

Colombian teachers' questions about CLIL: Hearing their voices – in spite of “the mess” (Part I)

Preguntas de docentes colombianos sobre AICLE: Escuchar sus voces – a pesar del “desorden” (Parte I)

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Abstract

This, the first part of a two-part paper, focuses on the importance of the voices of teachers in educational research, as they are key stakeholders in any educational endeavor and among the main agents of educational change. Therefore, even in the most learner-centered of approaches to teaching, it is essential to gather data from teachers. However, in examining the educational research from the 1990s to the present day, the focus appears to have shifted from teachers' voices to students' voices, which leaves an essential part of the picture missing. To address this absence, data was collected from language teachers on a new MA program jointly offered by a Colombian university and one in the United States, which is described in the second portion of the present article. The third portion of the present article introduces and explores the notion of 'messy data', and the final portion looks at the research on CLIL in Latin America in relation to teachers' voices.

Key Words: CLIL; Colombia; teachers' voices; messy data.

Resumen

Esta es la primera parte de un artículo de dos partes centrada en la importancia de las voces de los docentes en la investigación educativa, dado que estos son actores claves en cualquier labor educativa y son a la vez, agentes principales del cambio educativo. Por consiguiente, aún en los enfoques de enseñanza más centrados en el estudiante, es primordial poder recopilar datos por parte de los docentes. Sin embargo, al examinar la investigación educativa desarrollada a partir de la década de 1990 hasta la actualidad, la atención parece haber pasado de las voces de los docentes a las voces de los estudiantes, lo cual deja un gran vacío de información en el proceso. Para analizar esta situación, se obtuvieron datos de los docentes de idiomas en un nuevo programa de maestría ofrecido conjuntamente por una universidad colombiana y una de los Estados Unidos, cuyo análisis se describe en la segunda sección del presente artículo. La tercera sección del artículo presenta y explora la noción de "datos desordenados", y la sección final analiza la investigación sobre el AICLE en América Latina en relación a las voces de los docentes.

Palabras Claves: AICLE; aprendizaje integrado de contenidos y lengua; Colombia; voces de docentes; datos desordenados.

TEACHERS' VOICES: HEARING AND LOSING THEM

In the educational research of the 1990s, the sound of teachers' voices was heard loud and clear and was a regularly recurring theme of the research literature of that decade. For example, in 1992, Gitlin et al. published their book *Teachers' Voices for School Change: An Introduction to Educative Research*, which put the voices of teachers at the heart of educational research. A few years later, in 1995, Ann Burns and Sue Hood produced their edited report on *Teachers' Voices: Exploring Course Design in a Changing Curriculum*, published by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research at Macquarie University in Australia.

In 1994, Andy Hargreaves, who authored and co-authored some of the most-cited works in the 1990s on teachers' voices, presented a paper at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in New Orleans, USA entitled: "Dissonant Voices: Teachers and the Multiple Realities of Restructuring". However, although Hargreaves supported the idea of the importance of teachers' voices in the educational research, he also warned against what he believed to be the "romanticizing" of these voices. As he put it: "One cannot properly speak of the teacher's voice, only of teacher voices, and of voices that may vary for individual teachers, depending on time and place" (p.1). He went on to note that: "the teacher's voice ... has been made into a romantic singularity, favorably opposing it to and imposing it upon all other voices" (p.1).

In 1996, in an article entitled "Revisiting Voice", Hargreaves continued his criticism of the ways in which teachers' voices were positioned and articulated, arguing that, although "representing and sponsoring teachers' voices should remain an important research priority ... much of the literature in this area selects and portrays particular teacher voices as exemplary or generic voices" (p.12). Continuing with the "romantic" theme, Hargreaves concluded that: "The result has been that the teacher's voice has often been unduly romanticized" (p.12).

In spite of his own criticisms, in 1998, Hargreaves published *Changing Teachers, Changing Times: Teachers' Work and Culture in the Postmodern Age*, in which he appeared to vigorously support the importance of teachers' voices. He started by noting the conspicuous absence of teacher's voices: "In much of the writing on teaching and teachers' work, teacher's voices have either been curiously absent, or been used as mere echoes for preferred and presumed theories of educational researchers" (p.4). He continued by stating that: "Teachers' voices, though, have their own validity and assertiveness, which can and should lead to questioning, modification and abandonment wherever it is warranted" (p.4).

Also in the 1990s, the National Council of Teachers published a number of books in this area, specifically focused on English language teaching and learning, including *Global Voices: Culture and Identity in the Teaching of English* (Milner & Pope, 1994), *Under the Whole Language Umbrella: Many Cultures, Many Voices* (Flurkey & Meyer, 1994) and *Voices in English Language Classrooms: Honoring Diversity and Change* (Cooke & Lodge, 1995). These books also show a shifting of the focus from teachers' voices to those of the learners. This trend continued into the new millennium, an example of which is Maureen Barbieri's "*Change My Life Forever*": *Giving Voice to English Language Learners* (2002). The book is based on Barbieri's work in New York's Chinatown, where she worked with up to 1,400 middle school students, almost all of whom were from China.

The interest in teachers' voices continued into the early 2000s, as seen, for example, in Margaret Probyn's paper on the voices of teachers, reflecting on teaching and learning through the medium of English as an additional language in South Africa (2001). However, in 2003, Demulder and Rigsby reported that "few of the efforts to foster change in schools and

classrooms begin their analyses with the voices and experiences of teachers”. They therefore turned “to the voices and experiences of teachers to begin to explore the role of reflective practice in educational transformation” (2003, p. 267).

Moving in what appears to be a kind of equal and opposite direction to the decline in the number of studies on teacher voices has been this growing interest in students’ voices, including those in language classrooms, which has continued up to the present day. The most recent book in this area having been published in March of this year (2012), entitled *Same Classes, Different Voices: Do Teachers Teach What Learners Want?* (Gholami & Sedagatgoftar, 2012). This book specifically focuses on the voices of EFL learners in English language classrooms and examines the different language learning preferences of EFL learners, particularly in relation to gender and proficiency.

GATHERING DATA FROM TEACHERS IN COLOMBIA

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. This Master’s program is a joint project between the School of Graduate Education at the Anaheim University, based in California, USA, and the Department of Languages and Cultures at the University of La Sabana in Bogotá, Colombia, sponsored by the Colombian government. The MA is taught using a blend of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning, consolidated with brief, intensive periods of face-to-face interaction, the first of which took place in September 2011, over four days (from Sept. 10 to 14). Approximately 80 language teachers from all across Colombia gathered for the first residential and were divided into two groups, with approximately 40 teachers in each group, with all of the main lectures presented twice, once to each group.

One of the 90-minute core lectures, presented by the author, was on Content and Language Integrated Learning. As the lectures are designed to be interactive and tailored to the needs of the course participants, they 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?* This kind of opening question not only allows for the lecture to be tailored and interactive, but it also has the effect of activating the schema of the course participants, thereby preparing them for the teaching and learning about to take place.

Such an opening activity can be especially effective with language teachers, as many of them are familiar with the notion of schema activation, which has been a long-established aspect of language teaching, going back at least 30 years. For example, Carrel and Eisterhold noted that: “According to schema theory, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the text and the reader’s prior background knowledge (Adams & Collins, 1979; Rumelhart, 1980)” (1983, p. 553). In this case, a lecture of this kind is co-created as the result of an interactive process between the professor and the course participants.

MESSY DATA, MESSY CONSTRUCTS

A similarly long-established aspect, in this case, of research, is the notion of ‘messy data’, again going back more than 30 years and popularized by George Milliken and Dallas Johnson in their 1984 book, *Analysis of Messy Data, Volume I: Designed Experiments*, a 700-page volume, a new edition of which was published in 2009, 25 years after the first edition. In relation to educational action research, Nigel Mellor took “a frank look at the untidy realities of research ... during his practitioner-based PhD” (p.465), which resulted in article entitled “Messy Method: The

Unfolding Story” (2001). In this article, Mellor described how “working without rules (Appignanesi & Garrett, 1995, p. 50)” helped him to “gradually embrace a positive view of ‘mess’” (p.465). Mellor also makes use of Donald Schön’s oft-quoted reference to the “swampy lowland ... of confusing messes” (1983, p.42).

Not only can the data in educational research be “messy”, but the constructs can be “messy” too—as Pajares (1992) pointed out in his paper on teachers’ beliefs and educational research, which Pajares felt was “a messy construct” that needed “cleaning up”. However, in spite of the ‘messiness’ of the constructs related to studying teachers’ beliefs, Pajares’ position was that: “Attention to the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates should be a focus of educational research and can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot” (p.307).

Not only has this interest in “messy data” continued over the years, but it has also expanded into other fields beyond education, such as business. For example, in the online edition of *Forbes* magazine, an article by Suzanne Axtell appeared in February 2012 entitled “Unlocking Opportunities in Messy Data”. In this interview-based article, one of the two interviewees, Dr. Alyona Medleyan, highlights the role this kind of data plays in language-based research: “During my PhD in natural language processing and data mining, I started applying such algorithms to large datasets to investigate how time-consuming data analysis and processing tasks can be automated.” However, although the notion of “messy data” is generally applied to large sets of data, a claim could be made for it to be applied to small data sets as well.

In this case studied in the present article, the “messy data” was generated when approximately 80 Master’s program participants were asked to respond 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?* This generated 31 response slips in the first group and 34 in the second, making 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 related questions, which produced a total of 85 questions and comments, 69 of which related to CLIL, and 16 of which did not.

The data was also “messy” in the sense that all the slips were hand-written, in-class and “on the spot”, in just a few minutes at the beginning of the lecture, with little or no discussion. Most of the slips were torn from the pages of a note book, some as small as seven to eight square centimeters, ranging from bright yellow to pink, orange and plain. In relation to the quantity of “messy data” generated, although some of the questions were up to 30 or more words in length, some were as short as just seven or eight words (see below for examples of both the long and the short questions). The average length for the questions was 10 to 20 words per question, making a total of more than 1,000 words of question-data generated by 65 teachers/course participants.

LATIN AMERICAN TEACHERS’ VOICES AND CLIL

Using this journal, the *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, a brief study of the extent to which teachers’ voices regarding CLIL in Latin America have been represented in the literature was carried out. For example, in the first issue of the journal, which appeared in 2008, Restrepo Guzman reports on his experiences of teaching finance in English at the University of La Sabana (pp. 35-42). In his paper, Restrepo Guzman also reports on the result of a survey designed by the university’s Department of Languages and Cultures, which was completed by 33 students, from a group of 69, who completed a course on Financial Analysis, in English, in 2004. From the results of the survey, Restrepo Guzman concluded that “most

students felt that it is a definite advantage to have a course in English” (p.40), and the paper presents a number of other important findings and conclusions, as well as supporting the idea of a move away from teachers’ voices and more towards those of the students. This move may be part of the pedagogical and methodological shift to more student-centered classrooms, but the voices of teachers are still an essential aspect of any discussion of teaching and learning.

Also in the first issue of the *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, Moreno Alemay (2008, pp. 26-34) reports on the result of a collaborative language and content project, between the University of La Sabana’s International School of Economics and Administrative Sciences and its Department of Languages and Cultures. The report “focuses on the author’s three years teaching experience in accounting in a foreign language” (p.27) and Moreno Alemay notes that, in terms of CLIL in Colombia: “The system of teaching contents in English at the university level is quite recent in this country (Pineda 1999)”. In 2009, Corrales and Maloof, working at the Universidad del Norte in Barranquilla, Colombia, presented their study of “the effectiveness of CBI on the development of oral communicative competence and the causes of this development on a Medical English program in an English as a foreign language context” (p.15). In line with the focus on students’ voices, as the course participants were 16 Colombian university students, between 17 and 22 years of age, and the focus of the paper was on the voices of those students.

Also in 2009, two publications on CLIL in Colombia were published in the *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning*, the first by Otálora (pp.46-50), who presented a brief paper on a planned research project focused on the question: “Which learning strategies can teachers of content courses use to deliver content in another language in order to successfully impact student learning?” (p.46). Otálora planned to observe classes and to interview teachers and students “in order to identify instructional strategies” and implement and evaluate various strategies (p.46). In the second volume in 2009, McDougald also presented a brief paper on “The State of Language and Content Instruction in Colombia” (pp.44-48). McDougald started his paper by stating that: “Bilingual education, using a foreign language in addition to the students’ mother tongue, non-language subjects i.e. science, math, and art in English, is becoming more popular as time progresses throughout Colombia” (p.44).

In the conclusion of his paper on the future of CLIL in Colombia, McDougald stated that: “The need for Colombians to understand and use English across the curriculum in a school environment is becoming more and more of a requirement as a result of globalization (p.47)”. He also concluded that: “there needs to more research in terms of content and language integration using the CLIL approach in Colombia” and “although there is ample research surrounding CLIL in other educational contexts, more research needs to be done in Colombia so that ideal teaching practices are established” (p.47). All three of these concluding points from McDougald emphasize the need for educational data regarded CLIL to be gathered from teachers and students in Colombia.

In 2009 and 2010, a number of papers published in the *Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning* focused on CLIL in Argentina, including Fernández’s paper on “CLIL at the University Level: Relating Language Teaching with and through Content Teaching” (2009, pp.10-26) and a paper by Cendoya and Di Bin, who reported on “A CLIL Experience Based on the Use of Tasks and Different Genre Types” (2010, pp. 11-17). According to Cendoya and Di Bin, in Argentina: “in this context ... a new methodology Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has appeared” and their paper aimed “to point out what the core features of CLIL methodology are and how task-based and genre-based pedagogies can

complement it” (p.11). Although all of these papers reflect and report on the growing importance of and interest in CLIL in Latin America, few have the voices of teachers as their focus. An exception to this is the recent paper by Marilyn Hunt, working at Warwick University in England, whose paper reported on teachers’ and learners’ experiences of CLIL in England, based on an EU-funded project (2011, pp.27-39).

CONCLUSION OF PART I

In a review of the educational literature published over more than 20 years on the place and position of teachers’ voices and students’ voices in educational research, a shift from the former to the latter was noted—that is, from teachers’ to students’ voices. Although such a shift represents the positive moves towards more learner-centered teaching, this also leaves out an essential aspect of educational research. Therefore, to help re-establish the importance of teachers’ voices in this kind of research, data was gathered from teachers completing a Master’s program in English Language Teaching for Self-Directed Learning at the University of La Sabana in Colombia. Although the data gathered was “messy” in a number of ways, it will help illustrate the kinds of questions that arise when teachers are asked to express either concerns, in this case, regarding CLIL in Colombia. Furthermore, an analysis of the voices of these teachers asking questions about CLIL could inform teacher education and training programs in Colombia and elsewhere in a number of positive, professional ways. Part II of this article (to be published in the next issue of this journal, in October 2012) will build on the foundations laid in the present article (Part I) to present an analysis of the “messy” data on questions and concerns regarding CLIL in Colombia.

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