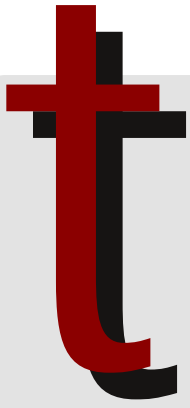


Every
Teacher
is a
Language
Teacher

The CLIL Counterculture

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he 1970s was a period of profound social change in Spain. In England, following the dynamism of the 1960s, it was a period of decline marked by strikes and struggle. One particular problem concerned education. Whereas the private sector was maintaining high levels of performance, the state system overall was falling badly behind. A key problem was identified. It was to do with language. Quite remarkably, the English students were increasingly unable to use English language sufficiently to learn subjects through English.

This led to a major initiative called 'Language Across the Curriculum' (LAC). The LAC mantra was 'every teacher is a language teacher'. But what led to this situation, and how could every teacher be a language teacher? And what has this to do with life here in 2009?

During the 1970s, schools were handling ever larger numbers of children due to the 'baby boom' of the 1960s. More students

led to the recruitment of more teachers. Teacher training involved ever more educational theory, and very little practice.

There was a compartmentalization of subject learning, so that teachers of one subject had very little idea of what was happening in other subjects. In addition, there was separation between primary and secondary teaching with the latter given higher salaries and status.

This resulted in a methodological shift where good primary practice which was child-centered was being separated from secondary teaching which was often 'transmission-based'.

Finally, as if to create the 'perfect storm', the government attacked the teacher trade unions and, in so doing, diminished the image of the teaching profession across some sections of the general public. Things were not looking good.

In the classrooms it was found that teachers were increasingly reluctant to take responsibility for nurturing the English language as an integral part of their work.

"¿Tienes problemas con el inglés? No es asunto mío. Vete a ver al profesor de inglés"

They were frequently poorly-trained, demoralized, and reluctant to do anything more than the basics. "Got a problem with your English? Not my job, go and see the English teacher." And what was happening in the very few hours allocated to English teaching? Mainly the teaching of English literature, which although intellectually sound, was not enough to help students develop hands-on communication skills in the language sufficient for learning through English. In addition, much of the literature in the curriculum was very remote from the real lives and interests of the children. Shakespeare, like champagne, can provide a wonderful experience, but it has to be at the right time and place, and for the right purpose. Meanwhile in the private system the educational culture was very different. Parents invariably

supported schools and teachers. Students were taught by teachers who had responsibility for the overall educational progress of each child. Therefore, they focused on



English language development across the curriculum. Mistaken grammar, lexis or constructions were handled there and then by the subject and English language teachers. There was a whole school approach which argued that literacy in the first language is a fundamental foundation upon which most of the rest of learning, and the holistic development of the

student as a person, takes place. The private system practiced language-across-the-curriculum without even having a name for it. It also taught Latin or Greek as a means of boosting both



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language awareness and intellectual rigor, and foreign languages were given high status. The methodologies used were basic common sense. Language was the glue which held learning together. Language awareness and fluency was a basic competence. England didn't have an educational system; it had

educational systems. There was a social divide between those who received basic good overall education, and those who did not. There was an increasing systemic failure occurring where basic language competences were not being sufficiently developed in the state system. This was partly due to lack of integration of literacy across all subject teaching. LAC was a form of counterculture which tried to change the status quo (the way things were) and, most especially, change standard teaching mindsets. It was an excellent initiative but it soon fizzled out because it was not embedded into the curriculum, and across the spectrum of teacher training. Now, let's turn to today. Like oil, rice and platinum, plurilingualism is increasingly considered a precious commodity. The ability to use English as a foreign language is rapidly becoming a basic competence in European countries, but in Spain, the learning of English is not bringing sufficient results across the regions as a whole. The educational neurosciences are reporting on the add-on value of second language learning, especially in relation to the brain, and personal development.

There are very specific questions being raised about how to teach an additional language in environments which are already bilingual. There is a marked increase of diversity in the classrooms and we are facing a profound period of adjustment in relation to socio-economics, and the need to encounter lifestyle change so as to reduce damage to the environment. As citizens, teachers, language teachers, this is the biggest period of change we have faced in our lives.

Change can pose threats, but it also brings opportunities.

The importance for 'every teacher to be a language teacher' is as relevant now as it was in the 1970s, and is true of all teachers whether they are teaching language, or subjects through the language, in the national, regional or foreign languages. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is the educational approach which enables all teachers to be aware of how to embed language development across the curriculum. There are specific features of what happens in a CLIL classroom, and many of these are basic good education practice appropriate for the age in which we live – the Knowledge

Society.

CLIL is vital for different solutions such as teaching Catalan to newly arrived immigrant children in Barcelona; teaching French to bilingual children in Valencia; teaching Spanish to adult immigrants in Madrid; Basque in Bilbao; or English in Galicia. The core of CLIL helps upgrade the



learning contexts of all of these, even extending to the classes where monolingual Spaniards are taught Geography in Spanish. So is CLIL all and yet somehow nothing?

CLIL has been likened to the Trojan Horse. This may not be entirely complementary depending on your historical perspective on the

conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans! But it is a good metaphor for describing its potential power in making change happen, and in creating a counterculture – to change the status quo, the ways things are. Frankly, as educators and citizens, we have a responsibility to embrace change when it is necessary. Right now in countries

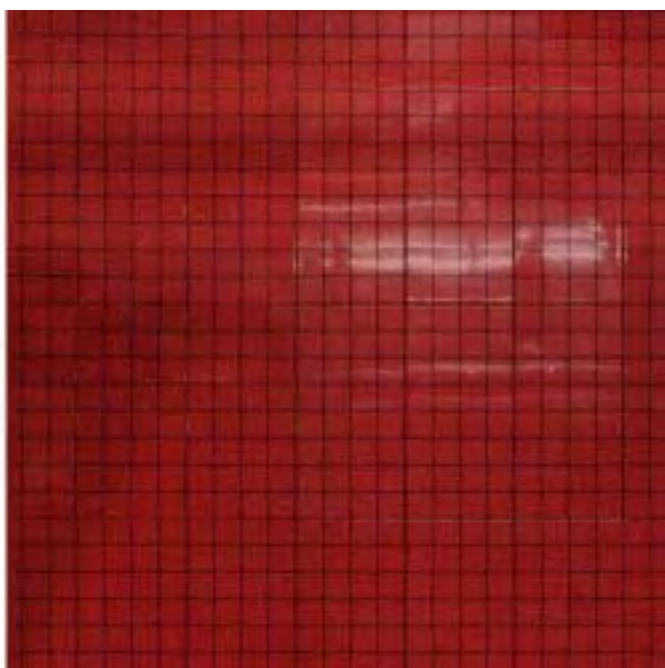


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like Spain, language teaching and the teaching of other subjects are ripe for 'changing the way things are', and CLIL could be a very persuasive tool for positive and sometimes subtle change.

Recently I found myself in the audience at an English language

"La habilidad de utilizar el inglés como lengua extranjera está convirtiéndose rápidamente en una competencia básica en los países europeos"

teaching conference in Spain. The speaker was showing how to get students to speak English in the English classes. The activity involved a make-believe gambling simulation which was intellectually undemanding (so involving fairly low order thinking skills) and which would result in the students managing to get through it by using very little actual speech in English working in pairs. You know, "yea", "no", "don't know", "don't care", which would probably be shadowed by less obvious use of Spanish. It was a classic 1970s language teaching communicative activity. I turned to a participant (secondary English language teacher) next to me and asked her opinion. She was positive about the idea – saying "if we get them to say anything in English then we are succeeding, it's just language, it doesn't matter about the content". Much as I respect her comment, and not knowing anything about her school context, this is a sad situation.

For me it was a 'yesterday activity', spent using precious time (and we should not think of a 60 minute lesson as one hour.... If there are 35 students in the class then it is more like 35 hours), and likely to fail to be worthwhile for many of the students in the class.

As I write this I am flying back from some days in a Spanish city where I have met some superb CLIL educators, and seen materials which are enriching and highly purposeful. There a choice for those of us in language teaching, and some of us in content teaching, to look very carefully at CLIL. We are talking here about 'cutting edge' education. There was a revolution in language education during the 1970s which led to 'communicative language teaching'. Now some 40 years later we are seeing a quiet revolution in education and it is called CLIL. What we need to do now is to ensure that all children have a right to the type of quality education which CLIL provides. We cannot do that if a social divide emerges between those who pay for education, and those who do not. We need to ensure that the bulk of the population, educated in the public sector, gets access to the types of excellence in teaching and learning practice which can be found in some very privileged educational contexts, whether

private sector or not.

CLIL is one key which is available to those teachers who want to embrace change, and it here on our doorstep now. In CLIL every teacher is indeed a language teacher; Some teachers teach language, and others alternative subjects, but they each use an integrated approach which ensures that content, language, and thinking skills objectives are interwoven into the teaching and learning process. This is the core success of language across the curriculum.

To be involved with CLIL means being part of the future, and frankly, given the state of the world around us, if we are not part of the future then we are part of the problem.

Foto: Asier Cosme

