LEARNERS' ORAL OUTPUT IN CLIL AND EFL INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCES

LA PRODUCCIÓ ORAL DELS APRENENTS EN SEQÜÈNCIES D'ENSENYAMENT AICLE I D'ANGLÈS COM A LLENGUA ESTRANGERA

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1. Theoretical framework

With the aim of describing CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) lessons as language learning environments side by side regular EFL (English as a Foreign Language) lessons, the present study inscribes itself within an SLA tradition and mainly draws on Swain's (1996) 'output hypothesis' which considers comprehensible output to be crucial to the development of language competence in the acquisition of a second or foreign language (Swain, 1996). Furthermore, cognitive theories dealing with the interplay between *cognitive engagement* and *language demands* (Cummins, 1984) also hold central stage in the study of learners' oral output in the two classroom context under investigation. In CLIL classrooms, learners are dealing with subject-matter knowledge and, at the same time, they are learning the language as vehicle for this subject-learning. Drawing on Bloom's (1956) conceptualization of cogntive engagement, higher-order thinking skills are in principle required from CLIL learners.

Thus, this cognitive load needs to be compensated with linguistic scaffolding if the learners are to spell out their thoughts effectively. In the EFL classroom, learners are considered to get engaged in cognitive processes of a lower order, which might somehow free up their processing capacity and, consequently, have an effect on the nature of their output and the linguistic support required to succeed.

2. Objective

This study aims at examining the nature of learners' oral output during a number of instructional sequences in CLIL and EFL classrooms. Aspects such as the level of cognitive engagement and linguistic complexity, on the one hand, and the amount of linguistic support through scaffolding, on the other hand, in relation to the sequencing of tasks/activities are carefully studied in order to characterize the nature of each language learning environment.

3. Methodology

Two public primary education schools located in Catalonia participated in the present study. The two of them had previously been granted a PELE project (*Pla Experimental de Llengües Estrangeres*) by the Catalan Department of Education and had received funding as well as specific training to start offering CLIL instruction in addition to regular EFL teaching. In each school, the *same* teacher was responsible for CLIL lessons and EFL lessons since the two of them had been trained as primary teachers and as English experts as well. With a vast teaching experience of more than 15 years, the two of them had spent a period of time in Britain to produce CLIL materials. While for one school it was the first year of CLIL instruction, for the other school that was the third year. The target group in each school was in the 5th year of primary education (10-11 years of age) including children from different linguistic backgrounds and mixed abilities.

Primary data consists of a series of classroom recordings which include 7 CLIL lessons and 11 EFL lessons that make up two different CLIL units entitled "The respiratory system" and "The germination of plants" and two EFL units on "Family

reunion" and "The legend of the poplar tree". All the lessons were audio- and video-recorded with the presence of a researcher. Recorded classroom discourse was orthographically transcribed by means of a word processor and instructional sequences were codified by means of N-Vivo in accordance with the following categories that have to do with classroom configuration (whole-class, pair/group work and individual seatwork) and their main instructional focus (form-focused or content-based). This served as the basis to conduct a qualitative analysis of the data. Secondary data included field notes taken by the researcher during data collection as well as informal out-of-class teacher comments on the learners' performance during the unfolding of the units.

4. Results and conclusion

The results obtained show that the overall architecture and sequencing of the CLIL and the EFL units greatly differ and so learner oral output is very much attuned to the way target language items and structures are introduced and dealt with. In this respect, it can be claimed that the CLIL units mainly follow a task-based design and so revolve around a main task, whereas EFL units are rather textbook-based and grammatical structures are presented to learners following an inductive approach. This turns out to be a common denominator of the two primary schools involved in the study.

As for the nature of learner oral output itself, in the CLIL context, complex linguistic structures –involving subordination, for instance– are required from students while engaging in cognitive processes like reasoning or evaluating. Thus, all the learners are provided with language support to cope with it either in the form of visual/written support (talking frames and/or substitution tables) or through teacher's scaffolding during teacher-learner oral exchanges.

Otherwise, in the EFL context, less linguistically complex structures are elicited during less cognitively demanding activities. Following an inductive approach to grammar, learner output mostly occurs during productive language practice activities. Furthermore, while most language structures tend to be pre-empted by the teacher in the EFL context, more spontaneous and less structured forms occur in the CLIL context. Nevertheless, it must be pinpointed that CLIL learners with greater language abilities are the ones who are somehow able to depart from these pre-defined structures.

To conclude, As Nikula (2007) puts it, “CLIL instruction provides an arena in which students can put their foreign language skills into a different use than in foreign language classrooms and, in consequence, learn different things.” Therefore, both forms of language education can be considered to be complementing one another. The results of the present study might shed some light on the current practice of CLIL and EFL teachers and inform potential CLIL teacher who will be embarking on this challenging adventure in the future.

5. References

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