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CLIL experiences in Cuba: expanding our language learning horizons

To Loly Corona

1. Introductory words

English language is considered an international language due to the economic, scientific, cultural and political power of the countries in which it is considered an official language today (United States, Great Britain, Canada etc.). English is worldwide spoken by more than 400 million people as a mother tongue and used by more than 700 other millions as a foreign language. This language has gained such an important role in modern society that nowadays it is vital in all branches of the social development.

Concerning education, English is taught in almost every corner of the world and specialized publications provide more and more specific and technical information using that language. The up-to-date bibliography for every subject of the human knowledge also appears in English. That is why students should learn English, at least for practical school purposes.

In the XX century, language teaching underwent many experiences, ideas and changes. Different linguistic, psychological and pedagogical principles were established and rejecting them now would lead to inefficacy. The application of theories about what language is and how it is taught has given rise to different methods and approaches.

A method is some overall means of achieving the general objectives of a course; it will be realized as carrying out of a set of procedures or activities which will have been chosen by the teacher because they together relate coherently to the way in which it is hoped to reach the course objectives. A method is thus realized as a set of procedures; the procedures themselves involve the use of specific techniques to ensure their success (Morrow 1981).

According to Jack C. Richards, a method is a set plan of the language content structured in a given approach. An approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural. Different methods may be based on only one approach.

The road to language learning has been paved with all sorts of methods and approaches, from the traditional ones giving priority to grammatical competence as the basis of language proficiency, to more contemporary ones focusing on communication and competences development.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a very recent approach to teaching the content of curricular subjects through the medium of a non-native language. It means that learners gain knowledge and understanding of a curricular subject while simultaneously learning and using the target language.

What is important here is the integration of language and content and the proven success of integrated learning in what concerns the learning outcomes (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Rehorick & Edwards, 1994). That success is such that there are even voices claiming the necessity of totally discarding traditional language-focused ESP teaching as obsolete in favor of integrated learning. For instance, Bicknell (2009) posed the question why we should teach Business English traditionally if CLIL can do it much more efficiently.

2. Perspectives of English language studies in Cuba and CLIL

In Cuba, English is a compulsory part of the national curriculum at all educational levels: elementary, secondary and tertiary; however our society not only demands professionals who use English as a tool for their specific purposes, but there is an urgent need of professionals of English language such as professors, translators, interpreters, tour guides. With the purpose of meeting this demand, at eight Cuban universities hundreds of students are majoring in English Language Studies with a second foreign language and will hopefully become the expected professionals to their nation.

The highest goal of the professional profile established by the Cuban Ministry of Higher Education for English Language Studies is to prepare a professional, competent enough to contribute either as a translator or as an interpreter, within our historically concrete context, to the communication with non-Spanish-speaking people and the effective and efficient teaching of foreign languages, so that our society could develop culturally and professionally by using them (MES, 2009).

During the preparation of English Language Majors, content and language integrated practices constitute a guiding principle. Students should be able to use the target language and integrate acquired knowledge and skills developed during their training stage. In general, the integration in disciplines such as Linguistics, Translation, Interpreting, and Foreign Language Teaching Methodology is clear for many people. However, very frequently, the potential in other school subjects is not taken into consideration.

Curricular subjects, such as Literature, History, Linguistic Stylistics, Semantics, and many others, convey the corresponding fundamentals for a general comprehensive preparation and provide a natural content for language study. They could all be integrated to language learning for a more coherent and true-to-life training. There is a huge potential in all their contents to develop a more competent preparation of the English Majors at the Cuban Universidad Central “Marta Abreu” de Las Villas (UCLV). The contents as well as the skills they develop may be

effectively exploited with this purpose in mind and the final outcome is really helpful for the students' lives and careers.

The experiences in this paper contribute to lead to the expansion of the professional horizons of the English language students. The mentioned curricular subjects only comprise limited contents. The rest is left for postgraduate courses, as is customary at university level. This is why exploiting their potential to learn and use the target language becomes crucial, based on the principles behind Content and Language Integrated Learning including global statements such as '*all teachers are teachers of language*' (The Bullock Report - A Language for Life, 1975) and considering the benefits of CLIL in terms of cultural awareness, internationalization, language competence, preparation for both study and working life, and increased motivation.

3. CLIL experiences at UCLV

The English Language Studies started at UCLV in the first semester of 1989-1990 school year. Until that moment there were similar studies only in Havana and Oriente Universities. At that time, there was the emerging necessity to start the development of touristic activity by the North Keys of Villa Clara province recently connected by a causeway. Besides, it was necessary to prepare more foreign language teachers to complete and enlarge the university staff. The President of UCLV at that time, Dr. Luis I. Gómez Gutiérrez, summoned the members of the existing English Language Department and explained these necessities to them. Then, on September 1989, the UCLV President officially opened the English Language Studies at UCLV for students coming from the central provinces.

Twenty years later, there are graduates from the UCLV English Language Studies in the staff of prestigious national entities as embassies, convention centers, hotels, important enterprises and ministries. Their general comprehensive preparation made them suitable for their different key jobs as interpreters, representatives, officials, public services, managers, researchers, and many others.

In the road to improve the quality of the English Language Studies courses development to the levels of contemporary standards worldwide, the teaching staff has worked out different strategies. One of them was the integration among different courses of the curriculum as a feasible and necessary practice and all of them to language learning: all for one and one for all. Such practice allows for advanced flexibility in the curriculum; use of theoretical and methodological frameworks of different sciences; emphasis on the teaching and learning process; revitalization of the teacher's role, stimulating creativity as well as cognitive and pedagogical upgrading; invigoration of the pedagogical community; enhancement of the students' scientific outlook; to assist the concretion and practical use of contents; overall understanding of the society by students, and active participation by students. (Sánchez, 2007)

3.1 Course on History of the English Speaking People

Successful History classes need to be not only scientific, well-planned, well-framed and well-addressed, but also expressive, which consents for enjoyment in addition to a more perpetual and significant knowledge attainment.

The experience at UCLV tells of a course delivered to a class arranged in orderly rows to allow for lecturing and occasionally, switching to interactive practices to engage the students in the learning process. Instructions start with an activity aiming to provide the students with the opportunity to practice speaking in the course of their own introductions to each other.

The History lessons are planned including language activities catering for all skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening) and learning styles as for instance, problem-solving tasks, work with quotations, films discussion, simulation games, newscast, interpreting political cartoons and writing collective newspapers, among others like the following:

ACTIVITY: Dictionary work

OBJECTIVES:

Word-study: practice skills in working with monolingual dictionaries

Practice speaking skills (giving information)

PROCEDURE:

a) Number heads together: in pairs, give each a slip of paper with different words and monolingual dictionaries to look them up.

b) Instruct the students to prepare definitions of the assigned words to share with the class.

WORDS: monopoly // pools // syndicate // trust // cartel // corporation

c) Have each team explain the definitions to the class.

d) The teacher uses a power point presentation with examples of each

TEACHING AID: Slips of paper; Dictionaries.

CLASS ORGANIZATION: In pairs.

3.2 Course on Literary Appreciation

Teaching Literary Appreciation to undergraduates majoring in English at the university has always been a huge challenge for both instructors and learners. It is one of the courses most students neglect or one of those they feel less motivated about, considering the intensively theoretical as well as somehow abstract nature of such

curricular discipline. It is also challenging for both instructors and learners, because of the lack of bibliography available to develop the course, either active or passive texts.

This proposal suggests teaching Literary Appreciation courses with revolutionary, engaging and effective language learning techniques. That is, for instance, activating the teaching-learning process by changing from intensive reading and discussion sessions or literary theory analysis of assigned literary works, to interacting with those works through artistic expressions like, drama techniques, visuals journals, music, and so forth to develop a more comprehensive understanding and with this, more coherent language learning to make this process more lively; also to develop meaningful learning and active students' participation in the pursuit of success. The use of story/poem reports in every lesson is another successful technique, because the students will read whatever they choose and will share their favorite readings with the class using the literary tools studied throughout the course.

One more technique involves the integration of contents from different subjects in a comprehensive activity. Here the students team up. Each team picks a poem originally written in English language and an appropriate version in Spanish language of the same one. The teams carry out a literary analysis of the poem according to the elements studied in previous lessons. They analyze the selected Spanish version, and evaluate it with the tools they develop in their Translation course. Students explain why they selected that version, and provide suggestions that could improve the translation. They could even provide their own translation. The students compare both languages through the poem to identify its successes and failures regarding the elements studied during the course. They prepare and give an oral presentation of their research to an audience (the rest of the students of the group and the teachers of the three courses) who ask questions based on what they know from the studied lessons.

With the previously described activity, students showed interest from the very beginning; assimilate the research modality in a serious way; go deeper into the study of different areas of knowledge; not only literary and linguistic knowledge are applied, but also the cultural knowledge of students is activated; students learn to find creative solutions to different problems by producing their own Spanish version of the poems, after arguing why none of the found ones was satisfactory for them.

3.3 Course on Literature of the English Speaking People

Studying literature on a regular context for elemental studies of foreign languages is not a torture intended to make miserable the lives of students who do not like reading. As a matter of fact, this subject continues to improve the competence of the student in the foreign language, either in its variant of oral-interpersonal language, monologue, or in its writing form; through debate, description, explanation, or essaying.

But, there is still another line in which this course could make contribution to the formation of proficient professionals in the field of translation and interpretation. Sometimes we ignore how powerful literature could be to develop a cultural awareness in foreign-language students. Literary works need to be approached alive and not as dead printed paper detached from human beings' nature or realities. Literature is a subjective version of life transformed by the creativity and imagination of the authors. The more lively the analysis and the closest to the human condition and objective reality, the better it will be.

To comply with the most contemporary standards of the XXI century teaching and learning, the course on US Literature is developed through interactions, using the World Wide Web, featuring webpages, open readings, responding to readings, the use of recordings and visuals like movie adaptations of literary works, and class presentations aided by visuals like power point among others.

One of the most effective activities used to this day is the "Press Conference". This is a simulation of a press conference with outstanding US authors. The students receive the instructions from the beginning of the course and the activity is scheduled for the last class meeting in the semester, in the form of a review. All the students will represent different authors (dead or alive) attending a press conference in Cuba, and they act like them and even dress like them; in addition, they all interact with the authors through questions based on their previous studies about those authors along the course, and also act as interpreters to facilitate the communication of the authors with the Cuban students attending the conference. By the end, all students will receive an evaluation based on their performances, questions, and also as interpreters.

The reported experience verified the feasibility and the necessity of designing activities integrating content and language skills developed in the preparation process of English Language Majors. This activity provides for the development of competences fostering meaningful learning by connecting and making a coherent use of the students' own learning background knowledge to that developed at the university level.

4. Concluding words

While Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) provides opportunities to practice English for communicative purposes, CLIL provides opportunities to practice communication, because if students learn to communicate by communicating then the destination and the route become one and the same (Nunan, 1989).

As expressed by Dolores Corona at the III British Council Conference in Havana City, English language teaching in Cuba is getting to a momentum. Therefore, it is the teachers' task to set to work in order to expand the language learning horizons assisted by approaches like CLIL, which in the opinion of these authors, seems to be the closest attempt to this day, to attain the goal of teaching how to communicate and use the target language effectively, from a natural context to an increasingly demanding world.

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