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Learning subject-specific content through ESP in a Geography teaching programme: An action research story in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

Pre-service teacher education courses on subjects such as Biology, Geography or Spanish may include ESP in their curricula. ESP can be taught with a view to reinforcing content and language integrated learning (CLIL). The purpose of this study is to understand how CLIL and ESP can complement each other. In an initial Geography teacher education programme in southern Argentina, a group of student-teachers felt unmotivated to learn English as a foreign language because they perceived their lack of subject matter knowledge in Geography as a higher priority. Instead, they demanded more Geography-related coursework. In this research setting, English language-learning motivation, authenticity and identity played a crucial role. Through action research, the group of student-teachers and their tutor examined and implemented practices during the course of one academic year. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire, diaries and interviews. Results show that the use of authentic materials, a focus on subject matter knowledge and language awareness-based activities had a positive impact on student-teachers' trajectories as future teachers and foreign language learners.

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1. Introduction

The global predominance of English has led to the inclusion of ESP courses at university level across the world (Aguilar, 2017; Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012; López & Puebla, 2014; López & Tello, 2008; Ochoa Alpala, 2015; Valenti & Galimberti, 2015; Wannagat, 2007; Yang, W., 2016a; Yang, W. & Gosling, 2014). Tertiary education institutions which offer pre-service teacher education courses on subjects such as Biology, Geography or Spanish have also included ESP in their curricula.

Following Ruiz Garrido and Fortanet-Gómez (2009, p. 179), ESP is "the term that has traditionally been used for the courses which aim at teaching the English language needed for specific situations, mainly related to academic or occupational contexts". Such contexts, the authors explain, shape the pedagogical approach underlying ESP as they imbue it with subject-specific content although content learning is not the primary aim. In this regard, ESP is centred on language, skills, discourse and genres of specific disciplines (e.g., Medical English), adopting a functional and instrumental perspective within a given higher education course (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

While the ESP literature has extensively examined strategies for improving English language learning and teaching (e.g., Harding, 2007; Paltridge & Starfield, 2013) through specific courses and materials based on careful needs analysis (e.g., Basturkmen, 2010), less attention has been paid to the role and impact of subject matter learning through ESP courses.

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Furthermore, little work has been conducted in tertiary teacher education institutions which provide ESP courses to student-teachers who negatively assess their pre-service subject-knowledge.

This study therefore seeks to understand how an ESP course can contribute to student-teachers' subject-specific knowledge in a teacher learning environment where the need to integrate content and language learning, English language-learning motivation and identity play a crucial role among a group of future teachers of Geography. In addition, this study attempts to respond to Ushioda's (2016) recent call for practitioner research on motivation by adopting action research (AR) as the preferred approach for investigation. Ushioda (2013, 2016) noted that motivation in language teaching and learning should be approached from a relational and in-context perspective which examines learners as individuals. Such a position, the author observed, can be achieved by investigating specific classroom settings and events, and therefore teachers are in an advantageous position as they are insiders and have access to learners over long periods of time.

This paper discusses the following key concepts: firstly, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), motivation, authenticity and identity are examined in relation to learning subject matter content in ESP. Secondly, the research context and action research methodology are presented, followed by the analysis of the data collected through each of the cycles which constituted this study. Finally, a CLIL-ESP model is suggested for pre-service teacher education programmes in other contexts where ESP courses can become a vehicle for content learning.

2. Theoretical background

A succinct explanation of some terms used in this paper is required. However, it exceeds the scope of this article to offer a thorough discussion of these.

CLIL, which has its roots in Europe, has been defined as a dual-focused approach through which integration is sought between teaching language and teaching content (Dalton-Puffer, 2011) and can be found across all educational levels including higher education (Fortanet-Gómez, 2013; Taillefer, 2013). In W. Yang's (2016b, p. 45) words: "[W]hat differentiates ESP from CLIL is that the latter has dual focuses, i.e. both language and content, while the former places emphasis on providing learners with sufficient language skills to master content knowledge."

CLIL's dual focus has given rise to different models and practices placed on a continuum (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010) where the ends highlight content or language learning respectively; thus, terms such as *hard* and *soft CLIL* or *content-driven CLIL* and *language-driven CLIL* are used (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015). At the content end of the continuum, CLIL is defined as an educational approach in which a non-language subject is taught through the medium of a language other than that of mainstream education (Cenoz, 2013; Dalton-Puffer & Nikula, 2014; Ioannou Georgiou, 2012). At the language end of the continuum, CLIL is conceived as a language-learning approach through which language learning is enhanced by drawing on subject-specific content for its contextualisation, meaningfulness and use (Coyle et al., 2010; Ikeda, 2013; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2013). Some authors (Ball et al., 2015) object to the notion of CLIL as a language-learning approach because it presents CLIL as too wide an umbrella term which confuses the teaching of content through another language with content-based language teaching (Cammarata, 2016). However, in Latin America the literature offers examples of CLIL which represent both ends of the continuum (Banegas, 2015; Cendoya & Di Bin, 2010; Ramos, Forte, & Bacci, 2016).

Since its inception, CLIL has been researched in relation to various phenomena (Pérez-Cañado, 2016), one of these being the relationship between motivation, a central construct in this study, and CLIL. According to Ushioda (2014, p. 31), "[m]otivation is widely recognised as a variable of importance in human learning, reflected in goals and directions pursued, levels of effort invested, depth of engagement, and degree of persistence in learning." Because persistence and motivation sustainability fluctuate over time, Dörnyei, Muir, and Ibrahim (2014) have put forward the notion of directed motivational current, which "can be described as an intense motivational drive which is capable of both stimulating and supporting long-term behaviour, such as learning a foreign/second language (L2)" (p. 9). This definition underlines the dynamic nature of motivation and the forces which operate to increase or reduce motivation in time. Motivation to learn a language in higher education can increase or decrease over time (Busse & Walter, 2013), and may be linked to learners' interests and goals, which may go beyond learning a language for its own sake and be associated with other interests connected to the specific degree they pursue in higher education.

It has been suggested that CLIL acts as a driver for learners to enhance and sustain their motivation to learn (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2017; Lorenzo, 2014). Sylvén (2017) observes that motivation "as a multifaceted and complex phenomenon" (p. 52) is affected by different factors in a CLIL environment. One central factor, Sylvén explains, is the sense of relevance that students find in the content through which language is learned. Learners may be motivated to learn content which derives from the school curriculum and may be related to their experiences. For the context of this study, it may be worth outlining how language-learning motivation interacts with teacher motivation, or the motivation of teachers-to-be, particularly when they are about to finish their teaching course. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) indicate that one factor which may influence teacher motivation is that of intrinsic motivation, or autonomous motivation emerging from the educational process itself, or the subject matter, and teacher efficacy. Within the CLIL spectrum, future teachers can be motivated to learn a language because the subject matter through which it is learned is authentic and inherent to their specialisation. Authenticity and CLIL are briefly discussed below.

Authenticity is a complex and evolving concept in English language education. Pinner (2014, 2016), based on the multiple and often overlapping definitions provided in Gilmore (2007), developed an authenticity continuum to cater for the different dimensions entailed by authenticity. These dimensions include the real (outside the classroom), the classroom, the

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