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Researching CLIL and TBLT interfaces

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ABSTRACT

The special issue is one of the first attempts at exploring research interfaces between the fields of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and language integrated learning (CLIL). In this commentary, I highlight several lessons learned from the research gathered in the eight articles that comprise the special issue, pointing at fruitful research directions that the contributors open up for the future.

1. Introduction

Language educators and researchers working with innovations in task-based language teaching (TBLT) and those advancing content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs share many interests. Both CLIL and TBLT are based on the tenet that language and meaning are inseparable, although in CLIL "meaning" is connected to content and subject-matter learning, whereas in TBLT "meaning" is associated with experiential and goal-oriented learning. In both TBLT and CLIL, teachers and students must interact and collaborate to do things with words in ways that maximize the learning of language while equally promoting the creation of "meaning." In other respects, the two fields are preoccupied by quite distinct issues. TBLT has traditionally maintained an emphasis on college-level language learners, whereas CLIL has most often been implemented with school-age children. CLIL programs have burgeoned most often in foreign language contexts, where teachers seek to make up for the input-rich environment that is lacking outside the classroom. TBLT programs, on the other hand, seem easier to imagine in second language contexts, where teachers and their students can work towards future but tangible needs and goals beyond the classroom. A preponderance of studies in CLIL are of a descriptive nature and get carried out inside intact classrooms, whereas most research into TBLT is of a more experimental nature and gets conducted in laboratories. In terms of educational effectiveness, TBLT stake holders put a premium on evidence of transfer of learning from pedagogic tasks to authentic tasks beyond the classroom, whereas CLIL stake holders expect researchers to generate evidence that the gains in language learning and content learning are balanced and never at the expense of each other.

The deep commonalities between CLIL and TBLT are as interesting as the clear differences. Thus, it is surprising that the interfaces between the two fields have been so rarely explored. This special issue is one of the first attempts at investigating the interaction between the two approaches. In this commentary, I offer some highlights on the lessons learned from the research gathered here and point at fruitful research directions that the contributors open up for the future.

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2. Blending CLIL and TBLT, crossing borders

One clear lesson to take home from this special issue is that the fields of TBLT and CLIL stand to benefit from more dialog and, ultimately, more research that combines their respective insights and strengths. Lyster offers an exemplary illustration of this optimal blend, along two different studies reported in the same article. He shows how connections between language and content learning in CLIL settings are strengthened by crossing borders (a) between content areas and (b) between target languages, respectively, all while infusing the instructional design with key principles of TBLT. In the first study, about the teaching of French gender marking, 5th-grade (10–11 years old) French immersion students crossed content area borders in a CLIL/immersion setting over 5 weeks of instruction that began with noticing activities in their language arts class, continued with awareness activities in their social studies class, and culminated with practice activities in their science class. In the second study, about the teaching of French derivational morphology, 2nd-grade (7–8 years old) French immersion students worked with their French and English teachers on the same storybooks, over four months alternating one chapter from the French edition and another from the English edition. They engaged in what Lyster terms"cross-lingual pedagogy," and which I will revisit in a later section.

Why do Lyster's two programmatic examples stand as optimal blends of CLIL? The straddling of learning objectives across language arts, social studies, science (in the first study) and the incorporation of literature in language teaching (in the second study) are quintessential CLIL. But many of the elements in the two instructional designs come from TLBT. I will draw my illustrations of this point from the second study reported by Lyster. Consistent with cognitive-interactionist rationales for TBLT, teachers engaged their students in noticing and awareness tasks that facilitated noticing (Schmidt, 1995), for example, by pointing out the use and meaning of *un-* in *unhappy* (during the English class) or *mal-* in *malheureux* (during the French class), or by highlighting and discussing the affixes seen in the same words (*hero* and *heroism* in the English class and *héros* and *héroisme* in the French class) when reading about the same central characters of the book, only alternating languages depending on the class. In agreement with skills acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2015), practice tasks were included to facilitate consolidation and proceduralization of learning, for example, via games requiring students to form other words by analogy with the same prefixes, to mime words so their peers could guess what action was being mimed, or to create new stories with new characters spinning off the ones in the readings. All these activities were created to be as close as possible to form-essential tasks (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993) that would make form-meaning connections —and not just forms or meanings— salient to learners. And in accordance to TBLT principles, a sense of accomplishment as demonstrated in a non-language final product was also important, in the case of this study, a bilingual class book portraying each student's contribution in French and English on facing pages.

The blending of TBLT and CLIL, as shown in Lyster's work, invites readers to ponder on the definition of task, a highly contested construct in TBLT that ranges from language elicitation tasks (as in Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993) to real-world target tasks (as in Long, 2005). It is clearly felt in the contributions in the special issue that the same full gamut of task definitions runs in CLIL as in TBLT. Many of the "tasks" implemented and investigated in CLIL contexts are ecological, classroom-grounded activities designed to learn subject-matter. Of this kind, in the special issue readers will encounter academic language-as-action tasks typically found in science classrooms, such as conducting and reporting on an experiment in chemistry and physics (Nikula), learning science through different formats like teacher-led whole-class discussion or group work discussion (Linares & Dalton-Puffer), or learning about DNA via a project scaffolded by the teacher (Van Gorp & Van den Branden). In the two studies by Lyster, on the other hand, readers will encounter other tasks that are strongly academic in flavor — in essence teacher-made tasks involving discussion and manipulation of texts and content for the learning of more contemplative subject-matters in, for example, the language arts or literature, occasionally modified to include a language learning element, either targeting metalinguistic reflection or communicative practice. Readers will also see in the special issue technology-mediated tasks implemented with multiple language and content learning objectives, such as teaching children to learn to think like an online game designer and helping them develop better vocabulary learning strategies (Butler) and encouraging adolescents to learn about human geography topics and about transcultural understanding and empathy (Juan-Garau & Jacob). At the end of the spectrum, the study of pedagogical blends of CLIL and TBLT can also be done via language elicitation with traditional spot-the-difference tasks (García Mayo & Lázaro Ibarrola). Finally, the distinction between tasks and tests is blurred when tasks are used to measure the outcomes of specific instructional tasks (Pérez Vidal & Roquet). Rather than insisting on achieving consensus on what defines a task, perhaps we should all agree that different understandings of tasks are legitimate if they are faithful to the educational context and/or are well suited to a given research purpose.

3. Process-oriented evaluations of instructional effectiveness

The special issue offers rich insights into the quality of the language used by teachers and students in CLIL programs, particularly during teacher–student and student–student interactions, both of which take up the largest part of instructional time. This focus can be described as a process-oriented evaluation of the affordances for language-and-content learning typically emerging in CLIL environments. The process-oriented evaluation can be done in qualitative and in quantitative terms, and both approaches are represented in the special issue.

A quantitative, process-oriented evaluation of CLIL effectiveness is offered by García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola, who examine differences in amount of negotiation for meaning on a spot-the-difference task between children at two ages (8 or 9