Chapter 16

Literacy Development in L1 in Bilingual Education: Evidence From Research on CLIL in Primary School

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores literacy development in the mother tongue (L1) in bilingual education programs. To explore the impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on literacy development in L1, a large-scale study was conducted in a monolingual autonomous community (Castilla-La Mancha) located in central Spain. Scores obtained by CLIL and non-CLIL (n=4,231) learners aged 9-10 in a writing task and in a reading comprehension test were compared. Results showed CLIL was not detrimental for literacy development in L1, since no significant differences were detected between both groups in their overall proficiency in written production and reading comprehension. However, a differential achievement was observed depending on the type of instruction CLIL/non-CLIL in some areas. Significant differences were observed in favour of CLIL students in receptive vocabulary, expressive richness and spelling, whereas the non-CLIL group was ahead in critical reading, planning strategies, and use of text typologies.

INTRODUCTION

In a multilingual globalized interconnected world, language learning has become an imperative for work, and for academic, social and personal development of individuals. However, as Fernández Fontecha (2010) diagnosed, traditional methodologies for teaching languages have not been effective for training citizens capable of communicating in different contexts and with different objectives in a second language. Against this backdrop, bilingual education, consisting in the use of a second language in the
teaching of non-linguistic school subjects such as History, Mathematics or Natural Science, has burst onto the scene of second language acquisition (SLA) as a new “lever for change and success in language learning” (Pérez-Cañado & Ráez Padilla, 2015, p. 1) with potential “to restructure language learning methods” (Pérez-Cañado & Lancaster, 2017).

Bilingual education programs or Content-Based Instruction (CBI) provide instruction in school subjects in a second language (L2), as a way of increasing exposure to the target language within school hours. In addition, this approach arranges for a learning scenario that replicates the conditions in which the mother tongue is acquired, since language is learned while acquiring knowledge (Coyle, Marsh & Hood, 2010). Due to the fact that the focus is in the content rather than in the form, this approach contributes to lower the affective filter (Krashen, 1988), and helps learning be more meaningful, communicative and natural.

Under these premises, bilingual programs have rapidly gained in popularity in the last decades, particularly after the inception of immersion education programs in Canada. The success of this innovation for second language learning, widely confirmed by research, contributed to the rapid expansion of the approach which has been set up in a variety of second languages worldwide. For example, in North America bilingual programs have also been implemented under the rubrics “dual language immersion” or “two-way immersion”.

In Europe, in order to underpin language learning as a way to strengthen the bonds among countries of the European Union and promote integration, sense of identity, cohesion and mobility, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) was adopted under the acronym, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). David Marsh, a member of a team working in the area of multilingualism at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) was responsible for this denomination in 1994. Based on the experience of Canadian immersion and British LAC (Language across the Curriculum) programs, CLIL main rationale was “to provide a wide range of students with higher levels of competence” (Marsh, 2012, p. 1). The vocation of CLIL was to cover the variety of contexts and practice of bilingual education across the different countries of the European territory, and therefore it was conceived as an umbrella term defined as “any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content” (Marsh, 2002, p. 2). This way, the concept “additional language” includes second, foreign, minority, or heritage languages, among other denominations, while the open definition as “dual-focused” encompasses methodological approaches in the central spectrum of the classic continuum of content and language integration enunciated by Met (1998), between the most content-driven and the most language-driven versions of bilingual education, thereby being the concept of “integration”, the keystone of CLIL. In the last decades, the term CLIL has been widely used in Europe, and its popularity has extended beyond the European boundaries, particularly in Asia and South America.

The success of content-based bilingual approaches and their rapid proliferation have brought about a growing interest of researchers. Since the main rationale behind bilingual education provisions is to improve proficiency in second languages, the most prominent line of research in this field aims to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in terms of second language learning. Comparatively, other important facets of this educational approach have drawn much less attention, such as content assimilation, literacy development in the mother tongue and acquisition of cross-curricular skills, among other issues. This is particularly the case for research on CLIL programs, since, while in Canadian immersion extensive evaluations have been undertaken to ascertain the impact of bilingual education on the acquisition of the mother tongue and the contents conveyed in the second language, more research is needed to determine how CLIL influence the development of these aspects. Particularly, mother tongue development in CLIL