Historical literacy in bilingual settings: Cognitive academic language in CLIL history narratives

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 24 December 2015
Received in revised form 12 October 2016
Accepted 3 November 2016
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Bilingual/ESL
History curriculum
Disciplinary literacy
CLIL
Cognitive academic language proficiency
Language across the curriculum
Languages of schooling

A B S T R A C T

Language competence has proven to vary substantially across school disciplines. This paper explores historical literacy, a major research issue in current European language policies. Specifically, it reviews the literature on how history content relies on language structures and how the ability of students to tell historical narratives depends on their individual competence level, both in a first and second language. However, historical illiteracy has to date been regarded mainly as a theoretical construct which would benefit from an empirical analysis that tests the descriptors provided for historical communication in a first and second language (Council of Europe, 2013). To this end, this paper conducts a corpus study of the historical narratives of secondary school students and provides evidence of the major cognitive discourse functions (CDFs) that appear in the literature (hypothesising about history, explaining history, describing historical events, expressing causality, taking an ideological stance, etc.). The results are tabulated and discussed, providing conclusions that may prove useful for L2 history learning and curriculum development in bilingual education and CLIL settings. Thus, this paper intends, for the first time, to provide empirical support for L2 historical literacy classifications and to describe the integration of history content and language (L2) by the end of compulsory schooling in secondary education.

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1. Introduction

In Ancient Greece, history defined the narratives of the remarkable events that transpired. History making, therefore, called for outstanding literacy skills so the narrator could represent in words the facts in a credible and sound manner. In their writings, historians reflected the truth and provided a permanent linguistic rendering of the past. Historiography called this the linguistic turn, an ascertainment that language shapes history and narrative language structures deeply affect the historical representation of the past (Carrard, 1992; Lledó, 2011; Yilmaz, 2007).

A classical discipline found in the curriculum in all world-systems, history places high academic demands on learners. Historical texts require powers of interpretative reasoning and the development of a personal voice in the presentation of narrated events. As a result, historical literacy (Levstik & Barton, 2001; Nokes, 2013) has become a cognitive academic language skill that global education is endeavouring to consolidate.

The interface between language and history has been researched from many angles in the educational literature. Some research strands have described the rhetorical structure of historical narratives, under the label of narratology studies (Adam, 2011) or rhetorical genre studies (Collins, 2014). Also focusing on the interface between language and history, corpus linguistics has mapped out the discipline’s language specificities and revealed that history produces a particular linguistic texture with distinctive sentence and morphological features (Asención-Delaney & Collentine, 2011; Biber, Davies, Jones, & Tracy-Ventura, 2006). Other studies have analysed historical language from a discursive perspective, and provided history curriculum guidelines based on the language demands of school tasks (Coffin, 2006), or considered the particular genres of the discipline in relation to their discourse-semantic effects (Hyland, 2002, 2004; Lorenzo, 2013; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin, Maton, & Matrulgio, 2010).

Multilingual education has given a twist to the study of the interface between language and history. Students around the world now learn history in a second language, either because the number of vehicular languages has increased with the global promotion of bilingual schools or because classes have to cater for minority language students who learn in a language that is not their mother tongue. Examples include American history taught in English to Hispanic students in the USA (Achugar, 2009), bilingual Middle-Eastern history lessons given in Arabic and Hebrew in Israel (Adwan & Bar-on, 2003) or the bilingual teaching of European history in...
Franco-German streams (Breibach, Bach, & Wolff, 2002). A curricular venture pointing in specifically this direction is the Council of Europe’s plan to benchmark ‘historical communication’ for school-level learners (Beacco, 2010). Of late, the Council of Europe has set out to chart the language competence needed to acquire different forms of historical knowledge in a L1 and L2, a new research perspective referred to as languages of schooling (Council of Europe, 2015). The goal of policy-making and academics here is not only to lay the foundations for efficient bilingual education, but also to equip national education systems for multilingual school populations with a strong presence of immigrants and refugees.

All in all, the effectiveness of these multilingual education schemes worldwide share a common denominator: subject content learning in an L2 depends critically on language competence or as is called in the bilingual research literature SLIC (second language instruction competence) (MacSwan & Rolstad, 2003). As the authors point out “SLIC denotes the stage of L2 development in which the learner is able to understand instruction and perform grade-level school activities using the L2 alone” (p. 338) Although conceptually useful, educational bilingual research has not provided a linguistic analysis of the limits, progress, or thresholds of the SLIC construct.

This bilingual educational trend has heightened interest in the interface between language and history for the simple reason that bilingual teaching requires language structures to be foregrounded so content can be learned, an educational process called sheltering, scaffolding or integrating depending on the bilingual tradition. In spite of this growing concern, some aspects of history and second language connections remain unexplored. More precisely, there is little understanding of second language historical literacy, namely, how cognitive academic language competence is arranged with historical content. Without a proper description of the parallels between history knowledge construction and academic language competence, we tend to overlook the existing aspects and evolution of historical syntax (the syntactic structures more prone to appearing in the discipline of history) or historical communication (the notions and functions of historical semiotics). This lack of understanding has grave educational implications since, in the absence of a proper account of language and history integration, some of the major issues of history education remain elusive, chief among them: (a) the feasibility of teaching history in a second language in compulsory education; (b) the exploration of historical academic functions that may or may not develop and could interfere with content-learning; and, finally, (c) the curriculum planning of bilingual history education in accordance with first and second language proficiency levels. This study looks at precisely the interface between history and language, with the overall aim of describing this integrated competence known as historical literacy. Furthermore, historical literacy in a second language is now by all accounts a component of the appropriate linguistic capital that society demands (Lillis, 2001).

1.1. The expression of historical knowledge structures

Interpreting and giving an account of the past are elaborate skills. With time, infants develop cognitive resources which enable them to interpret the past in ever more sophisticated ways. In the early stages, the events that draw their attention are those occurring at present in the immediate surroundings of the speaker (child studies call the language used for the description of these events here and now language). Later in life, more distant territories are explored and with attention reaching further comes the understanding of a historical dimension. At this stage, individuals do not only look back and forth and describe the passage of time, but can also consider the relationship between concurring episodes or events happening at distant points in time, even abridging centuries; a key historical function called backshifting.

The stages of historical thinking are common knowledge, starting with a first level, which is purely narrative: an account of events over time; followed by a more demanding skill involving the exploration of causes and consequences, and eventually culminating in the expression of multi-factorial causality; and, finally, a third level coinciding with the consolidation of a personal ability to judge and take an ideological stance on the past (Coffin, 2006, 2009). During the early stages, there exist clear limitations: young learners regularly fail to arrange historical events on a timeline and instead rely on the calendar dimension of time. As a result, anything happening during the first months is believed to precede other incidents occurring later in the year. Instead of chronological time measured in years and centuries, their personal time, marked by the school calendar, frames their reasoning. For instance, the discovery of America (October, 15th century) is believed to have taken place before the birth of Jesus (December, 1st century) (Diaz Barriga, Garcia, & Toral, 2008; Martin & Rose, 2003). Cognitive educational research has pointed out further constraints in history learning at early ages which lead to historical misconstructions. Featuring among these are presentism – students surround past actions with a present bias; a concrete understanding of abstract historical notions; the provision of anecdotal and personalist causal explanations; a simple and static representation of past events, among other indications that students only develop a complex, dynamic understanding of history after years of schooling (see Carretero & Van Alphen, 2014; Voss & Carretero, 2000). By the same token, during the early stages students have little command of synchronicity management (place events at the same or different points in time), causality links (a cause and consequential sequence which helps to explain states of affairs and historical turns), or the assessment of historical facts (taking a personal stance on events, including critical assessment), among other historical discourse functions.

Apart from these functions, history uses specific cognitive tools to manage content area knowledge relying on advanced language competence and historical heuristics. When students reproduce historical content, they have to interpret and consider multiple sources of information (sourcing), contrasting them and checking their consistency (corroboration), before finally assessing events within their spatial and temporal limits (contextualization) (Wineburg, 1998). Without these heuristics, history is no more than a story, a narrative belonging to the realm of fantasy rather than that of science or, to put it in classical terms, to mythos rather than logos.

As a result of this development of skills, history learning is often mapped out piecemeal in education. Students between the ages of 11–13 are merely required to record historical information; during mid-adolescence (14–16), they are requested to explain complex causes in the construction of the past; and finally when aged between 16–18, they are expected to take a personal stance and present arguments about events with critical and personal interpretations. Recording, explaining and arguing constitute, therefore, three stages in historical literacy (Coffin, 2006). Before students attain historical literacy, they are inclined to dualistic thinking (labelling characters as good or bad) and stereotyping. They lack, in short, expertise in historical knowledge construction, what has been termed an epistemic stance in the discipline (Nokes, 2013).

1.2. The development of cognitive academic language in an L2

Historical thinking relies heavily on language competence and competence in academic language is gained in formal education. Although normally unexplored and often ill-defined, national curriculums tend to lump together language and content objectives (see Lorenzo & Dalton-Puffer, 2016 for an analysis of history curriculums in different European countries). Overtly or covertly, all national curriculums take for granted that literacies differ from
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