The State of Language and Content Instruction in Colombia

Estado del arte del aprendizaje de contenido e idiomas en Colombia

Jermaine S. McDougald
Colegio CIEDI
(Bogotá, Colombia)

Abstract

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is a teaching approach that is becoming increasing popular throughout Colombia. CLIL combines content and language teaching. Research indicates that language learning in a bilingual educational setting could be improved by very specific language teaching. This article describes the state of language and content in Colombia, the underlining principles and the future of CLIL in Colombia.
Key Words: CLIL; CBI; content-based teaching; content-based learning.

Resumen

CLIL es un enfoque pedagógico, la cual está volviendo más común en Colombia. CLIL combina contenidos y la enseñanza de idiomas. La investigación sobre el CLIL indica que el aprendizaje de un idioma en contextos de la educación bilingüe podría ser mejorado mediante la enseñanza especifica de idiomas. Este artículo pretende de describir el estado actual de la enseñanza de idiomas y contenido en Colombia, los principios que los subyace y el futuro de CLIL en Colombia.
Palabras Claves: CLIL; CBI; enseñanza por contenidos; aprendizaje por contenidos.

Introduction

Bilingual education, using a foreign language in addition to the students' mother tongue, non-language subjects i.e. science, math, and art in English, is becoming more popular as time progresses throughout Colombia. Buchholz, (2008) argues that being in contact with a foreign language when learning other contents other than the language itself can support the acquisition process; i.e. foreign language is used as a means of learning other subjects. There are dozens of forms of bilingual education programs that are covered under the umbrella term of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). The unprecedented spread of English throughout the world in recent years has resulted in its major role and high prestige in the academic, cultural, and political landscape of a growing number of countries (Crystal, 1995, 1997; Fishman, Cooper, & Conrad, 1977; McArthur, 1998, 2002 in Kaufman& Crandall, 2005).

Bilingualism is starting to take on a new role in Colombia. Schools and universities are not concerned with just learning English anymore, but are more concerned as to what students can do with the new language. Graddol (2005) states that English is no longer a foreign language, rather it is becoming more of a core skill very much like ICT skills, as it transforms and repositions the curriculum. This in turn has brought about change in the way in which English language researchers and professionals look at how English is taught.

In Colombia, bilingualism is closely related to "high quality" education, where parents look for better education and strongly desire to send their children to study abroad, thereby selecting bilingual schools. There are cases of additive bilingualism in which the acquisition and learning of a foreign language is useful for future opportunities. Nevertheless, there is also subtractive bilingualism which is often associated with submersion education where a minority language speaker has to "sink or swim" at school without any support (Mejia, 2002).

Recently, through the M.E.N.'s [1] Colombia Bilingual Project, English is now a part of the State Curriculum, in which the Common European Framework for Languages (CEF) is used as a source of reference. The new state language curriculum contains a comprehensive description of language proficiency along with associated assessment standards, so that there is transparency and consistency in English language teaching throughout Colombia.

Content and language integration is starting to become the established language teaching approach in Colombia. More increasingly, private schools and universities have been doing more with English and content, thereby demanding more in terms of professional development in order to better understand how content and language go together. As a response to this trend, a number of CLIL courses, both short & long, have been designed for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Current research in second language acquisition indicates that a critical element in effective English as a second language instruction is access to comprehensible input in English (Krashen & Biber, 1988). One way to provide comprehensible input directly to a student is by teaching content in English using strategies and techniques that make the content comprehensible to the second language learner.

Methodology

Role of English in bilingual education in Colombia

Overall, there are various approaches to how content and language are integrated, mainly because every institution has a different meaning of the concept of "bilingualism". There are programs that give preference to content learning, thereby making it the primary goal and learning language as the secondary goal. In many cases, there are no formal language learning objective(s), which in turn leaves it up to the teacher to decide on which teaching method to be used as well as the content related language to be focused on. This nevertheless creates a large diversity of CLIL teachers, due to the fact that they are using a variety of approaches in order to integrate content and language. Very few of these teachers modify or change their teaching methodology, which brings us to question the teaching-learning process when it comes to language learning and content. Marsh & Langé (2000) describes that in CLIL the learning of language and other subjects is mixed in one way or another. This means that in a CLIL class there are two main aims, one related to the subject, topic, or theme and one linked to the language, sometimes referring to CLIL as a dual-focused education.

Some of the issues surrounding the variation of CLIL teachers may be justified. To begin with, content teachers may be forced to comply with the curriculum and standards for the content class (Science, Math, Social Studies, etc.) It may also be due to language barriers, where teachers are caught up in trying to uncover the English language; this at times may slow the progress of the class resulting in the teacher getting behind in the content, because too much focus has been given to language (English). Yet another possibility may be that teachers feel as if the language

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[1] Ministerio de Educación Nacional (M.E.N.) de Colombia

portion may become a burden or an "extra obstacle" (Jarvinen, 2008). We can go even further and highlight the fact that the majority of content teachers are not language specialists, thereby leaving out important elements involved with Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, there are a very small amount of teachers in Colombia that have dual certification, specialized in both language and content or they work directly with language specialists in order to plan and organize their classes, which can include team teaching.

Underlying principles of CLIL

There is no doubt that learning a language and learning through a language is a concurrent process, nevertheless using the CLIL approach requires teachers and school administrators to rethink the traditional concepts of language teaching in Colombia. For those involved directly or indirectly with language teaching it is safe to say that *all teachers are language teachers*. This concept has to be instilled in their minds due to the ever so increasing list of advantages in cross-curricular bilingual teaching. Some of the benefits involved in using a CLIL approach can be seen in cultural awareness, internationalism, language competence preparing for both studying and the working life as well as increased motivation (Marsh, 2002).

Some of the underlying principles of CLIL when used in the classroom are; (1) language is used to learn as well as to communicate and (2) the subject matter determines the language needed to be learned. Marsh (2002) suggests the 4Cs Approach to an Integrated Curriculum (figure 1), displaying how these principles interact with each other.
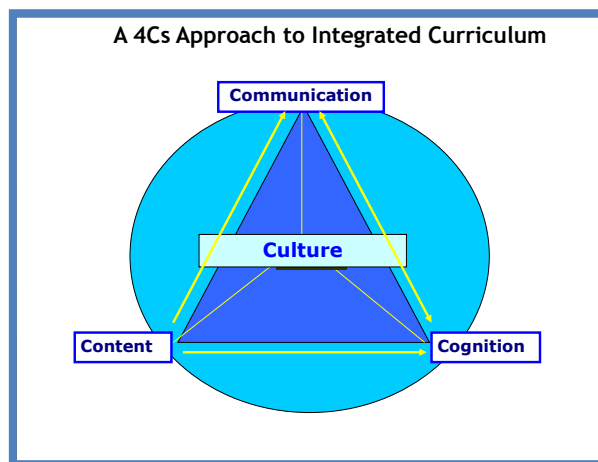

Figure 1. 4Cs Approach to integrated Curriculum

Content: Progression in knowledge, skills and understanding related to specific elements of a defined curriculum.
Communication: Using language to learn - while learning to use language.
Cognition: Developing thinking skills which link concept formation, understanding and language.
Culture: Exposure to alternative perspectives and shared understandings.

Current research in second language acquisition (SLA) indicates that a critical element in effective English as a second language instruction is access to comprehensible input in English (Krashen & Biber, 1988). One way to provide comprehensible input directly to the student is by

teaching content in English using strategies and techniques that make the content comprehensible to the second language learner.

Results

The future of CLIL in Colombia

The need for Colombians to understand and use English across the curriculum in a school environment is becoming more and more of a requirement as a result of globalization. The content that is managed within the field of bilingual education frequently presents problems for the students, due to the way in which the content of a given subject matter is taught, thereby making language learning more difficult for the students to fully comprehend, thereby leaving a large gap in the teaching-learning cycle. Equally this is frustrating to teachers who do not have the tools necessary when delivering a class using the CLIL approach. The days are gone where students "just become conversant in 'General English', but they should study their subject in English" (Graddol, 2005). Although CLIL varies as far as being described or implemented, it is an approach that can be easily adapted to current educational and bilingual programs in Colombia.

To conclude there needs to more research in terms of content and language integration using the CLIL approach in Colombia. Research could focus on the different stages of implementation taking into consideration the different educational levels. Increased in-service courses are feasible in order to re-train teachers on different teaching methods as well as different ways of working with content specific language in a CLIL environment. Establish opportunities for content specialist to know more about language learning and teaching in order to successfully promote the students' language skills. Although there is ample research surrounding CLIL in other educational contexts, more research needs to be done in Colombia so that ideal teaching practices are established.

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Biodata

Jermaine S. McDougald holds a Bachelor's Degree in Business Management from the University of Maryland, an M.A in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Leon University, a Specialist in University Teaching from Universidad del Bosque, and he is currently a candidate to the Post Graduate Program in Educational Management at the Universidad de La Sabana. He has experience in coordinating bilingual programs and language centers at university level and has directed English departments in schools. He has over 12 years experience in teaching and training. His areas of interest include ELT/CLIL curriculum design, Content-Based Instruction (CBI), ICT and standardized test design. He is currently the IB Diploma Program Coordinator at CIEDI - *Colegio Internacional de Educacion Integral* in Bogota and an ELT/CLIL consultant for Pearson Education.