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Assessing the influence of socio-economic status on students' performance in Content and Language Integrated Learning

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 20 January 2017

Received in revised form 28 August 2017

Accepted 2 September 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

CLIL

Bilingual education

Socio-economic status (SES)

Language teaching

Content acquisition

Primary education

Context analyses

Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the influence of social, cultural and economic background on students' performance in content-subjects in the framework of CLIL programmes in Spain. So far, CLIL investigation has focused primarily on language attainment in the L2 and the L1, but students' socio-economic status (SES) has been largely ignored, and its influence on performance in content-subjects remains unexplored. Competence in Science in the L1 (Spanish) is analysed by comparing pupils enrolled in mainstream schools with students in the so-called bilingual streams offering CLIL-based approaches. The paper analyses a sample of 709 6th grade Primary Education students from diverse social backgrounds and enrolled in public schools in the Principality of Asturias (Spain). A test to assess students' knowledge in Science and a context questionnaire (measuring participants' social, economic, and cultural background) were designed and validated. Inferential statistics were applied with one-way ANOVAs and inter-subject analyses. The main finding is that students from less favoured socio-economic backgrounds obtain significant lower scores than those coming from more privileged settings. Results suggest students' context influences the teaching-learning process in bilingual education. The determining factors for these findings are discussed in the paper together with prospective research lines.

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1. Introduction

The coming of age of globalization has led to major changes in society: among others, the promotion of international mobility, and the increase of migration flows worldwide are two key features of the global era. As a result, the command of foreign languages is today an essential element for international communication. In this context, the pervasiveness of English as the world's lingua (Crystal, 1997; Phillipson, 2003), has invigorated many countries to implement bilingual programmes where English is the tuition language together with students' mother tongue (Coleman, 2006; Ruiz de Zarobe & Jiménez Catalán, 2009). In Europe, institutional efforts have been committed to foster societal multilingualism and individual plurilingualism, aiming that citizens are able to communicate in two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue (European Commission, 2008). However, more often than not, bilingual education is a synonym for English-language education, a tendency that can be witnessed in other contexts: in Asia, for instance, many governments have implemented English-taught programmes at Primary School to promote its command by young learners (Butler, 2014).

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Within the overall strategy to encourage plurilingualism in Europe, the emergence of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been of paramount importance, as CLIL has emerged as a “timely solution to European plurilingual education” (Pérez-Cañado, 2012).

CLIL, or teaching content-subjects through an additional language, is intended to promote the use of an L2 to learn non-language contents at several educational stages. This is the case of Spain, where CLIL schools¹ have flourished in the last two decades based on the language, cultural, and cognitive profits reported by research (Cenoz, 2015; Lorenzo, Trujillo, & Vez, 2011; Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). However, so far, research on CLIL has been focused predominantly on language-related fields, and other (non-linguistic) areas have been neglected: social class, or the socio-economic status (SES) has received scant attention in the investigation of bilingual education and CLIL programmes in Europe and in Spain (Alejo & Piquer-Píriz, 2016).

Leaving aside the benefits of commanding English for international communication, it is central that the SES of young learners is analysed to cater for possible divergences in the planning and implementation of bilingual programmes: specifically, there is a dearth of studies exploring whether social class might render significant differences in the performance of young learners in bilingual provisions. If this research line is neglected, we might be contributing to create (or enlarge) a divide between an elite of young plurilingual learners and those who could not access bilingual education (and/or those who underperform at school because social context has not been considered in the implementation of bilingual programmes). Moreover, research in bilingual education should examine whether all students have access to CLIL provisions, and if so, if bilingual streams guarantee students' integration and academic success irrespective of their SES. Research in Spain has reported that SES may modulate access to CLIL in Secondary Education due to self-selection (Broca, 2016; Bruton, 2015) although no empirical results have reported there are overt selection criteria to exclude students from bilingual sections in the public system; in Primary Education, the access of students according to SES has been ignored so far.

This paper is intended to fill this gap by analysing the impact of the SES of young learners in CLIL and regular schools of Primary Education in Spain. The investigation will analyse the possible differences in the performance of students of 6th grade of Primary Education by examining the influence of their social class, and their school modality (CLIL, where they study Science through English, and mainstream education, where they learn Science in Spanish).

2. Literature review

2.1. Content and Language Integrated Learning

CLIL has been a major trend in the last decades in Europe, where it has been effectively implemented in primary (Serra, 2007; Xanthou, 2011), secondary (Admiraal, Westhoff, & de Bot, 2006; Alonso, Grisaleña, & Campo, 2008), and tertiary education (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013; Wilkinson, 2004).

CLIL has received considerable support from institutions, as it is believed that this approach is suitable to address the specific characteristics of the European educational setting (Coyle, 2002; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016), where there is a strong need for multilingual approaches (Cenoz, 2009). The acceptance of CLIL has also been endorsed by research conducted in Europe, which has consistently reported on the gains in language competence in the L2, the transfer to the L1, and other language-related issues such as code switching (Cenoz & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2015; Dalton-Puffer, 2008; Ianos, Huguet, Janés, & Lapresta, 2016; Muñoz, 2007; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008). As for the scope of this paper, academic results in CLIL have also been analysed by investigating students' performance in content-subjects taught through an L2: pupils learning contents through an additional language show enhanced subject-matter learning than their counterparts in monolingual groups (Admiraal et al., 2006; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). In fact, Serra's (2007) longitudinal study reported on cognitive and academic benefits for CLIL students learning Maths in public schools Switzerland. In a similar vein, Xanthou (2011) concludes that studying through English was beneficial as regards content acquisition in Science students in Cyprus.

Despite the concurrence of positive results associated with CLIL, some scholars have anticipated that the “pendulum effect” of language teaching (Swan, 1985, p. 86) can very soon unveil some less favourable elements in the implementation of this approach, such as the lack of conceptual clarity (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014), or the fact that the success of CLIL may be related to “a world view which sees language proficiency as the main causal factor in economic success” (Paran, 2013, p. 335).

The provision of CLIL schools in Spain² has mushroomed in the last decade: in fact, the country outnumbers most European state members regarding the number of schools offering CLIL provisions (Eurydice, 2012, p. 155). The promotion of CLIL has been partially caused by the poor results in foreign language command of young learners in Spain: official reports (European Commission, 2012a; 2012b; Eurydice, 2006; 2012) place Spain consistently behind other European countries in the command of foreign languages: in fact, Spain is among a group of 5 countries where citizens are less likely to be able to speak a foreign language – only 18% of the population (European Commission, 2012a, p. 13).

¹ L2 German and French CLIL sections can be found in Spain, although English CLIL provisions have become the standard since the implementation of this approach in the country.

² Although some diversity can be found, in most CLIL provisions in Spain, students are normally taught 5 h of English per week (instead of the 3 h of regular groups) besides taking (at least) 2 subjects taught through English (Science, Mathematics, Arts, Physical Education, or Music).

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