Japan is also located in Kachru’s expanding circle, its historical background is markedly different, both in relation to colonization and immigration. The position of English would not seem to match the prestigious status it holds in Argentinian society. How does Argentina compare with Japan in key areas?

A: Resources:

Could a system such as the time divide for classes indicated above (am: Spanish, pm: English) be feasible in Japan? It is described as a clear feature of bilingual schools in Argentina by a source (ONESTOP), quoting de Mejia (2002), “The English-Spanish bilingual schools have adopted an overtly separation approach to language use according to time of day and officially do not approve of code-switching. Some schools adopt a points system and use these to discourage students from speaking Spanish during an English activity.” However, it would be demanding in terms of resources and is largely only a feature of private schools in Argentina. Public schools in Argentina typically have a couple of hours a week of English according to the student. Although not exactly parallel, the gap between the resources and also flexibility of public and private schools would seem to at least be partly shared. This is reflected in the provision of a CLIL program involving mathematics in Japan being carried out at a private school (see Chapter 12).

B: Teachers and CLIL experience:

The student indicated the key factor of the quality of the teacher, particularly in relation to her experience of the mathematics classes. Japan continues to struggle with providing enough high-level English teachers for classes in the subject itself, let alone for other subjects taught through English, by approaches such as CLIL. However, Argentina also faces challenges. Banegas (2011) in a survey of related articles from conference proceedings finds that CLIL is increasingly being

adopted in Argentina, after first being adopted in Buenos Aires (p. 45), often as a successor to task-based learning approaches. However, while there is study of CLIL content, there is a lack of training in CLIL pedagogy (pp. 38-39) and a need for the development of more “local aims, expectations and resources” (p. 44), rather than merely importing wholesale from European models of CLIL.

C: The balance of language and content and use of the target language:

Generally, CLIL is seen as giving priority to content over language. However, a situation is described in Argentina where, “The stress was placed on the language used to teach content rather than on what was being taught itself. If you take any of these bilingual schools you may find the following subjects in their curriculum: English Language and Literature, Spanish Language and Literature, French, Mathematics, Science, Information Technology, Philosophy for Children, Bible Studies, Art, Music and Physical Education.” The question “Do they meet CLIL standards?” was raised (ONESTOP). The student described two of the subjects as ‘language’ and ‘literature’. These would generally be seen as away from CLIL, but more concerned with the issue of use of the target language in the classroom, an ongoing issue in Japan, as government policy directs attempts to pressure change.

Conclusion

Although this report has been limited by focusing on the experience of just one individual student, I trust that it sheds some light on a contrasting location which has both similarities to, and differences from, Japan. Such contrasts are valuable at a time when Japan is engaged in reforming its English education system and interest in introducing newer approaches such as CLIL is rising.

References

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Appendix A: Questions

1: Was the school public or private?

2: What was the age range at the school?

3: What was the relationship between your morning and afternoon classes?

4: What subjects did you study in English?

5: How many times a week for a typical subject?

6: How many students were in a class?

7: Was English used 100%. If not, what was the language balance?

8: Apart from the classes being in English, can you remember any differences from classes taught in Spanish?

9: What did you feel were any positive points about studying those subjects in English?

10: What do you think were any negative points about studying those subjects in English?

11: If you have children, would you like them to repeat your experience of studying other subjects

in English? Why/Why not?