

**ZIP YOUR LIPS OR KEEP QUIET? DIFFERENCES IN THE  
CLASSROOM DISCOURSE OF MAIN TEACHERS AND  
LANGUAGE ASSISTANTS IN BILINGUAL SCHOOLS**

**¿SELLAD LOS LABIOS O GUARDAD SILENCIO? DIFERENCIAS  
EN EL DISCURSO DEL AULA DE LOS PROFESORES  
TITULARES Y LOS AUXILIARES LINGÜÍSTICOS EN CENTROS  
BILINGÜES**

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## **1. Theoretical framework and objectives**

Each year more than 800 English-speaking native language assistants are brought into Madrid's bilingual/CLIL primary schools to assist the local teachers and promote students' foreign language and intercultural competence. However, in spite of the high numbers and the cost to the bilingual programme, no specific guidelines are provided by the administration as regards to how assistants should collaborate with the local teachers in the classroom. Drawing on three broad strands of literature, namely Systemic

Functional Linguistics and the distinction between instructional and regulative classroom registers (Christie, 1997, 2002), Discourse Analysis and classroom discourse functions (Cazden, 2001; Dalton-Puffer, 2007) and Second Language Acquisition and interactional strategies (Long, 1983, 1991; Lyster, 1998, 2008; Pica, 1991, 1994), this study analyses team-teaching situations and provides a description of the discursive practices enacted. The data suggest qualitative differences in the type of discourse produced by both sets of participants while interpretations are offered in the light of native and non-native speaker status, novice and veteran teacher profile and possible intercultural differences. In closing we briefly discuss some of the implications for team-teaching practice in bilingual/CLIL programmes across contexts.

## **2. Objectives**

This article sets out to describe how the teachers and assistants working in this context interact in the classroom, how they assume and distribute their corresponding teaching roles and how these roles are articulated linguistically as classroom discourse functions. Variables such as native and non-native teacher status and teacher discourse, novice and veteran teaching experience, as well as possible cultural differences will be taken into consideration when discussing our findings.

## **3. Methodology**

The research undertaken has been conducted in a two-part sequence. In step 1 a pilot questionnaire (Hibler, 2010) was carried out amongst a small number of main teachers (MTs) (n=15) and language assistants (LAs) (n=15) to check their views and first-hand experiences of the bilingual programme in their centre. By and large, findings show that both stakeholders enjoy working together but, concurrently, the LAs with the highest educational and professional experience report some dissatisfaction with the programme. This was a surprising finding, as nearly all MTs mentioned they felt problems arose due to the lack of LA teaching experience and yet, the data reveals that the more qualified the LA, the less they enjoy their work. This could be correlated to the fact that the 'qualified' LA has higher expectations in terms of classroom procedure and

involvement. The second comparative item in the questionnaire exposed contradictory data in regards to LA classroom participation, while most MTs indicated that the LA was involved in nearly all in-class activities, only half the LAs interviewed reported to be indeed engaged. The third comparative item showed that both sets of stakeholders demanded more LA involvement. This data points at miscommunication problems occurring between MTs and LAs that need to be overcome by providing explicit guidelines.

Step 2 of the research consisted of classroom observation to identify the tasks performed by the stakeholders and the discourse functions used. In order to have a more objective view of the classroom context, two complementary sets of data were employed: 1) observation of pre-recorded classes, and 2) in-class live observation taking place between March and April 2010. Three levels of analysis have been used for the data: instructional and regulative registers, classroom discourse functions and SLA strategies. We have focused on the extracts in which there is *explicit* linguistic interaction between the MT, the LA and the students. Using this two-fold registerial distinction as a framework, within the Instructional register we will focus on one discourse function which seems to take up much of the classroom time, that is, Explaining (Cazden, 2001). For our analytical purposes, explanations (EXPL) are defined as the *initial presentation of novel information* or the teachers' first attempt in explaining a given topic or procedure. Within this teaching scenario and level of analysis, we will tackle the function of EXPL through the presence of three linguistic strategies which have been examined in SLA studies as means for negotiation of input which in turn may result in modifications of form: Expanding (XPN) Recasting (REC), and Repeating (REP).

#### **4. Results and conclusions**

Overall, our data offer a recursive pattern in the interactional exchanges conducted by MTs and LAs. The findings show that the occasions where the MT and LA interact more often belong to the regulative register, that is, to situations in which classroom management issues are dealt with and content matters (i.e. the domain of the MT) are not addressed. In these cases, it is the MT who initiates a turn, either addressing the

assistant or the students, with the LA developing a given turn rather than beginning a new one. Within this regulative register, and in line with this idea, the functions of Rewarding (REW) and Disciplining (DIS) are usually enacted first by the MT and only then followed up by the LA, mostly using a Recast (REC) strategy. Linguistically speaking, LAs normally use this scaffolding strategy to make the FL more accessible to the students either by simplifying a question, making a request more concrete, displaying a wider set of examples or offering a more informal register. Within the instructional register, the interactional patterns between stakeholders are similar to the regulative one: the MT initiates a turn while the LA follows it by XPN, REP or REC. The data show that MTs open the turns and offer many of the Explanatory (EXPL) functions in the classrooms, while LAs are mostly responsible for XPN.

In all, as this qualitative analysis suggests, the Language Assistant programme implemented by the Comunidad de Madrid region seems to offer an enriched FL learning context, both for the students and for the MTs involved. Nevertheless, the discursive practices described here may help us not only to unveil differences in the use of certain linguistic choices but, most importantly, may provide interesting insight into the interpersonal relationships, roles and identities built amongst participants. It is by describing what is actually going on in these team-teaching situations that we can raise awareness of the roles that both parties are implementing, and develop an understanding and appreciation of the rapport, skills, linguistic behaviour and cultural models that both parties follow.

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