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The role of different tasks in CLIL students' use of evaluative language



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ABSTRACT

Some consider CLIL to be a “particular pedagogic manifestation of the task-based approach” (Skehan 1998, 276). In this study we examine learners working on a range of naturalistic tasks following the rationales of CLIL social science subjects in three European contexts (Austria, Finland, Spain). The focus is on learners' use of interpersonal resources, especially the language of evaluation. Using an integrative analytical framework that draws on systemic functional appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005), Goffman's (1981) participation framework as well as educational-pragmatic notions of academic discourse functions (e.g. evaluating; Dalton-Puffer 2007, 2013), we analyze CLIL students' evaluative language across five ecologically viable task-types (whole-class discussions, group-work discussions, individual interviews, oral presentations and role-plays). Findings show clear differences in the frequency and distribution of different appraisal types between different tasks, with role-play and whole-class discussion forming the opposite ends of a continuum. The analysis puts particular emphasis on the resources for engagement because of its significance for expressing learners' epistemological stance on curricular content. In educational terms such resources are often framed in terms of higher order thinking skills or discourse functions like arguing, evaluating.

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1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content-based instruction (CBI) represent different approaches to second language teaching which have received wide attention from research but have seldom been explored in conjunction, even though both belong to the field of second language learning research. The two models share their focus on meaning-making activities geared to achieving a non-linguistic outcome in the interest of enhancing second language development. However, in some bilingual education (or CBI) programs like European CLIL, because of the importance of content learning, an approach seems commendable that is less exclusively inspired by language acquisition models (as in TBLT) and takes a more general educational-linguistic perspective.

It is true that the rationale based on CLIL improving second language learning of school-level students has been very important as a trigger for the implementation of such educational programmes (European Commission, 1995, 2003).

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However, these motivations have been met with understandable misgivings by content-subject specialists fearing for the status and weight of their intrinsic learning goals in the enterprise (cf. Badertscher & Bieri, 2009). In order to solve this potential conflict, subsequent conceptualizations of CLIL have claimed it represents an integrated approach that incorporates a focus on both content and language. In these conceptualizations, learner-centredness and learner activation is frequently invoked, as in TBLT. In CLIL this type of pedagogical practice is viewed as a pathway to achieve the desired integration, as well as heightened cognitive engagement from which both subject and language learning are expected to profit (e.g. Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Marsh, 2013).

Despite the pervasive conceptualization of CLIL as a content and language *integrated* approach and the growing research on this construct, the realities of CLIL implementation clearly emphasize its content-side. Prototypical CLIL implementations (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Dalton-Puffer, Llinares, Lorenzo, & Nikula et al., 2014) show that CLIL lessons are taught by content-specialists, who are often non-native speakers of the CLIL language. Sometimes these teachers also possess qualifications for foreign language teaching but this is a requirement only in a few national education systems. At school level, CLIL lessons are timetabled as content-lessons which are guided by content learning goals and pedagogical traditions inscribed in the content-subject curricula. Furthermore, assessment and certainly high stakes testing in CLIL classes is driven by the content-subject. Likewise, the pedagogical tasks set in CLIL lessons are typical of the respective content-subject (history, science etc.), thereby incidentally foregrounding students' role as users rather than learners of the L2. Nevertheless, in a CLIL situation, students' participation in content subject-specific tasks will necessarily require them to use the L2 both for epistemic and social purposes, involving the use of linguistic and pragmatic resources to express both factual and interpersonal meanings, all of which is ultimately expected to enhance language learning. The empirical focus of this study will be on interpersonal meanings and, more specifically, the type of evaluative language used to express those meanings across a variety of tasks.

Since the reality of CLIL thus combines the rationales and practices of two pedagogies and their principles and traditions (that of language pedagogy and that of subject pedagogy) it seems a pertinent question to pursue how far this intertwining of pedagogical practices can be understood in terms of the notion of task as developed in TBLT. From this position (which is argued for in Section 2) and from the fact that the naturalistic context of subject lessons features several different types of tasks which the learners have to carry out, we derive the main objective addressed in this paper: to investigate whether in CLIL contexts different types of tasks trigger different interpersonal and evaluative meanings and how these relate to content and language integrated goals.

2. TBLT, CLIL and the notion of task

In this section, we elaborate on our rationale for exploring the interface between TBLT and CLIL. For this purpose, we need to discuss in detail the understanding(s) of task that underlie both educational approaches.

Let us start with the definition of task as developed in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Although the notion of task is not unequivocal in TBLT,¹ the following criteria outlined by Ellis (2003) are generally accepted as necessary (if not sufficient) for a classroom/learning activity to count as a task in the sense of TBLT:

- It has a clearly defined, non-linguistic outcome.
- It involves a primary focus on (pragmatic) meaning.
- It has some kind of 'gap' (information gap, reasoning gap, opinion gap, ...).
- The participants choose the linguistic resources needed to complete it. (Ellis, 2003)

Interestingly, tasks that fulfil all the above criteria happen naturally in CLIL classrooms, in other words, there seems to be no need to design them specifically as in EFL classrooms. However, the rationale behind these four criteria may be different in EFL and CLIL contexts and the identification of their specific nature in CLIL is key for the understanding of the opportunities these tasks offer for language and content engagement and learning, and also to help design similar tasks which might also work in EFL contexts.

Quite naturally for CLIL teachers, the primary desired outcome of tasks is that learners reach the curricular goals of the content-subject and these are by definition not linguistic but content-subject goals. Even though language is clearly implicated in subject learning as initiatives like Language Across the Curriculum (the study of language in non-language subjects) have repeatedly underscored, it continues to be extremely difficult to change the understanding and self-image of subject-teachers in a fundamental way. Therefore, it is important to understand the nature of tasks in CLIL classrooms in order to identify to what extent they also contribute to language use and learning while students are engaged in the expression and understanding of academic content.

With regard to the second criterion, it is obvious that tasks in CLIL represent a focus on meanings which are connected with the concepts, notions, facts and skills of the content-subject. In other words, meaning orientation is there automatically via the content curriculum and concrete non-linguistic outcomes are required *qua* specific content learning goals (e.g. "present arguments for why this is a breach of the contract of sale"). Within TBLT in foreign language classrooms focus on

¹ There is a sort-of-canon of TBLT tasks in TBLT research, much of which is done outside the classroom, while the notion of task in classroom settings has been less explored.

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