

Obstacle race for a plurilingual educational system in Spain

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RESUMEN

Este artículo se centra en el análisis de cinco obstáculos y la necesidad de su superación para lograr un sistema plurilingüe efectivo y funcional. Se enfocan los siguientes puntos: 1) carencias en el nivel A2 de Inglés al culminar los estudios de la ESO, 2) los tipos de programas que se están implantando, 3) la competencia y formación del profesorado implicado, 4) los libros y material de apoyo disponibles y 5) los fundamentos pedagógicos y lingüísticos de base.

Palabras clave: plurilingual, communicative, immersion, CLIL, skills, applied linguistics

ABSTRACT

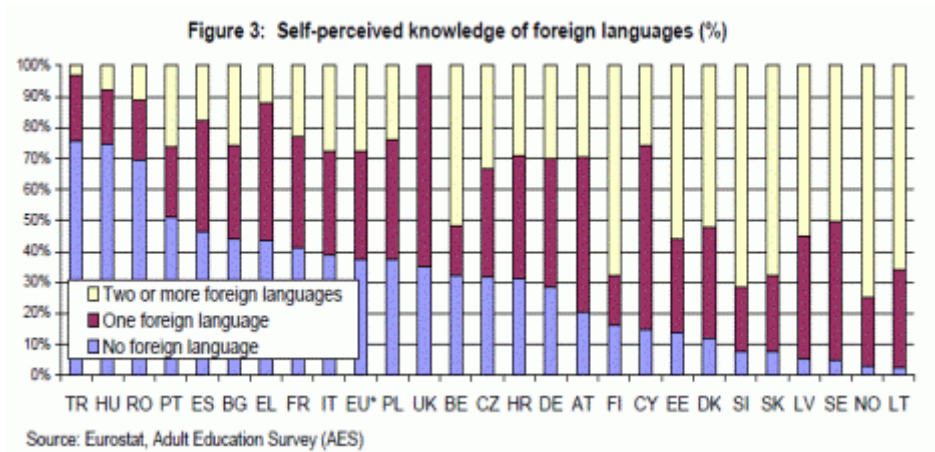
This article poses a look at 5 obstacles we see as necessary to overcome in order for a successful plurilingual educational system to work in Spain. The following points will be addressed: 1) unmet English A2 level standards upon finishing ESO, 2) types of programs being implemented, 3) the linguistic competence of the teaching staff involved, 4) development and implementation of materials to be used, 5) theoretical principles of successful language teaching.

Keywords: plurilingual, communicative, immersion, CLIL, skills, applied linguistics

1. INTRODUCTION

Every morning it is with some fear and apprehension that we read our regional newspapers to find out what is said about the latest policies and new regulations for the coming school year in the Comunidad Valenciana. The Consellería de Educación of the Comunidad Valenciana has embarked on a plan for making our public schools a plurilingual educational experience starting from Educación Infantil all the way to High school and Formación Profesional. An ambitious plan designed by our legislators along the lines of the PIALE (Plan Integral de Aprendizaje de Lenguas Extranjeras Marzo 2011) a nation wide program from the Ministerio de Educación. This program seeks to improve the foreign language competence of the Spanish population with a series of objectives to be implemented in a 10 year period across the regional educational administrations starting in the primary grades all the way up to Formación Profesional.

Plurilingual projects in regions of Spain like Barcelona, Madrid, Andalucía, Galicia and País Vasco among others have been working for a number of years. Some data about these projects can be found in the publication [AICLE En El Contexto Europeo](#) (Eurodyce 2006). However, we must keep in mind that the plurilingual effort in the Spanish education system is a two folded situation, on one side are the local demands in communities where there is more than one official language and on the other side is the foreign language competency much needed in our working age population. According to the office of statistics of the European Commission, Eurostat, the highest shares of the population perceiving themselves as speaking no foreign language are found in Hungary, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria and Greece, between 43% and 75% (see figure 3, Lene Merjer et.al. Eurostat 49/2010).



Internal and external socio, political and economic factors have challenged Spain's long held attitude of complacency in its low achievements in foreign language competence, forcing us now to face this lagging handicap. The freedom of mobility for our university students, thanks to the Bologna Agreement, has resulted in an overwhelming number of candidates seeking to be certified in the B1 or B2 English proficiency levels following the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). This accreditation gives our students the opportunity to continue their studies, look for professional development or find suitable work abroad particularly amidst the crisis we are immersed in apparently for years to come. A nation-wide effort has started with regional regulations and decrees in the public school system in order to fix the linguistic disadvantage. The terms plurilingual or bilingual are being frequently heard now in schools, among parents, from regional officials, legislators and even presidents, as seen in the PIALE program mentioned.

For those of us involved in applied linguistic studies, and in particular in the English teaching profession, it is encouraging but also worrisome. In this paper we seek to discuss and mention four troublesome areas in this journey towards plurilingualism in the public school settings. We see them as obstacles that will require hard work to overcome in order to race successfully.

2. UNMET A2 LEVEL STANDARDS UPON FINISHING ESO

We will start with the first one: unmet A2 level standard for graduating Bachillerato students. According to the 62nd article of the LOE the successful completion of the degree of Bachiller allows students to start intermediate or B1 level classes in the foreign language studied in high school. However, in many cases high school graduates cannot perform at such a level and must repeat an A2 course in order to meet the requirements of special programs within universities, or to obtain the accreditation needed for their future professional degrees. According to the results of the Estudio Europeo de Competencia Lingüística (EECL) published in Europapress, 63% of Spanish students do not understand oral English upon finishing ESO. Fourteen countries participated in the study where Spain came out in 9th place next to Poland and Portugal (Europapress 22-06-2012).

This situation affects entering university students every year, making it difficult for them to attain an advanced level in their English skills within their four year programs. Unless students take English classes as part of their required courses during university, they have to find the extra time to do it and in the end many choose to postpone them for an uncertain time in the future. As a result we find among newly graduated professionals a wide spectrum of intermediate English levels, supposedly B1s, with few of them managing to certify an upper intermediate B2 level. Among the working age population it is a conditioning and limiting factor for many.

This unmet A2 level in high school graduates is a determinant factor in the teaching careers or Grados de Magisterio, where primary and high school teachers are trained. If they enter university to study the Grado de Magisterio, with a doubtful A2 English level it is unlikely that they will be able to attain the B2 or C1 levels within their four year program. Education legislators across regional administrations are setting these high standards for teachers who intend to work in plurilingual programs. This frequently becomes one of the biggest barriers in their successful implementation.

3. TYPES OF PROGRAMS IMPLEMENTED

A second important issue to consider in this race towards plurilingual schools in Spain is the type of program to be implemented in each case. With different sectors of society discussing language issues the terminology used to refer to the educational programs proposed becomes confusing. A basic point to keep in mind is H. Doug Brown's distinction of the term "second" language as one in which the target language studied is "readily available out there" and "foreign" language when students do not have contexts for communication outside the classroom (H. Doug Brown 1994). In the case of English teaching in Spain, we clearly fall in the "foreign" language scenario because the teacher is the only source of the target language heard. We all acknowledge that simple steps like having original version cinema, more access to the target language literature, and opportunities for outside classroom communication are key for reaching the outcomes expected. Quite often what ends up happening is that the teacher is left as the main source of knowledge and the one who carries the responsibility of the success in the outcomes.

Most of the plurilingual regional programs being implemented use different forms of immersion models. The first research in bilingual and immersion education originally comes from successful programs in countries where diverse language minorities co-exist forcing implementation of second language support programs. Consequently, most of this research is based on studies done in the United States, Canada, Nordic European countries. In studying and documenting Canadian immersion programs Genesee (1985) defines *immersion programs* as those in which regular school subjects are taught in the target language. He classifies the models used as *early*, *delayed* and *late* immersion depending on the time that the FL is introduced (Omaggio 154).

Swain and Lapkin (1989), also referring to the Canadian programs, classify them as *total* or *partial* immersion, depending on the percentage of the classwork done in the target language (Omaggio 154). These immersion type of programs face serious disadvantages in a context like ours, when the target language is a foreign one. As Doug Brown points out in a foreign language context the children are only exposed to the teacher's input "Therefore, the language that you present, model, elicit, and treat takes on great importance. If the foreign language class meets for only 90 minutes a week, which represents a little more than one percent of students waking hours, think of what they need to accomplish!" (H. Doug Brown, 1994).

In the case of Spain, the immersion program chosen in most of the plurilingual programs is the Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas (AICLE). Originating from content based language learning which dates back to the 1960's, CLIL basic premise is that language is used as a vehicle for attaining subject matter knowledge (Donna Brinton, et.al., 1989). As a result, both language learning and content learning take place with equal intention. A detailed and thorough study with comparative results and statistics of the different CLIL programs in Europe since the 1970s can be found in the Eurodyce publication already mentioned

The framework used in CLIL is basically that students are taught *some* content-area-classes, like Math, Art or Physical Education in the target language and the rest in the native or official language of the region. In the Comunidad Valenciana, according to the most recent Decreto Plurilinguismo of August 3, 2012, there will be two tracks to choose from: the Programa Plurilingue en Valenciano (PPEV) and the Programa Plurilingue en Castellano (PPEC). In both programs one content-class has to be in the second language and a minimum of one in English. With less than 50% of the curriculum taught in the target languages achieving a high competency in any one of the three languages is doubtful. More studies regarding the progress and results of these plurilingual programs will have to be carried out in order to realistically support and embrace the well intentioned goals stated in the decrees.

4. TEACHER TRAINING AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

A third obstacle we face in this plurilingual journey of the Spanish public schools is probably the most difficult one to overcome: the communicative competence of the teachers involved in the plurilingual programs. The speed at which this plurilingual effort is being implemented becomes a serious burden for working school teachers who find themselves pressured to attain advanced levels of competence in English in particular. The foreign language teacher is not a content-area teacher, and the subject matter teacher needs the language proficiency. The report from Eurydice states that in Primary education the majority of European teachers who are foreign language teachers are generalists, that is they can teach almost all of the curricula classes. However, in eleven countries, Spain one them, language teachers are specialists only in their field (PIALE p. 131, 2011). There seems to be a gap in the implementation of CLIL programs regarding teacher training in this area which is not readily available for working teachers, and it is gradually entering the university curriculum. It now appears that classroom teachers must spend their off school hours working to reach the language standards and the training “capacitación” required for the programs implemented. Consequently, it’s not surprising that the Eurodyce report confirms in the section regarding implementation of AICLE programs the lack of qualified teaching staff available and the high cost of the programs as the two main obstacles for the success of these programs.

5. MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION

In fourth place, we must also consider the use, development and implementation of materials in a plurilingual program. Content-based foreign language instruction requires a repertoire of printed material at least comparable to that of the native language one. Here the publishing houses have stepped up to the challenge coming up with a variety of classroom texts that reproduce the original sources used in regular Spanish curricula. However, apart from this new material not much literature is available for teacher reference and student use to read beyond the classroom walls. Printed English, for example, is not a common sight in Spanish cities or in bookstores, where one can rarely find an English language section. Teachers must make an effort to seek for supplementary materials to reinforce primarily the reading and listening skills, particularly in the initial stages if assimilation and comprehension are to take place. In a CLIL context where key vocabulary within each subject area taught is one of the intended outcomes, students must have a variety of materials available to them to reinforce this vocabulary. Ready access to classroom and library books is key in achieving effective reading competence. The reading texts used in class need to be reinforced and presented in different forms and contexts. As Krashen (1985) points out skills reinforce one another when students engage in sustained silent reading for pleasure and even more so if they have a wide selection and can themselves decide what they want to read (Scarcella 1992).

Along these lines, there is concern particularly among the primary classroom teachers regarding the content-area printed material in the foreign language. Care must be taken to ensure that in the effort to make the reading materials in the target language accessible to students the editing or language simplification does not affect or alter the content. This would lead to a lowering of the standards in the subject matter that could seriously affect children’s achievement levels in later grades.

The situation is different for the language teacher who has at her disposal English textbooks for primary grades, that come fully equipped with a variety of resources: activity books, CDs, workbooks, storybooks, and class books. These materials are thoroughly designed and incorporate different learning styles activities in the skills practiced. What is more useful and appreciated is the fact that the teacher’s book covers all the possible trouble points a novice teacher might find, and specific detailed instructions for each step are given and exemplified. In our foreign language teacher training courses, when we discuss material design our students know that their textbook will cover most of their needs. They gladly listen and participate in designing original activities and lesson plans to be presented in our classes. However, they are aware of the daily pressures, bureaucratic tasks, and out of class work they will face making it difficult to put into practice much of the creativity displayed in their training years in university.

6. LINGUISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES

This relates to our last point or hurdle in our plurilingual race, one this congress addresses and helps us to overcome, the pedagogical and theoretical principles of successful foreign language teaching and learning. New programs cannot be implemented disregarding all the research and documentation in this field. Here we find universities have stepped up to meet these needs with a wide variety of Masters Programs that are literally flourishing everywhere. These well intentioned Masters aim to provide teachers with the applied linguistic studies, the methodology, and the theoretical framework for some of these innovative multilingual programs. Those of us in the university teaching field are now responsible for this training challenge. However, what we frequently find is that we have to squeeze the basic theoretical foundations of foreign language teaching/learning into fast track courses. After completing these one or two year programs, we as teachers find a big gap between the student's theoretical background and their actual teaching performance. Meaningful and effective learning cannot be accomplished in speedy and heavy loaded programs. Students are presented, or sometimes bombarded, with the research of our field, which in many cases becomes difficult to assimilate due to their low target language competency. In the Masters programs and Grado degrees at our university, we have had to carefully select readings that will be minimally suitable for our students English proficiency level.

New decrees and regulations are seriously affecting teachers in the primary and secondary years who after many years in service find they have to work towards not only the foreign language requirement, as we have mentioned before, but also course like the Capacitación in order to participate in the multilingual programs. Understandably, these experienced teachers feel this is a heavy and unrealistic challenge. Recent headlines from newspapers in the Comunidad Valenciana announce that one out of every four teachers will be expected to participate in the plurilingual project being implemented there. These statements produce frustration and uncertainty among teaching staff already affected by the various educational reforms in the past.

It's a difficult scenario where suddenly primary school teachers are expected to become language teachers without sufficient guidelines or linguistic training in fundamental areas such as: error correction, communicative teaching, alternate use of L1 and L2, strategies for skills development, fossilization and many others within the field of foreign language pedagogy.

Universities and professional development programs have to meet the needs of working teachers in the transitional stages of the plurilingual programs. Collaboration and team work between the public school and university is needed. More long term studies of multilingual programs and their results have to be analyzed and contrasted in order for responsible decisions. Language professionals must fight to be heard, asking the right people and asking the right questions will save time and money in successful implementation of multilingual programs.

The obstacles here mentioned are ones we consider critical for obtaining some success in the many multilingual programs being implemented across Spain. Lack of resources is often cited as one of the main reasons for not reaching well intended goals and objectives. We would agree in part with this point, but regarding other obstacles mentioned in this paper we believe some changes can be made that are not necessarily costly or require large amounts of administration's budgets. From a pedagogical point of view, any action taken from ones own initiative and motivation will, in the long run, provide better results. Mandatory programs don't work, instead we would encourage giving schools the freedom to gradually participate in pilot plurilingual programs according to the resources they have. Having a group of qualified teachers in the target languages and trained in the methodology of CLIL is the first and foremost important condition for embarking in these programs. We believe that in teacher training programs, universities and Escuelas de Magisterio is where most of the support for these programs must be found. Linguistics professionals should play an active role in the design, implementation, and continuous support of multilingual programs in the public schools. We as a community of language professionals must fight to be heard in regional boards of education regarding school policies and allocation of resources in foreign language teaching. Resources are fundamental for successful programs but also knowing how best to make use of them is just as important. El camino hacia el Plurilingüismo, like the theme of this congress, is a joint effort and we must get involved.

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