The challenge of balancing content and language: Perceptions of Dutch bilingual education history teachers

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highlights
- Bilingual education history teaching perceived as both challenging and rewarding.
- Translanguaging used spontaneously by Bilingual Education History Teachers despite English-only policy.
- The importance of interpersonal language in bilingual education seems underestimated.
- Reappraisal of the learning goals set for bilingual subject learning is advisable.

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, bilingual education in the Netherlands has become a popular option for a select group of students who are looking for an extra challenge to enrich their secondary education. Currently one out of every five mainstream secondary schools offers bilingual education. In Dutch bilingual education half of the curriculum is taught in English and the other half in Dutch in grades 7 through 9, and there is an emphasis on European and international orientation (EIO). This implies that there is a strong internationalisation component in the curriculum to enhance the global outlook of the students.

The bilingual subjects are almost exclusively taught by non-native English speaking subject teachers who aim to develop both subject knowledge and English language proficiency in Dutch students using the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) methodology (Verspoor, De Bot, & Xu, 2015). Only the target language (L2) is used in CLIL lessons in the Netherlands and in that sense, it differs from the variety of bilingual CLIL approaches in other European countries that sometimes allow for the use of the mother tongue (L1) in CLIL or where the subject teacher is assisted by the L2-language teacher during CLIL lessons (Eurydice, 2006; 2012). There is much common ground between CLIL and other forms of bilingual education like content based instruction (CBI) and immersion education which are both popular in North America.

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An important difference is that North American teachers can teach in their mother tongue while almost all Dutch CLIL teachers teach content and language in and through a second language.

Research on secondary education level CLIL shows that bilingual education has a positive impact on students’ L2 language proficiency and does not have a negative effect neither on the students’ development of the mother tongue nor on learning subject knowledge (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Verspoor et al., 2015). Thus far however CLIL research mainly focuses on the second language development of the students (Dallinger, Jonkman, Holm, & Fiege, 2016; Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013; De Graaff, 2013). The role of the teacher in CLIL has received little attention and research into the perceptions of CLIL subject teachers is scarce when compared to research into CBI and immersion education (Cammarata, 2009; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2005; Tedick & Wesely, 2015). This is quite remarkable as CLIL subject teachers are key players in the bilingual education of students, and the importance of teacher perceptions or teacher beliefs on the decision-making process of (language) teaching has been emphasised in multiple studies. (Borg, 2003; Den Hartog Kort & Peralta Nash, 2011; Fang, 1996; Flores, 2001).

For this study into the perceptions of Dutch CLIL teachers we selected history because the subject has been known for its linguistic demands. Learning history requires students to have both a passive and active command of academic language, including subject-specific language. Extensive research has highlighted the struggle of students to find the right lexis for assignments on causal relations, change, chronology etc. in their mother tongue (Schleppegrell & De Oliveira, 2006; Van Drie, Braaksma, & Van Bostel, 2015; Wilschut, 2013). Teaching history in a second language (L2) then becomes even more challenging, because students need to be able to understand and use academic language in the L2 as well. The Dutch Bilingual Education History Teachers (or BHT’s) dual teaching task seems to be complex and arduous, because they continuously need to anticipate and respond to the delicate and changing balance between teaching subject content knowledge and second language skills (Schall-Leckrone & McLquillan, 2012).

This exploratory study aims to gain insight into how BHTs perceive aspects related to teaching history in English in grades 7 and 9 using the CLIL methodology. Most bilingual stream subject teachers also teach mainstream classes and are therefore able to compare teaching history in English and Dutch as well as the performance of mainstream and bilingual stream students. We questioned BHTs with teaching experience in grades 7 and 9 of both streams on three main topics: CLIL practice, comparing CLIL to history teaching in Dutch and the effect that CLIL teaching has on their level of job satisfaction.

1.1. Content and language integrated learning

Content and language integrated learning is the most common foreign language learning methodology used in European bilingual education, but CLIL comes in many shapes and sizes (Eurydice, 2006, 2012; Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigos, 2008). The concept of CLIL is still being discussed, developed and refined by practitioners and researchers (Cenoz, Genese, & Gorter, 2013; Perez-Canado, 2016) and therefore a universal definition of CLIL is lacking. In this study, we will use the definition by Coyle et al. (2010) which focuses on CLIL practice in general terms:

Content and Language Integrated Learning is a dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. That is, in the teaching and learning process there is a focus not only on content and not only on language (p.1).

Cummins’ (1981) classic second language learning theory proposed a distinction between the language used in informal, social settings, and the formal academic language used for learning in schools. CLIL focuses on the latter because insufficient knowledge of academic language, i.e. subject-specific and/or technical language, can impede a full understanding of content knowledge and affect student achievement. Other research, however, points out that learning and teaching the less formal, conversational language in the CLIL classroom should not be undervalued because it is important as a means to support teaching and learning of academic language (Dale, Van Der Es, & Tanner, 2010; Llaenas, Morton, & Whittaker, 2012).

Based on Coyle's holistic 4Cs framework (1999), the language triptych (Coyle et al., 2010) and Cummins’ matrix (1984) every CLIL lesson plan should be based on how content relates to cognition, communication and culture. Teaching CLIL implies that subject teachers carefully plan, prepare and execute lessons in order to simultaneously develop students’ subject content knowledge and language skills. This is achieved by learning and using academic and subject-specific words, concepts and skills in the L2 through scaffolding, using authentic (i.e. original English or American) teaching materials and cognitive challenging assignments.

At first glance the basic four phased structure of a CLIL lesson plan looks similar to any standard foreign language lesson plan: activation of prior knowledge, use of appropriate teacher (L2-) input, assignments that stimulate comprehension and students’ (L2-) output, and finally teacher assessment of student performance by means of corrective feedback on the (L2-) output. However, there is a major distinction in focus between the two. Whereas foreign language teaching has a predominant focus on developing grammar, vocabulary and social language, CLIL has a dual focus on developing both linguistic skills and subject content in every stage of the lesson (Bertaux, Cooman, Frigos-Martin, & Mehisto, 2009; Coyle et al., 2010; Dale & Tanner, 2012; De Graaff, Koopman, Anikina, & Westhoff, 2007; Mehisto et al., 2008; Vazquez & Ellison, 2013).

It is therefore essential to find out how BHTs perceive their dual role in teaching CLIL. In this research, we have questioned them on planning, preparing and performing both content and language learning activities. We have also asked them to compare teaching CLIL at different levels in grades 7 and 9 to find out if and how they appreciate the similarities and differences between these age groups.

1.2. Dutch mainstream and bilingual education

In order to be admitted to the pre-university bilingual education stream Dutch students first need a positive pre-university recommendation (based on performance tests) from their primary schools. They are generally also required to demonstrate their motivation and ambition through an interview or application letter. The bilingual programme, therefore, can be considered selective (Perez-Canado, 2016; Verspoor et al., 2015) and attracts high achievers (Mearns, 2015).

Dutch secondary education ends with national exams in Dutch. Therefore, bilingual education stops in grade 9 and all exam subjects are taught in Dutch in grades 10, 11 and 12. Bilingual education schools can choose to offer non-exam subjects in the L2 in years 10 through 12 and thus continue a form of CLIL education in upper secondary classes.

The Dutch network of bilingual schools safeguards the quality of
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