A CLIL experience based on the use of tasks and different genre types

Experimentar el CLIL con el uso de tareas y distintos géneros

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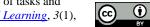(Buenos Aires, Argentina)

Abstract

Teaching English in the 21st century poses the challenge of facing and adapting to the new status of the English language as a lingua franca. Accordingly, its teaching methodology and didactics have changed too. It is in this context that a new methodology Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has appeared. This paper aims to point out what the core features of CLIL methodology are and how task-based and genre-based pedagogies can complement it. It then presents the analysis of a classroom experience in order to show how problem solving tasks can help enhance CLIL contexts so that students can develop their linguistic competence as well as their content knowledge in English by means of reading, interpreting, and producing texts of different genre types.

Key Words: content; language-tasks; text types; genre-based pedagogy; CLIL.

Resumen

La enseñanza de la lengua inglesa en el siglo veintiuno plantea el desafío de enfrentar la nueva situación de este idioma como lengua franca. En consecuencia, la metodología y la didáctica de su enseñanza han cambiado. Es, en este contexto, que ha surgido una nueva metodología de Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (CLIL, por sus siglas en inglés). Este ensayo pretende mostrar cuáles son las características centrales de la metodología CLIL y cómo las pedagogías basadas en tareas y en géneros pueden complementarla. A continuación se presenta el análisis de una experiencia en el salón de clase para demostrar cómo la implementación de tareas de resolución de problemas puede ayudar en el mejoramiento de los contextos de CLIL de manera tal que los estudiantes puedan desarrollar su propia competencia lingüística y, a su vez, su propio conocimiento de contenidos en inglés a través de la lectura, la interpretación y la producción de textos de distintos tipos de géneros.

Palabras Claves: contenido; tareas; tipos de texto; pedagogía basada en géneros; AICLE.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the change in the status of English as a lingua franca, English teaching methodology and didactics have had to adapt to the change. In a globalized and integrated world, the integration of learning as w ell as the view of language as a tool for communication seems to be of utmost importance. As a result, a new and innovative educational approach has emerged: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In it, an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of content and language. Its most significant feature is integration, which has a dual focus: language is learnt in content classes such as math and science, and the content drawn from these subjects is used in language learning classes.

Peeter Mehisto, David Marsh, and Marìa Jesus Frigols (2008) point out that the natural way children learn their mother tongue can be used to learn a second language. In other words, an educational approach should provide rich input and opportunities for rich intake and output. Other features mentioned by these authors are:

- multiple focus so as to support language and learning
- subject matter providing the context for language learning
- a safe and enriching learning environment in which language is used and produced to achieve a communicative purpose
- reflection as a routine activity
- use of authentic materials
- students as active participants of their learning process
- scaffolding of new knowledge on the basis of existing knowledge, skills, interests and experience.

A quick look at the core features described shows that in a CLIL approach the focus is on meaning rather than on form, and on fluency rather than on accuracy. A more careful reading poses the question related to the way by means of which teachers can provide a safe and enriching learning environment characterized by rich input and prodigious output.

OTHER APPROACHES THAT ENHANCE CLIL CONTEXTS

Task-based pedagogy

A task-based pedagogy offers an answer t o t he question posed. Tasks have been de fined by various authors and with a certain degree of variation. According to Ellis (2003), a task "is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed" (p. 16). Ellis also states meaning is primary and while performing tasks students use their own linguistic resources. A task´s ultimate goal is to promote language use which resembles the way language is used in the real world. Finally, a task engages any or all the macroskills as well as various cognitive processes.

Thus, from a pedagogical perspective it is possible to say that by means of tasks learners use the language to achieve goals, that is to say, language is a means to an end. By engaging in meaningful activities, the learner's interlanguage is stretched and encouraged to develop. When students are engaged in a task, they learn the language by using it and at the same time use the language to learn it. In this respect, Vand den Branden (2006) states that:

> By understanding language input and by producing language output i.e. by interacting with other people in real-life situations through the use of language, the goals that the learner has in mind can be (better) achieved. Defining the language learning goals of a curriculum/syllabus, then, is basically a matter of describing the tasks the language learner needs to be able to perform and of describing the kind of language use that the performance of these tasks necessitates (p. 4).

Genre-based pedagogy

Genre pedagogies promise substantial benefits for learners as they group language, content and contexts and at the same time offer teachers a way of presenting students with explicit and thorough explanations of the way texts are designed to communicate. This is so because of the defining characteristics of genres. According to Swales (1990) a genre is a dynamic social practice susceptible of change. He states that the receivers' expectations and their schematic structure of a genre are as important as or even more important than accuracy or form as these do not necessarily lead to effective communication. Swales refers to genres as the products of social structures that generate them; in other words, texts are the final product of social interactions realized by genres.

Some of the advantages of genre pedagogy Hyland (2004) enumerates are that it clarifies what is to be learnt and facilitates the acquisition of, for example, writing skills. It supports teachers' interventions when they scaffold students' learning as well. This pedagogy also increases teachers' awareness of texts which results in more confident guidance when teaching the genres students are exposed to. Finally, perhaps the most important feature is that genre-based instruction offers students meaningful insight into the way target texts are structured and the reason for that organization

A genre-based approach is considered appropriate in a CLIL lesson due to the fact that students are exposed to different genres and text types deriving from different fields of knowledge: social sciences, natural sciences, and language arts, among others. Accordingly, the pedagogical practices that take place in the classroom should focus on tasks that enable learners to analyze the different levels of a text, its micro and macrostructure, the analysis of recurring features, and the comparison of similarities and differences among genres. This work is what enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness and what helps them be able to read, interpret, and produce texts of different genre types.

Successful teaching practices to promote integration

Stroller (2002) describes sound teaching practices that can promote the integration of language and content. One of them is the use of task-based activities and project work as they successfully engage students when tasks are combined with collaboration skills. Another practice described is the natural integration of skills: students read to write or they conduct a survey to show results in graphic representations.

Stroller also stresses the importance of visual support, extended input and meaningful output which includes synthesis activities. Visual support is particularly effective when used to introduce thematic units, to facilitate students´ access to dense texts and to guide them in seeing

a text's macrostructure and discourse organization. In regard to input, it should be extended and sustained so as to culminate in meaningful output in which students synthesize information which de rives from multiple sources. In doing so, learners show their content and linguistic knowledge both in written and spoken formats.

The use of the practices described by Stroller creates a favorable context which invites learners to actively participate and promotes the natural learning process. This kind of context together with suitable teacher's intervention will encourage learners not only to develop linguistic competence, but also to gain content knowledge from the field the input introduced derives. The following teaching sequence exemplifies the theoretical principles presented in the previous sections.

TEACHING SEQUENCE

The teaching sequence accounts for the succession of tasks that was presented to a group of eight-year-old students from third class of a bilingual parochial primary school from the city of La Plata, Buenos Aires, Argentina during the year 2009. The class was composed of twenty middle-class girls who had English classes every day of the week. The main objectives of the whole sequence were:

- to integrate content, language, and learning skills
- to expose students to authentic learning material and to genuine contexts of language use
- to build on students' existing knowledge, skills, interests, and experience
- to expose students to different genres and text types around the same topic
- to foster recognition of different genres and t heir discourse organization as well as their specific vocabulary
- to integrate diverse semiotic systems in a single text
- to help students develop metalinguistic awareness and critical thinking.

The complete sequence followed a task-based methodology and was developed in eight language arts and science lessons of 50 minutes each and was structured in three stages which featured the use of three different genres on the same topic: an expository text, a narrative, and a poem.

In the first stage of the sequence, students worked with short expository texts around the topic of plants (parts, functions, cycle, and seasons) as a subtopic deriving from a larger generative topic: Changes in Nature.

Throughout this stage, children were asked to perform a variety of tasks, deriving from the expository texts included in their science book, such as reading texts with specific aims, joining images with texts, ordering items, transferring information from one semiotic system to another as in the diagram showing the plant cycle. As Anstey and Bull (2006) state students make meaning of a text by understanding and interpreting the text's set of signs or symbols, which are called semiotic systems (linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural and spatial). Because texts are increasingly multimodal, a lite rate person must have mastery of all five semiotic systems and understand how they work together to convey meaning (Anstey & Bull, 2006, p. 26). Towards the end of this stage, students were assigned a productive hands-on task: designing informational posters and leaflets for the school to show the plant cycle.

The second stage of the sequence involved the same topic but using a different genre: a narrative by Eric Carl, "The Tiny Seed." The detailed analysis of the title and the colourful, collage pictures of the story acted as a trigger to help students develop prediction strategies to

speculate about the plot of the story, to recycle or learn new vocabulary related to the topic, and to activate previous knowledge and cognitive schemes related to the narrative structure. The exploitation of pictures allowed the teacher to analyse the story of the life cycle of a flower in terms o f a tin y seed that travels with the wind, survives perils, germinates and g rows in to a flower, producing more tiny seeds.

The analysis of paratextual features was followed by the interactive reading of the book during which, both the child and adult were active participants in the construction of a dialogue surrounding the storybook. This dialogue might focus on the storyline, such as characters, events, or settings, experiences the child has had that are similar to those contained in the book, or specific words, aspects of print, or concepts that are novel to the child (Justice & Pence, 2005, p. 1).

One of the fundamental aspects of interactive reading is the intention of the adult reader, in this case the foreign language teacher, to structure the reading experience to expand and scaffold children's skills to propel children forward on their path of learning. This assistance provided by the adult to the child helps him perform at a higher level than what he can achieve on his own, which is referred to as scaffolding The interactions that were present during the interactive reading sessions allowed students to set the pace of reading, to pause to look at pictures, to talk about words related to them, to exploit topics of interest even when this means to deviate from the text so as to relate the story to the student's own experience, to facilitate the acquisition of expressive and receptive vocabulary, and to create a sense of familiarity that fosters learning of new concepts and skills.

Once the tasks that deal with the story itself, such as ordering events, identifying changes according to the season, playing memory and movement games were performed, students were asked to summarize the story by using pictures as a follow up task. This kind of activity allowed children to integrate different semiotic systems (linguistic and visual) in a single text.

The following class, the teacher exposed students to a new genre: a poem by Amy Goldman Koss called, "How does a seed know which way is up?" The richness of the poem and its title allowed the teacher to design tasks around linguistic and poetic elements such as specific vocabulary, imagery, personification, rhyme, and rhythm.

As a follow-up task, students were asked to compare the two texts in regards to their macro-and microstructures using their contributions from the previous task. Students were also asked to compare and find similarities and differences regarding paragraph organization, vocabulary, and length of sentences.

In the last class, students were shown pictures that told the story of a new flower: "The White Daisy." As a first step, children were asked to describe the pictures in order to recycle specific vocabulary and specific content knowledge, to deal with the notions of setting and characters, and to see in which way this story relates to the story and poem previously dealt with. This stage prepared students both linguistically and cognitively for the final and more demanding stage: writing the story of the white daisy.

As a second task, students were given the first paragraph of the story so that they could be able to identify its role within the macrostructure and have the necessary tools for the last task. Even though this final activity may seem demanding linguistically and cognitively, students were able to solve it because they had already been exposed to the micro-and macrostructure of the narrative and they had been involved in the analysis of the functions and features of the genre. Students' productions showed many linguistic features of this genre such as formulaic opening, use of specific vocabulary, and sequence markers.

CONCLUSION

The need to integrate learning as well as language as a tool of communication is of great importance in today's world. CLIL has emerged as an educational approach to satisfy this need. An analysis of its c ore features shows that this approach shares some principles with other methodologies such as task-based and genre-based. Awareness of this close relationship among them is of great significance since the use of problem solving tasks together with a genre-based pedagogy offer teachers a path to create fruitful environments for the teaching-learning process to occur, an environment in which learners can improve their linguistic competence and their content knowledge in English. They can also raise consciousness of how different genre types channel and organize information for it to be successfully communicated which, if the appropriate practices are implemented, will result in improved reading, interpretation, and production skills.

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