FIRST STEPS TOWARDS CLIL: PERCEPTIONS AND TRAINING AT A CATALAN UNIVERSITY

PRIMERS PASSOS CAP A L'AICLE: PERCEPCIONS I FORMACIÓ EN UNA UNIVERSITAT CATALANA

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1. Introduction

Educational institutions are increasingly committing themselves to plurilingualism in their language education policies. As part of this commitment to improve learners' L2 communication skills, content and language integrated programmes are becoming increasingly popular in Spain, especially in primary and secondary education (Ruiz de Zarobe & Lasagabaster, 2010). As Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a relatively new area of research, empirical data has only just begun to emerge from initiatives in these contexts (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010; Lorenzo, Casal & Moore,

2010; Navés, 2009; Navés & Victori, 2010; Vallbona, 2009). However, far less of the literature examines CLIL in tertiary education (Dafouz & Nuñez, 2009; Dafouz, Núñez, Sancho & Foran, 2007; Fortanet, 2008; Pinyana & Khan, 2007). For this reason the study described here makes a modest contribution to the literature on Integrating Content and Language in Higher Education (ICLHE). More specifically, the purpose of this paper is to examine university teachers' perspectives before and after teaching their first CLIL subject.

Three main questions were addressed:

a. What are teachers' perceptions before teaching a CLIL subject?
b. How do perceptions influence their lesson planning?
c. What are teachers' perceptions after implementing a CLIL subject?

2. Context

Following the requirements of the Bologna Plan the University of Vic (UVIC) has introduced a 6-credit compulsory English course and at least further 6 optional credits in CLIL subjects on all degree courses. With a view to supporting teachers assigned to CLIL subjects, CIFE (*Centre d'Innovació i Formació en Educació*) at UVIC held its first 10-hour CLIL training course for 15 teachers. Teachers were compensated financially by attending the course and presenting a course adaptation.

3. The CLIL training course

Four sessions were held at the beginning of the first semester of 2011 with a final session at the end of the semester. A pre-course questionnaire gathered information about teachers' backgrounds, their CLIL subjects, their motivation for teaching CLIL and initial perceptions. The first two sessions introduced theoretical aspects of CLIL and their connection to linguistic and methodological strategies, followed by two practical sessions of microteaching led by participants. The course ended with the submission of a CLIL lesson plan and/or course plan.

Course participants were of Catalan/Spanish (11), English (3) and Italian (1) origin, representing three of the four main centres (Education, Business, Polytechnic) at the UVIC. Their CLIL subjects (80%) had been scheduled mainly in the 3rd and 4th academic years, with 20% in first and second years, and with only two subjects providing parallel courses in L1. Courses were aimed at either local (60%) or both local and international students (40%).

In terms of motivation, teachers' claimed mainly to be intrinsically motivated (71%) to teach CLIL, although extrinsic motivation (29%) was also mentioned. Among non-native teachers self-reported levels of English ranged from upper intermediate (2), advanced (7) to proficient (3), with the majority (9) having previous teaching experience abroad. However, none had had any previous CLIL training.

3.2.Pre-course Perceptions

Teachers' perceptions of CLIL are summarized below. Perceptions were discovered through answers to the pre-course questionnaire, during the microteaching and discussion sessions and in their lesson plans.

The main advantage of CLIL (67%), according to teachers, was that it would prepare students better, academically, with 78% identifying content as the main focus of lessons compared to 22% who identified both content and language. Other advantages were that materials already existed in English (27%), CLIL would be better for authentic communication (13%) and CLIL classes would be smaller. On the other hand, the difficulties envisaged in teaching CLIL classes were students' difficulty with the language (35%), teachers' difficulty with the language (25%), assessment (25%), students' difficulty with content (10%) and the language of tutorials (5%). All teachers called for clear and precise teaching guidelines.

Considering these pros and cons teachers were asked to suggest possible lesson adaptations. Due to lack of experience 4 teachers claimed they could not answer this question and remaining teachers suggested: individual/small group work, reducing the amount of content taught, using a variety of materials, using authentic English materials, providing study guides and communication strategies such as repetition, rephrasing, giving examples and comprehension checks.

Microteaching uncovered a diversity of teaching strategies across academic genres, with some incorporation of strategies introduced during the course. Some teachers used communication strategies, others demonstrated tasks or combined a variety of language skills.

As for lesson planning, there were three basic differences in teachers' approaches: the workload, the language support and the language of assessment. Some teachers planned a much heavier workload than others. Some teachers actually timetabled language support into their courses. Although all teachers included more than one type of assessment, for some the language of assessment was English only, whereas for others it was both English and L1.

3.3.Post-Course Perceptions

After teaching their CLIL subjects teachers' perceptions were gathered from a post-course questionnaire and discussions in a final course session. Despite pre-course reticence the general perception was that the CLIL courses had gone well, and according to informal feedback, students had been more motivated than expected.

Most specifically, teachers perceived that they had been unable to include as much content as intended, as they had had to provide more time for language support, particularly with regard to written or oral tasks. The fact that teachers had small groups was, therefore, valued as a great advantage. Furthermore, teachers pointed out that students' attention span in CLIL classes was much shorter, requiring them to break down their lectures. These factors (time allocation and workload) had been hightlighted before the course but not all teachers had been convinced. Another significant and unexpected aspect of the classes was the mixture of language levels among students, which for some teachers instructed the way they managed tasks. Curiously, teachers who had been concerned with their own language level did not mention this factor after teaching their subject. As for the language of assessment, there had been no university guidelines so teachers were free to choose for themselves. Interestingly, although some assessment included an element in L1, teachers evaluated in English more than they had initially intended.

4. Conclusion

In sum, teachers evaluated the CLIL training course positively. They acknowledged the microteaching as by far the most useful course component as they could observe or experience different strategies and tasks firsthand, as well as receive constructive feedback from both trainers and peers. The sessions had provided a meeting place for CLIL teachers at the university where they were able to share concerns and experiences gained. In light of this fruitful exchange a working group has been created to 1) share and promote information on ICLHE training and good practices, 2) assess ICLHE–related problems and 3) to design cognitively and linguistically appropriate teaching resources.

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