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Integrating curricular contents and language through storytelling: criteria for effective CLIL lesson planning

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Abstract

Storytelling is a receptive and productive educational resource in which social values, content and language are linked and integrated (López Téllez, 1996; Hearn & Garcés, 2005; Miller & Pennycuff, 2008, etc.). Hence, as a current approach to language teaching, CLIL represents the best framework for providing young learners the effective acquisition of some topics from the curriculum (Bentley, 2010, p.6). However, this methodological approach requires establishing quality criteria for successful and sustainable CLIL teaching and learning. This paper aims to explore the complex process of delivering effective CLIL lessons through storytelling and to illustrate a framework (Bloom, 1956; Coyle, 2005 and Coyle et al. 2010) that a pre-primary teacher needs to apply in order to facilitate learners’ linguistic development and acquisition of content knowledge. These theoretical principles are then exemplified and assessed in the development of microteachings conducted at Universidad de Alcalá, where student teachers could reflect on 1) the establishment of an appropriate framework for successful and sustainable CLIL teaching and learning, 2) the effective teaching and learning of some curricular topics through storytelling and 3) the potential development of language and cognitive skills. The findings of the study report that storytelling can be considered an effective educational CLIL resource that facilitates not only the effective acquisition of contents from the curriculum, but also cognitive development and communication in another language. Limitations of the present paper call for further research in the young learner classroom.

Keywords: CLIL framework; young learners; storytelling; culture; language learning and teaching.

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1. Introduction

Using stories in education can facilitate not only the cognitive development and effective acquisition of the curriculum, but also communication in another language and learning from other cultures (Ellis & Brewster, 1991, 2002; Taylor, 2000 & Luque Agulló, 2001).

Marsh (1994, 2000) advocated that in school contexts there is greater success in learning foreign languages through subjects than through functional separate curricular areas that deal with language in isolation. Working different topics through storytelling can contribute to this purpose.

Due to the scarce research of studies on the value of Storytelling in CLIL, the aim of the present study is to provide a detailed description of appropriate criteria (Bloom, 1956; Coyle, 2005 and Coyle et al. 2010), which explain how the integration of storytelling in language learning develops communication and can serve as a practical tool for teachers in bilingual environments (Illán, 2007 and Fernández Antelo, 2010).

2. Literature review

Learning a foreign language with tales offers the opportunity not only to develop different activities in which students can improve the four skills and reinforce the language, but also to acquire and introduce new contents, as shown by Foley and McKeny (2012, p. 322). According to Marsh (2000), this educational approach where some content learning is taught in an additional language is called CLIL and involves several models.

The framework proposed by Coyle (2005) considers the integration of content, cognition, communication and culture using storytelling as the main theme. These elements should be developed at the same time and under the same conditions (Coyle et al. 2010).

Working the content of a story allows students acquire the specific knowledge of an area or develop curriculum issues (Kelly et al. 2013). For example, in the case of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Jacobs, 1890), children can use the foreign language to learn the cycle of plants growing a seed (Science) or create a puppet giant to familiarize with the figure of the Cyclops in Greek mythology (Literature), etc.

According to Barreras (2004) and Miller and Pennycuff (2008) storytelling develops communication. It helps improve language as the self-esteem of the students is increased because they are more motivated to express their ideas. Linguistically, stories present grammar, vocabulary, and structures within a meaningful context that supports comprehension of the narrative world and the content the story is related to (Glazer and Burke 1994).

The relationship between language and cognition (thinking and understanding) is complex; effective learning involves cognitive challenge and feedback (Coyle, 2005). In this regard, Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) constitutes a key tool for educators and suggests sequencing activities cognitive levels spanning from the simplest or LOTS (Low Order Thinking Skills), which are remembering and understanding, to the most complex or HOTS (High Order Thinking Skills) which are applying, analysing, evaluating and creating).

Thus, following the model proposed by García Esteban (2013), if the objective is to develop Bloom's taxonomy with a story, first we can ask students about their favourite one and comment it. To introduce new vocabulary we can show images of different folktales, and to recap we can ask the pupils to point familiar related topics with visual elements (remembering). Secondly, we can show a table with folktales and, based on their brief descriptions, we can classify them according to the category they belong to: fairy tales, hero tales or fables (understanding). If our interest is teaching different terms or wh- questions (eg. *Who? Where? What? When?*), to describe a folktale, we can group students and conduct an information fill in the gap activity. In pairs we can complete a chart with the story following wh- questions (applying). Succeeding this activity, students can watch movie trailers and organize them according to the subtype of tale they belong to (analysing). We can ask them to judge whether these stories have bad or good characters (evaluating) and, finally, organize a play or storytelling in groups to be presented in the next class (creating).

The last key element is the development of culture, which introduces the specific intercultural knowledge in the classroom (Coyle, 2005). This concept is considered an influential component in storytelling as it helps transmit...
values such as tolerance and respect. According to Wright (2003) tales convey cultural factors when the setting takes place in different places or time, which helps explain and understand cultural and historical backgrounds, processes, actions and consequences involved in diverse topics.

Since, many of these issues have not been tested yet, it was necessary to observe whether students of a teaching degree program engage these scaffolds through microteaching sessions conceived by Ferry (1983) as a transference model between a real and a simulated session, and how it was perceived by them.

3. Procedure

The participants of this study were twelve third-year full time students of English as a Foreign Language in BA (Hons.) Infant Education. The main project consisted on the preparation and presentation in class of a microteaching based on an optional folktale to work curricular topics. Different teaching strategies and methodologies (included CLIL) had been previously explained in lectures and were expected to be considered during the action. Lesson plans were carried out using traditional (flashcards, puppets, etc.) and technological (YouTube Disney trailers, IWB, etc.) resources following Trujillo et al. (2004) that helped develop communicative skills in a motivating way.

After designing their CLIL lesson plan following Pérez Torres, (2009) and conducting their microteaching, the student teachers were required to work through a close questionnaire about self-performance based on the three rubrics mentioned below. In the questionnaire, based on Johnson (2007) and Pool et al. (2013, p. 455), students had to select in a scale from 1 (“yes”) to 2 (“no”). Quantitative data comprised ten Likert-scale questions related to 1) the establishment of an appropriate framework for successful and sustainable CLIL teaching and learning, 2) the effective teaching and learning of some curricular topics through storytelling and 3) the development of language and cognitive skills. Qualitative data were obtained from an open question concerning rationalization of the experience.

4. Results

The results of the learners´ responses and reflections on their own teaching show that the developed process meets the objectives, as shown in table 1. The use of direct quotes will be used in order to provide evidence of the views stated by the participants.

Table 1. Reflection on story-based microteaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4Cs Planning Framework</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTENT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear curricular teaching aims</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COGNITION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning on LOTS (4 low order thinking skills)</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning on HOTS (3 high order thinking skills)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops activities to encourage all cognitive skills</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate scaffolding</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CULTURE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presents &amp; develops cultural awareness in students</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connects culture with a curricular topic</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indicates other cultural related elements</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings revealed that all participants chose a correct topic to teach the content of a curricular area using storytelling, hence broadening their specific knowledge of the curriculum of Infant Education. Although 95% of contestants used LOTS, only 30% showed engagement in developing students’ thinking and understanding by introducing “where?, what?, who?” questions that go beyond “display” requests. 70% of the students designed activities that developed all cognitive skills with the use of diverse scaffolding techniques (70%).

Within the curricular area of Knowledge and Understanding of the World, the main topics of our lesson on Cinderella were housing & housework. We aimed to explore where children live so that they comprehend the world around.

All students presented cultural elements in storytelling that developed self and other awareness and citizenship within a curricular area. 95% related culture with other topics.

Working the Jungle Book children were able to recognize own feelings and the feelings of others (cross, alone, etc.) and a different civilization, thus connecting Personal, Social and Emotional Development with Knowledge and Understanding of the World curricular areas.

Outcomes revealed that 90% respondents presented language for learning content through interaction. Within the area of Communication, Language and Literacy, our story Goldilocks allows children use language to describe, predict and explain events and sequence a familiar story handing visuals in pairs.

Only 30% participants included HOTS questions (what do you think?, why?) in organisational language to enhance communication.

5. Discussion

Lessons proved to be a success because apprentices understood from the very beginning that “holistic learning experiences are constructed through rigorous attention to detail in planning and teaching”, in the words of Cameron (2008, p. 184), hence confirming the students’ concern of planning lessons following a particular framework (4Cs) to be effective.

Results also showed that storytelling is considered a useful resource to develop thinking skills and content language. As different topics had to be covered, student teachers often needed to prepare well for classes -find materials, resources and information from different sources-, which enhanced different language skills such as summarizing, retelling or using different registers, etc.

Contemplation and use of content, culture and language procedures through tales was, consequently, considered an important factor that contributes to the appropriateness of teaching CLIL lessons. However, cognitive skills were not always considered in lesson planning due to the difficulty of developing HOTS questions at early stages. This circumstance can be attributed, in accordance with Riera Toló (2009), to the psycho - evolutionary characteristics of young children, which prevented Infant Education students from using too complex thinking/learning to learn language and communicative activities.
6. Conclusions

Storytelling can be considered an excellent resource to teach contents and language following specific criteria. Using a specific CLIL framework permits learning curricular topics in a foreign language with different strategies, resources and materials. Teaching environmental or cultural contents through storytelling can become a valuable experience for children, as they are encouraged to use new language in a communicative and motivating way. From early stages students can learn how to combine all their cognitive strengths and a variety of skills while they acquire new knowledge and learn a foreign language. However, bearing in mind the intellectual development process of young children, it should be considered efficient to plan syllabi and teach curricular topics with specific scaffolds that also foster high order thinking and language skills. Practical structures that can assist teachers in effectively employing stories in their CLIL teaching have been illustrated. The present paper calls for further observation and research in the young learner classroom.

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