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Learning journalistic opinion genres using CLIL methodology

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Abstract: The Faculty of Business and Communication recently started an internationalization process that, in two year's time, will allow all undergraduate students (studying Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations, Business and Marketing) to take 25% of their subjects in English using CLIL methodology. Currently, Journalism is the degree course with the greatest percentage of CLIL subjects, for example *Current Affairs Workshop*, a subject dedicated to analyzing current news using opinion genres. Moreover, because of the lack of other subjects offered in English, ERASMUS students have to take some journalism subjects in order to complete their international passport, and one of the classes they choose is the *Current Affairs Workshop*. The aim of this paper is to explore how CLIL methodology can be useful for learning journalistic opinion genres (chat-shows, discussions and debates) in a subject where Catalan Communication students –with different levels of English- share their knowledge with European students of other social disciplines. Students work in multidisciplinary groups in which they develop real radio and TV programs, adopting all the roles (moderator, technician, producer and participants), analyzing daily newspapers and other sources to create content, based on current affairs. This paper is based on the participant observation of the lecturers of the subject, who have designed different activities related to journalistic genres, where students can develop their skills according to the role they play in every assignment. Examples of successful lessons will be given, in addition to the results of the course: both positive and negative. Although the objective of the course is to examine professional routines related to opinion genres, and students are not directly graded on their level of English, the Catalan students come to appreciate how they finally overcome their fear of working in a foreign language. This is a basic result of their experience.

1. Introduction, objectives and methodology

This paper explores how CLIL methodology can be used in teaching journalistic opinion genres, using English as the language of instruction. The paper focuses on the participant observation of the lecturers of a CLIL course called *Current Affairs Workshop* taught in the Business and Communication Faculty at the University of Vic during the first semester of the academic year 2013-2014.

The students of the course were a mixture of Catalan journalism students¹, a Catalan business student, and Erasmus students from different countries (mostly from Germany and the Netherlands) and from different academic disciplines (public relations, audiovisual communication, business administration, and journalism) One of the biggest challenges faced by the lecturers was the varying level of English of the students, with the international students generally having a higher level of English than the home students. This was reflected in the home students' initial reluctance to participate in oral activities. Another difficulty encountered was the differing academic backgrounds of the international students: only two were studying journalism, while almost all the home students were.

Table 1: Student information

Nationality	Number students	Undergraduate studies
The Netherlands	2	Publicity and Public Relations
	1	Marketing
	1	Audiovisual Communication
	4	Business Administration
Germany	2	Business Administration

¹ Referred to as home students

Poland	2	Journalism
Spanish/Catalan ("home")	17	Journalism
	1	Business Administration

Total home students: 18

Total ERASMUS students: 12

Given the challenges presented by the idiosyncratic backgrounds of the students, great importance was given to the selection of the lecturers of the course. A previous paper (Ginesta, Coll-Planas, San Eugenio, 2013) highlighted the need for both content teachers and language specialists to co-teach the course, to give advice and guidance to students on both content and language. Although co-teaching requires a greater degree of coordination, and considerable effort on the part of the teachers, it was thought that the combination of content specialist and language specialist would be beneficial for the students. In this case, the teacher profiles were:

The content teacher is a journalist and has a PhD in Communication and Journalism, with 11 years' experience working in media and 9 years' experience of teaching journalism-related subjects, with a C1 level of English. The classes led by the content teacher were both theoretical and practical.

The language specialist is a CELTA-qualified native English speaker, with a BA in International Business Studies, and seven years' experience of teaching English to

undergraduate students. The classes led by the language teacher were communication based, using different activities to discuss various current affairs topics.

It is clear that the requirements of the lecturers teaching this course were higher than those of lectures teaching their "normal" subjects: the content specialist had to have a proficient level of English, and the language teacher had to have some knowledge of journalism and current affairs. Of note here is the motivation of the two lecturers to coordinate and teach a course, which satisfied student expectations.

2. Theoretical framework

In 1995, the Catalan Government promoted a plan in order to introduce foreign languages into primary schools (Vallbona, 2008). This was the beginning of content language integrated learning (CLIL) programs in Catalonia, which were also introduced in high schools and universities in 2012. However, a long-term study of the advantages of this methodology will not be possible until the original CLIL primary students reach university (Ginesta, Coll-Planas, San Eugenio, 2013).

CLIL has been considered by the University for two main reasons: on the one hand, with the aim of finding a more effective way to teach languages. On the other hand, as a result of the European integration process, which creates the necessity to improve the foreign language level of new students (Marsh and Largé, 1999; Marsh, Marsland and Maljers, 1998; Marsh, 2008; Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010).

Currently, most students learn formal aspects of foreign languages, but they still have a lot of problems when applying them in real situations. For this reason, Marsh (2008) establishes that we have to move beyond "formal education" to give more importance to the use of the language. The obsolete way of understanding foreign language learning is

evident in Spain when we take into account the ranking of English users in non-English speaking countries: Spain is 24th (EF EPI, 2009).

CLIL refers to any learning context where content and language are integrated in order to reach specific educational objectives (Marsh, 2008). CLIL methodology is used when a teacher of foreign languages teaches content, which is not linked to the language learning process. It is also used when a teacher uses a foreign language in order to teach content to his or her students (Marsh, 2008). In this paper, we present a case study where both situations can be identified. A language lecturer and a journalist are using English to lead a course based on the analysis of current affairs, which is offered, together, to the international students and home students of the Faculty of Business and Communication.

Coyle (2005) states that the implementation of CLIL lessons is based on the four “Cs”: “content”, refers to the working progress and techniques used to follow a curriculum in English; “communication”, because language is used to learn and communicate; “cognition”, because students develop techniques and capabilities in both their first and second language, in abstract and concrete contexts; “culture”, because culture is one of the most important elements of a bilingual program: learning a language also implies a knowledge of the language’s country of origin.

In CLIL evaluation, it is fundamental that lecturers focus on the communication and fluency skills of the students, not on grammar. For this reason, when evaluating CLIL it is important to reward communication skills, not those based on memory or grammar. According to Álvarez (in Álvarez et al., 2009), bilingual learning which integrates language and content has great potential, but we must not impose strict methodological principles: the application of the method must be adapted to the context. Vallbona (2008), in her PhD research, states that students who use CLIL methodology improve their listening and

fluency skills, but not accuracy. Other research has reached the same conclusion, such as Patsy and Lightbrown (in Vallbona, 2008) or Ginesta, Coll-Planas and San Eugenio (2013), analyzing the specific case of the University of Vic bilingual program in Journalism studies.

3. Discussion

The objectives, or learning outcomes of the course “Current Affairs Workshop” (in the third year of Journalism), were three-fold: firstly, to gain an understanding of current affairs and their evolution in the news, using English; secondly, to produce a real journalistic product (a radio debate) with real social actors in English; finally, to provide a space where home and international students could discuss the topics they share an interest in.

From the lecturers' point of view, the main aim of the course was to provide an enjoyable and gratifying learning experience, guaranteeing that students would learn more about opinion genres and improve their English skills. At the end of the course, students were required to have produced real journalistic material (radio debate) and have used English to talk or write about a number of topics (opinion articles and press kits).

The course design and teaching methodology were largely determined by the students' background and the learning outcomes of the course. Special emphasis was placed on using expert groups. Students were divided into different groups concentrating on one topic in the press. The expert groups were politics, culture, gossip, sports, social affairs and the economy. During the first class, the students had to choose their groups and expert topic themselves. They were asked to give a brief introduction of themselves and to state which topic they were interested in to the rest of the class, and then they were given time to find other students with similar interests. The only constraints placed by the lecturers

were that the groups contained a mix of home and international students, and that each group had to focus on a different topic.

Over the course, each group was required to present a press kit and give a presentation of at least 10 stories from the previous week's news, all focusing on their topic. This was part of the continued assessment, and students had to generate debate among the rest of the students, either through posing questions or suggesting debate topics. In addition, each group gave a commentary of two articles previously chosen by the content teacher, which were not related to their area of expertise.

At the end of the course, each expert group invited real social actors to take part in a radio debate on their expert area, which was recorded in the university's radio studio. Each member of the group had a different role, including the anchorman or anchorwoman, journalists, the technician and producer. The aim was to produce a real journalistic product, applying the student's knowledge of opinion genres, using English.

The course focused on working on opinion genres, rather than informative and interpretative genres, as opinion genres are those where journalists and non-journalists can participate more actively at the same time. For example, in a debate, the implication of journalists and experts is essential for its success. Examples of opinion genres are, in the press, personal columns, editorials, portraits or news analysis. In the audiovisual media, examples are radio or television chat shows, face-to-face, debates or discussions. In this particular case, the journalists were the home students, and the non-journalists were the international students. The international students were therefore not at a disadvantage, as they were able to use prior knowledge of their undergraduate studies or interests to enrich the tasks.

Although students had to develop real journalistic content for press, radio and television, students were also required to buy a dossier of reading material, which comprised recent articles from *Time Magazine*, and other international press. This material was important to improve students' knowledge of some of the most important topics of recent times, such as the election of the new Pope, the economic crisis of Europe, the Catalan secession process, and other social affairs topics. It is important to understand that not all the students had the same previous knowledge of current affairs –they came from different countries, as said in the introduction of this text. Therefore it was important to fix some important topics, as the basic frames of this course. There were three sections in the dossier: one section of articles which were to be read and commented on each week, with a related activity; one section with similar articles which students analyzed, compared and presented to the rest of the class; and some grammar material to help students with their written assignments, such as linking words or phrasal verbs. The articles were all chosen by the content teacher, on the basis that they would generate discussion and other activities, and would be of interest to the whole group, both journalism and international students. It was intended that each student could apply their prior knowledge and schema when participating in classes and activities.

Taking into account all the structure and material of the course, CLIL methodology was used in each class in the following ways:

Ice breakers

At the beginning of classes students were asked to brainstorm topics, come up with lists and examples of topics, or give their opinions on homework from the previous week. The aim was to set the atmosphere for the next, related activity. The use of ice breakers was important in checking whether students had actually prepared the required material before

class, and to determine what students already knew about the topic. The ice breakers were all lower-level thinking skills designed to put the students at ease and welcome them to the class.

Prior knowledge

Students were required to work in groups and answer questions related to the topic studied in class (which were varied and from all fields of study), for example, articles on crowdfunding, human rights abuses in Qatar, or the Middle East conflict, among others.

At this point new language was introduced, to prepare students for the following activities. Techniques included providing students with a glossary, or matching words and their definitions.

Scaffolding

All higher-level thinking activities were carried out either in groups of mixed nationalities, as mentioned above, or larger groups with half of the class. The latter technique was used in classes with debates, with a question posed by the teacher, the class split in two, and time allocated to prepare arguments either for or against the question. Of interest here is that the students' position in the debate did not always reflect their real position on the topic. It was thought that asking the students to defend a different point of view would encourage critical thinking, and enable them to research and understand different points of view.

In addition, all activities were broken down into smaller tasks, for example, questionnaires, pair work, and quizzes. The students reported back to the rest of the class after each activity, before starting the following task. Hard copies of material were provided for each

activity, to give less proficient students more support and visual aids. In this way, the lecturers anticipated the possible language difficulties of the students.

Debriefing

Debriefing activities included reporting back to the rest of the group for discussion with the teacher, or debates which applied knowledge and new language acquired during the class.

3.1 Outcomes

From both the lecturers' and students' point of view, the experience of learning about journalistic opinion genres has been positive. Informal consultation with the students at the end of the course has revealed that, from the home students' point of view (and who were the most linguistically challenged at the beginning of the course) they were satisfied with the course and will recommend it to fellow students next year. On the other hand, the international students also expressed satisfaction of the course, but not just academically. They stated that the *Current Affairs Workshop* was one of the only opportunities they had to mix with Catalan students, as many of the other courses they were taking were made up of entirely international students. This in itself is problematic: the international students who come to study at the University of Vic don't need any prior knowledge of Spanish, and can study the whole semester or year in English. While this is advantageous for attracting international students, the downside is that some students return to their home universities with only a basic grasp of Spanish, despite having spent a whole semester in Spain.

In fact, although the home students had to force themselves to speak English and the language most frequently used in class was English, the international students also enjoyed the chance to practice Spanish in class with their local classmates.

Using mixed-nationality groups "forced" the students to speak English as much as possible, while giving them a natural reason for doing so. Usually, in homogenous groups students will try to use L1, at least while the teacher isn't listening, but adding an international student changes the group dynamics and provides students with an incentive to use English in a more natural way, thereby increasing motivation to speak English. The students know that if they want to complete a given task, they must communicate with the other students in their group. Another reason for using mixed groups was that the most of the Catalan students were journalism students, whereas the most of the international students had no or little prior knowledge of journalism. Combining them created multidisciplinary groups. This gave the Catalan students the opportunity to be "experts" in the genres studied in class, and have a certain authority over the international students. In other words, what the Catalan students were lacking in confidence in their English skills, they made up for with their knowledge of journalism.

3.2 Advantages

The advantages of using CLIL methodology in a mixed-nationality class are:

Most importantly, using mixed-nationality groups gave the students a real reason to speak English in a professional situation. As mentioned above, students will automatically revert to using L1 when working as a group, and if the teacher also speaks L1, some students will try not to use English. This is completely normal and to be expected, so it was positive from a CLIL perspective for students to have the additional motivation to speak English. While students, especially home students, were initially reluctant to speak English at the beginning of the course, they overcame this obstacle to communicate with the rest of their working group. Moreover, in some cases home students came to realize that their level of English was higher than what they had previously thought. This course gave them the

opportunity to put into practice the English they had learned before, whether part of their degree or before starting university.

While the local students were mostly studying journalism, the international students came from many different disciplines (as shown in Table 1). Therefore, having the opportunity to learn about journalism, opinion genres and how to create a radio chat show was beneficial to the students, who perhaps wouldn't have had these opportunities to enrich their education had they taken a course more closely related to their chosen field of study.

It was noticed by the lecturers that the students were using social media, e.g. Facebook, to communicate in English among themselves. Each expert group had their own Facebook page, where they shared articles and activities. Given that one of the aims of the course was to help the students improve their English, this spontaneous use of English outside of the classroom was particularly gratifying, and a direct result of using mixed-nationality groups.

In line with the objectives of CLIL methodology, students were able to widen their range of vocabulary on a number of topics, all related to current affairs, for example, the political situation of Catalonia, religion affairs, drugs, education, entrepreneurship, euomyths, immigration, etc.

Informal conversation with the students at the end of the course revealed that they had enjoyed the *Current Affairs Workshop*. The home students told us that they were particularly satisfied with themselves, as they had been able to talk about a wide range of topics in English. One student even said that he had set himself a challenge by taking the course, and that he was pleased with the outcome. This positive feedback was encouraging for the lecturers, and perhaps in future editions of the course it would be desirable to survey the students to obtain positive and negative feedback.

3.3 Disadvantages

It is difficult to define any significant disadvantages of this course, as the students attended regularly, completed all or most of the assignments, and all passed the course. However, some students (mostly Catalan) found the classes hard to follow due to their low level of English. It was observed by the lecturers that this had a direct effect on motivation in class. Perhaps it would have been preferable for the students to have all passed their obligatory English classes (currently 15 ECTS credits) before taking the *Current Affairs Workshop*, so as to guarantee a minimum level of understanding and fluency in English.

Another possible disadvantage is related to the use of multidisciplinary groups (each group contained both home journalism students, and international students from different areas of study). The use of such groups meant that students weren't experts on some of the topics, for example, the politics students may have had little interest in sports topics, and vice versa, and found it hard to give their opinion in some activities. However, this isn't a disadvantage of using CLIL methodology to teach this course, and resembles what students may encounter in their future professional careers: having to give their opinion on a topic which may be of little interest to them.

Finally, although home students improved their fluency, pronunciation and vocabulary, we did not perceive a notable improvement in grammatical accuracy. The reason for this lies in the original objectives of the *Current Affairs Workshop*, which was to gain an understanding of current affairs using English to produce journalistic products, especially, audiovisual products. For this reason, more importance and time was given in class to communicative skills and activities than grammar.

3.4 Example of a successful lesson

As mentioned previously, each expert group presented a press kit (10 articles from the previous week's press, related to their topic) and a commentary (which was not related to their topic) to the class. This took place every two weeks. In preparation for the commentaries, students were required to read two related articles before class, to help them understand the topic and participate in the class discussion.

After the commentaries, the lecturer provided the students with exercises, quizzes, questions, debate topics, etc. to further develop the commentary topic. Here is an example of a lesson based on the economy and crowdfunding, and a related activity about investment.

Articles:

"The Case for Optimism", by Bill Clinton in *Time Magazine*, 1 October, 2012
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2125031,00.html>

"The Kickstarter Economy", by Harry McCracken in *Time Magazine*, 1 October, 2012
<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2125023,00.html>

Commentary group:

Sports group.

Activity:

Firstly students were given a handout with vocabulary related to investment. Students matched the words and the definitions. All the vocabulary was general, e.g. shares, dividends, capital, to owe, etc.

Secondly, students worked in groups to play the “Inventors and Investors Game”. Each group designed a new product (the inventors), and pitched it to the rest of the group (the investors, or crowdfunders). The objective was to raise enough capital to cover production costs. In return for investment, the inventors had to offer something attractive, true to crowdfunding, such as a share of the profits or dividends. The groups took turns to pitch their new products, and were then given 10 minutes to confer and decide what their favourite products were. They had to spread their capital between at least two companies.

After reporting back with the whole class, the winning group was the one which had raised the most capital.

Language skills: vocabulary for investment, adjectives for describing products, first and second conditional sentences, listening and speaking.

4. Conclusions

The University of Vic has shown its commitment to improving students’ English, especially home students, in order to adapt its education programs to the requirements of global society. For this reason, some degrees are incorporating CLIL methodology in order to achieve this objective. This is the case of the Journalism degree, where students not only have 15 obligatory ECTS in English for Journalism (including grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, writing and speaking), but they can also take optional credits in English related to their degree specialization. This is where *Current Affairs Workshop* is situated.

After two years of co-teaching (using a content lecturer and a language lecturer), the academic results are satisfactory. Above all, home students recognize they improve their fluency, vocabulary and communication skills, while sharing working groups with international classmates. Moreover, mixed groups allow home and international students

to share knowledge and abilities, as well as different perspectives arising from their academic traditions. We believe that the synergies created by using mixed working groups are one of the most important factors in the success of the class. Another important factor is the practical structure of the course, where theory has been reduced and practical experience is the basis for the creation of knowledge.

While it has been noticed that home students do not improve their accuracy, we feel that improving grammar is not the most important objective of this course. Perhaps, the place for this would be English language classes. It is important to realize that given students' varying levels of English it would have been impossible to establish a minimum grammar level for the classes, as levels ranged from B1 to C2.

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