Colombian teachers' questions about CLIL: What can teachers' questions tell us? (Part II)

Preguntas de docentes colombianos sobre AICLE: ¿Qué implicaciones tienen las preguntas de los profesores? (Parte II)

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Abstract

The second part of this two-part paper starts with a review of the literature on teachers' questions, going back 100 years, and finds an almost exclusive focus on teachers asking students questions in classrooms. To address this apparent oversight on the other kinds of questions teachers ask, for example to each other and to themselves, Colombian teachers were asked to write their questions about CLIL, at a workshop which was part of a new MA TESOL program. A total of 85 questions were written by approximately 80 language state school teachers from all over Colombia, 69 of which related to CLIL. These questions were divided into three groups or sets: CLIL in the Colombian Context; The Implementation of CLIL; and Fundamental Concepts of CLIL. These questions and these three categories are analyzed to see what developers of teacher development and CLIL training programs in Colombia can learn from such questions, and how they can inform the design of such programs.
Key Words: CLIL; Colombia; teacher questions.

Resumen

Este artículo consta de dos partes. La comienza con una revisión de literatura sobre preguntas de los profesores, que se remonta 100 años atrás y descubre un enfoque casi exclusivo que consiste en que los docentes formulan preguntas de los estudiantes en el aula. Para compensar este aparente descuido de los otros tipos de preguntas que hacen los profesores, por ejemplo entre ellos y a sí mismos, los docentes colombianos fueron invitados a escribir sus preguntas sobre AICLE, en un taller que formó parte de un nuevo programa de Maestría en la enseñanza de inglés. Un total de 85 preguntas fueron escritas por unos 80 docentes de los colegios oficiales de idiomas de todo Estado de Colombia, 69 de ellas relacionadas con AICLE. Estas preguntas se dividieron en tres grupos o conjuntos: AICLE en el contexto colombiano, la implementación de AICLE, y Conceptos Fundamentales de AICLE. Estas preguntas y estas tres categorías se analizan para ver lo que los desarrolladores de programas de desarrollo profesional y capacitación para AICLE en Colombia pueden aprender de dichas preguntas, y cómo pueden informar el diseño de dichos programas.
Palabras Claves: AICLE; Colombia; preguntas de los profesores.

TEACHERS' QUESTIONS

The importance of questions in education has been established for at least 100 years by now. For example, more than 40 years ago, in 1970, Meredith Gall opened her chapter on the *Use of Questions in Teaching* by stating: "It is a truism for educators that questions play an important role in teaching" (p. 707). Gall goes back another ten years, when Aschner (1961) "called the teacher 'a professional question-maker' and claimed that the asking of questions is "one of the basic ways by which the teachers stimulates students thinking and learning" (p. 707). Gall also goes back a full century, to Steven's 1912 work, who according to Gall "estimated that four-fifths of school time was occupied with question-and-answer recitations" (p. 707), which provides a brief but important insight into some of the changes that have taken place in education over the last 100 years.

However, the focus on questions in Gall's work, and the work of those she refers to, is on teachers asking questions to students in classrooms, and how those questions facilitate or impede teaching and learning. For example, in another early study, Davis and Tinsley (1967) looked at "Cognitive objectives revealed by

classroom questions asked by social science teachers". Davis and Tinsley also begin their paper by emphasizing the long period of time during which teachers' questions have been researched, in this case, within a particular disciplinary area: "Questions posed in the social studies classroom for over half a century have been recognized as emphasizing memory as the most important cognitive operation (e.g. Adams, 1964; Barr, 1929; Steven 1912)" (p. 21).

More recently, though still nearly 30 years ago by now, Russell (1983) reported that: "Teaching commonly involves asking questions, in sequences that enable a teacher to control the direction and duration of subject-matter discussion, while also maintaining attention and order" (p. 27). Russell's paper shows how the focus on teachers questions asked to students has persisted over many decades of educational research. In relation to teachers' questions types, Russell focuses on the form-function distinction: "The form of questions and their role as a means of instruction have received more study and discussion than the function of questions and their role in achieving particular ends of instruction" (p. 27). Russell may well have been right about teachers questions at that time, however, another area that has received much less attention is the questions teachers ask that are not directed at students, and that are not part of classroom management, assessment of student learning (for example, see Shake & Allington, 1983).

This emphasis on teachers asking questions and students giving answers in in-class interaction has also been prevalent and predominant in the field of language education, both first (see French & MacLure, 1981) and second. For example, in an article in *TESOL Quarterly*, Cynthia Brock (1986) reported on her investigation of ESL teachers' use of referential questions: "In their examination of ESL teachers' questions in the classroom, Long and Sato (1983) found that teachers ask significantly more display questions, which request information already known by the questioner, than referential questions" (p. 47). Again, we can see a focus on teachers' questions types, with another two-part distinction, in this case, display versus referential.

So many changes and pedagogical developments in teaching and learning in education in general—and in language education in particular—have occurred in recent decades. However, in spite of all that, the focus on the types and purposes of questions asked by teachers appears to have remained largely unchanged. For example, in a more recent chapter on "The purpose of language teachers'

questions", Nunn (2009) presents a "three-level analysis of classroom discourse as a means of examining in detail the implications of characterizing language teachers' questions as 'display' questions" (p. 23). Nunn challenges the assumptions and makes a number of important points regarding the negative characterization of "purposeless questions". However, like so many researchers before him, Nunn pays little if any attention to the questions teachers ask that are not asked to students in class, and that are not related to the management of in-class teaching and learning, including assessment of student achievement (for example, see Ladd & Anderson, 1970).

Nunn's work on "purposeless questions" was recently followed up by Shin-Mei Kao and Gary Carkin, whose 2012 article is entitled "Don't ask fake questions". According to Kao and Carkin: "Asking questions is a primary method for EFL teachers to maintain control over classroom discourse, carry out their instructional materials, check students' understanding level, and create interaction with the class" (p. 1). Kao and Carkin raise many important points regarding EFL teachers' uses of different types of question. However, the fact that their article appeared in the August 2012 newsletter of the Speech, Pronunciation and Listening Interest Section of the TESOL Association's *As We Speak: SPLIS Newsletter* shows that this focus on the types of questions teachers ask students in class is still the focus—and the unquestioned assumption—of the research in this area.

There are a number of possible reasons for this 100-year focus on the kinds of questions teachers ask. One possibility is that the shift from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness, which has been reported for at least 60 years by now (for example, Flanders, 1951), has still not yet permeated all aspects of teaching and learning, as with some other areas of research in the field. Another possible reason for this apparent oversight could be an assumption that teachers mainly or only ask questions in class ask and/or only ask questions to students. In that case, teachers would ask few if any questions to themselves, to other teachers, or to any other party, which seems unlikely.

Compared to the century of reports on teachers' in-class questions to students, an awareness of the potential importance of other kinds of teacher' questions is relatively recent. Much of this has occurred within the area of *reflective practice*. For example, in the area of nursing education, Jarvis (1992) noted that: "the good reflective practitioners can also ask questions of themselves"

(p. 174). A review of the literature on reflective practice is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is worth noting that the journal *Reflective Practice* is relatively new, as it was launched in 2000. Within that journal, a recent example of the use of teachers' questions to themselves is given by Parr (2011), whose article focuses on the use of "reflexive questions to love (and cautionary ethics to live by)" (pp. 803-815, parentheses added).

Given this extremely firm and long-lasting focus on teachers' questions to students in classes, it is important to address the apparent oversight regarding teachers' other kinds of questions. This includes the kinds of questions they ask themselves, and the kinds of questions they ask each other, which was the impetus for these two papers in this journal.

TEACHERS ASKING TEACHERS QUESTIONS

Part I of this paper was presented in the previous issue of this journal, 5(1), published in April 2012 and titled "Colombian teachers' questions about CLIL: Hearing their voices – in spite of "the mess" (Part I)". As the author explained in Part I: "In September 2011, the first residential session of a new Master's program in ELT for Self-Directed Learning was held on the campus of the University of La Sabana" (Curtis, 2012, p.3) which was attended by approximately 80 language teachers from all over Colombia. During the four-day residential: "One of the 90-minute core lectures, presented by the author, was on Content and Language Integrated Learning" (p. 3) at the start of which the course participants: "were asked by the author to give a brief, written reply to the question: *Regarding CLIL, what do you want to learn or learn more about, be able to do or be able to do better at the end of this session?*" (p. 3). This question generated "a total of 65 written responses, equal to a response rate of slightly more than 80%. Also, although most of the respondents wrote a single question, some wrote up to three questions, which produced a total of 85 questions and comments, 69 of which related to CLIL, and 16 of which did not" (p. 4). The 69 questions were divided into three groups or sets:[1]

- CLIL in the Colombian Context.
- The Implementation of CLIL

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[1] There was also a set of questions that did not ask about CLIL.

- Fundamental Concepts of CLIL

Some questions could have appeared in more than one set, and if the aim of this paper was to focus on questions types, those questions that could have appeared in more than group would have been counted two or three times. However, as the exact number of questions in each set was not the main concern, and for the sake of simplicity, each question was counted once only. Related to classification, the questions could have been grouped differently, but the aim of this paper was to look at broad areas of CLIL concerns in Colombia, using the questions as indicators of where those concerns lie, and how much concern there is within those broad areas. Therefore, the exact size of the question groups and the precise labels for the groups was not a key concern.

CLIL IN THE COLOMBIAN CONTEXT

The largest set of questions, making up 26 of the 69, and which were asked by 25 of the 65 respondents (approximately 37.7% and 38.5% respectively), came under the category of *CLIL in the Colombian Context*. This was to be expected, as teachers are most familiar with their own teaching and learning context, so it is logical that their questions focus on their context. However, there was a range of different types of question about CLIL in Colombia. For example: "Can Colombia become a bilingual country if people don't need English language in their work environment?". Although that question asks about the Colombian context, it is also an example of one of the 16 that did not ask directly about CLIL. A similar contextual question, and another example of questions not directly related to CLIL in Colombia, was: "Isn't the 'bilingual plan' too ambitious for our reality?".

Therefore, these two questions are presented here as examples of some of the more "global" concerns expressed by some teachers, but they were not included in the counts of CLIL questions. Other examples of questions that did not ask about CLIL included: "How can we profit from students' addiction to technology (mobile phones) in language learning?", "Is English the only close language Colombia will use as a second language?", and "How do I improve my speaking skill?".

Examples of questions that did ask about CLIL in Colombia included: "What would some requisites be to implement a CLIL approach in a country like Colombia?" and "How can we apply CLIL in a public school?". With the latter

kind of question, it was assumed that the question is asking about public schools *in Colombia* as an implied or a given part of the question. Similarly, when a teacher asked, "How can teachers build the bridge to connect CLIL with everyday teaching practice in a specific context?", it was assumed that that context being referred to is Colombia. A number of questions asked about CLIL in Colombian public schools, for example: "How to implement a CLIL approach in a public school with limited resources, with the lack of responsibility of students for their own learning and the lack of collaborative work other colleagues?" (counted as a single question).

A similar context-based question was: "How can I deal with the weaknesses of this approach that are a lot in my school context?". As these questions were written anonymously, to encourage the respondents to express their concerns as openly and as honestly as possible, one of the weaknesses of this approach is that follow-up clarification questions could not be asked to the individual teacher. With this question that would have been useful, as it is not entirely clear whether the respondent is claiming that there are a lot of weaknesses with CLIL, within that particular school context, or both.

However, these contextual questions indicate that there is a concern on the part of the teachers regarding the feasibility of CLIL within their own specific teaching and learning situations. Another question, related to group size, asked: "Is it possible to use this approach with large groups? In Colombia we are working with 40 or more students.". Therefore, when training teachers, in addition to focusing on the theory and practice of CLIL, the context in which that CLIL is going to occur should be an essential part of any CLIL training program.

The importance of context in relation to approach and methodology was recently highlighted by Yuko Goto Butler in her article on the implementation of communicative and task-based language teaching (CLT and TBLT, respectively) in the Asia-Pacific region (2011). Although Butler was researching different geographical and pedagogical areas, her findings are highly relevant to the contextual questions above, as she identified three sets of context-related reasons for why CLT and TBLT have not succeeded in the Asia-Pacific region to the same extent as they have elsewhere. Drawing on earlier work, Butler concluded: "Prabhu (1990) stated more than 20 years ago that there seems to be no single golden method that works well for everybody regardless of context" (p. 51). Extrapolating from Prabhu's (1990) work, and concluding her own study, Butler goes on to note

that: "Similarly, for a specific context there is no single method that works best all the time" (p. 51). Therefore, context is the key.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CLIL

The second largest set of questions, making up 24 of the 69, which were asked by 23 of the 65 respondents (approximately 34.8% and 35.4% respectively), came under the category of *How to Implement CLIL*, with 16 of the questions in this category starting with "How". Examples include: "How can we take the CLIL approach into our classes?", "How to apply CLIL in a class environment?", and "How can CLIL be implemented in the classroom?". (Three questions from three different respondents.) A number of questions in this set referred explicitly to "integration". For example: "How can teachers integrate CLIL approaches in their classes?", "How can I integrate content and language learning?", and "How can I integrate listening into this new method?". These question shows that concerns regarding implementation were both at the more general level, and at the more specific level, such as using CLIL to develop a particular language modality.

Some of the questions in this how-to implementation category were more teacher-focused and some were more student-focused, for example: "How can we as teachers begin to use CLIL?" compared with "How can CLIL be useful/helpful to students who don't manage the second language efficiently?". An example of a question that could have been categorized as a context-based question was: "How can we implement CLIL methodology as an interdisciplinary project if other teachers in school don't speak English or don't know anything about English?". However, this question was classified as a how-to implementation type of question, partly because of the way in which it was worded, and because of where the focus of the question appeared to be. A number of questions in this implementation category asked specifically about CLIL in terms of curricula and syllabi, for example: "How to create a syllabus according to learners' needs?" and "How to develop a curriculum using a CLIL approach?".

An essential aspect of any teaching methodology or approach involves the materials, tasks and activities used to teach and learn the target language, and a number of questions asked about task-based language teaching (TBLT) in relation to CLIL. For example: "To what extent and how is CLIL related to task-based teaching and learning?", "How to plan tasks based on CLIL in order to improve

students' learning of English?", and "What are good tasks to develop with CLIL?" Not all of these questions focused on tasks and/or TBLT, for example: "What kinds of materials help us to integrate the contents and the language learning process?".

However, these questions highlight the important relationship between CLIL and TBLT, some of which were presented by Roger Gilabert, in April 2009 in Spain, to the International Round Table on CLIL Programs. Gilabert, in his presentation on "The Role of tasks in CLIL program development" defines a task as: "a differentiated goal-oriented process with a number of steps, which draws on a series of cognitive and communicative procedures that has a defined outcome" (Gilabert, 2009, p. 6). These kinds of CLIL-TBLT connections indicate that CLIL training programs, as well as focusing on implementation of the methodology, also need to look at how CLIL relates to other methodologies, as "there is no single method that works best all the time" (Prabhu, 1990, p. 51).

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF CLIL

The third set of questions, with 19 questions asked by 17 of the 65 respondents (approximately 27.5% and 26.1%, respectively), was categorized and grouped together under the heading of *Fundamental Concepts of CLIL*. An example of questions in this category, and an example of multiple questions being asked by the same respondent, is: "What is CLIL? How could I use it my teaching? What kind of outcomes are gotten with CLIL?". Other questions in this category included: "What is the philosophy/or principles behind this teaching approach?", "How can the word 'content' be defined?", and "What are the advantages and disadvantages of CLIL?". (Three questions from three different respondents.)

Some questions in this category show some familiarity with CLIL, for example: "What is the 4 C approach?", referring to the four-part model of "Cognition, Culture, Content and Communication" put forward by Coyle (2005, 2008). However, these questions show that a significant number of course participants still had questions about some of the most fundamental aspects of CLIL, in spite of context-specific CLIL initiatives, such as this journal, the *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, published since 2008. Therefore, if many Colombian teachers are still unaware of the CLIL work being carried out in their own context (see, for example, Restrepo Guzman, 2008;

Moreno Alemay, 2008; Corrales and Maloof, 2009; Otálora, 2009; McDougald, 2009, and others), it would be important to highlight such work in any CLIL training program in Colombia.

This lack of familiarity with such work may be the result of the heavy preparation, teaching, and marking workloads of teachers in Colombia, but over time, this familiarity should grow. Also, with new MA programs, such as the one reported in the previous issue of this journal (Curtis, 2012), greater awareness of the fundamental aspects of CLIL, especially CLIL in a Colombian context, should also grow.

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