The A-B-C of content teaching in an EMI classroom: Reflecting on language and the co-construction of doing teaching

interviews

MONICA CLUA

UNIVERSITAT INTERNACIONAL DE CATALUNYA

mclua@uic.es

JAVIER JIMÉNEZ

UNIVERSITAT INTERNACIONAL DE CATALUNYA

jjimenez@uic.es

CLIL - Content and Language Integrated Learning, as we know, is an umbrella dual-focused pedagogical approach (e.g., Dalton-Puffer, 2011) that is more commonly associated within contexts of primary and secondary education. Pedagogical strategies and materials are designed to, on the one hand, progressively work towards higher-order thinking and production abilities in areas of content learning in a foreign language, often English, while simultaneously attending to the students' need to develop the relevant linguistic competencies in the target language. To achieve these, and related goals, materials and teaching strategies centre on the principles of integration (Nikula et al., 2016) and high-quality classroom interaction (Walsh, 2006).

But what of the EMI context? Specifically, how is content and language integration achieved (or at least, aimed at) in tertiary education? To allay concerns to some degree, language, in any context, packages knowledge, and knowledge is packaged in language. In other words, language and knowledge co-constitute each other (Airey & Linder, 2009; Lemke, 1990). So, although EMI as such does not hold to explicit language-related goals, studies have shown that teachers do hold themselves and students accountable for the correct use of conventionalised disciplinary language in the field (Clua Serrano 2021; Clua[1] & Evnitskaya, forthcoming, Escobar Urmeneta, 2017; Mancho-Barés, G., & Aguilar-Pérez, M., 2020) as well as deal with language aspects, often

beyond the purely technical range (e.g., Andjelkov, 2022). However, a significant proportion of faculty rejects certain socio-constructivist-based CLIL methodologies that are often used in compulsory-level education (e.g., Kletzenbauer et al., 2022, this issue), believing these approaches should be reserved for university students with low English language proficiency (Aguilar, 2017; Airey, 2016). This not only speaks of the additional investment required of teachers in the EMI enterprise (Doiz et al. 2011), but also of the reported identities at play in teachers as content, and not language, experts (Macaro, 2018; Mancho-Barés, G., & Aguilar-Pérez, M., 2020). All in all, research continues to explore teacher (and student) practices in, and beliefs about, EMI to find ways to optimise teaching and learning in this context. The interview presented here serves to get a glimpse into pedagogical praxis and identity through the experience of one EMI teacher.

Javier Jimenez Jimenez is a tenured Associate Professor in the Department of Basic Science at the Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC Barcelona). He is an experienced lecturer, and through this interview, he reflects on his experience as an EMI teacher of Immunology and Microbiology between the years 2016-2019. He taught this subject in English in the English-track Dentistry programme, and in Spanish in the Spanish-track programme, back-to-back.

1

What do you think are the rationales for teaching (Immunology and Microbiology) in English?

Our university context is the first thing that comes to mind. We have had groups of students where English has been a *lingua franca* between all of us. As part of the growth and internationalisation strategy, the university introduced an English-track program for the first two years of the Dentistry degree, after which the students join the Spanish-track program. So, attracting more international students was, and is, one rationale. However, we are teaching in English also for the sake of our domestic students. Nowadays, English is the primary language of science; you cannot be a scientist without a certain mastery of (scientific) English.

But English is more than a lingua franca - it is the language of science. In fact, when I'm teaching in Spanish, there are many terms I only know in English, because my specialist knowledge comes to me in English rather than in Spanish! For instance, the term '*checkpoint*' in English is clear and precise, whereas if you translated it to Spanish, '*punto de control de regulación de algo*' (point of control in the regulation of something), no one would know what you're talking about! We have to include terms in English to be more precise in Spanish! The integration of terms in English makes teaching science efficient and precise in EMI and in non-EMI lessons.

2

In your experience, how does teaching through a foreign language (English) differ from teaching the same content in your and students' first language (Spanish)?

According to the transcripts and video recordings of my classes[2], I was more efficient in English than in Spanish! In Spanish, I was very wordy and often digressed. Because speaking Spanish is easier than speaking in English, I could ramble on when explaining concepts. When I saw the data, I was actually shocked! From that moment on - from that insight, my teaching in English influenced how I controlled my teaching discourse in Spanish; fewer digressions and more to the point!

> **"English is the primary language of science; you cannot be a scientist without a certain mastery of (scientific) English."**

As for my slides, they were, and continue to be, all in English regardless of whether I was teaching the English- or Spanish-track group. Ever since I was a PhD student, I developed the habit of writing everything in English. That way, for instance, the person coming after me in the lab could understand what I did in my experiments. It was a good exercise for me; not only did my English improve, but I experienced a different quality in the use of the language, which was very motivating. When it comes to my professional world, everything I write, I write in English.

So, in my classes, the very first thing I do is explain why the slides will be in English throughout the course. I address the following points; that learning and talking about science only in Spanish will hinder their development of certain scientific concepts, and not having basic scientific notions *in English* will stop their progress in their field. I do reassure them that using English will not be an obstacle to their understanding, because technical/scientific terms are, more often than not, of Latin or Greek origin. For instance, *microbiology* is really not that different to the Spanish *microbiología*.

As for other methodological aspects, I don't think I structured or sequenced my teaching any differently in English than in Spanish. However, teaching in English was more exhausting. Apart from the general stress, interestingly, the level of general *alertness* in and of the class was higher. In the EMI classroom, there were many different accents and cultures, and you needed to understand them all, so in this aspect, I was on 'high alert' to make sure I could understand and be understood. This single aspect made EMI more demanding.

3

What do you think of the notion `Content and Language Integrated Learning'? What does it mean to you?

Students' ability in general communication in English is not relevant in my classes, whereas specific technical language and the content knowledge it supports is relevant. When Spanish-speaking students learn biology in Spanish, they learn a *new* language - the language of biology in Spanish, and when Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking students learn biology in English, they are learning a new language, that of biology in English.

4

Teaching *in* and *through* English. Any thoughts?

EMI gave me a new vision of education, and the experience took me to a new level in my growth and development as a teacher. But, not only as a teacher. It changed me as a *user* of English. It was gratifying to use English for more than ten minutes in a casual conversation! Through EMI I was using English over an extended stretch of time for a significant goal-driven, defined purpose in a context of higher education. In fact, I had the option of refusing to teach in English, so it was a personal choice to take it on.

5

What do you think are the roles of language in teaching?

So, we are talking about language, not languages, right? Ok, so how could you deliver a lecture without speaking? It would be very difficult! Language is fundamental in a classroom; it is the bricks and mortar of knowledge building, creating relationships with your students and setting the tone in your class. But there is a more 'philosophical' perspective. Through language you produce the *discourse* of your field, and this is more than making sentences with strings of words. A discourse conveys the very concepts, the ideologies and the particular style of thinking proper to a discipline, which is then mobilised to (1) teach students content and (2) socialise them into the profession. In other words, you use the *discourse* to shape minds. Then again, it would be very difficult to deliver a lecture and shape minds standing still like a statue!

6

What kind of texts (genres) and task typologies did students need to become familiar with in your EMI classes?

In both EMI and non-EMI classes, nothing beyond books and research articles, which are all in English. In a few instances I asked them to look at a magazine or a newspaper to find news and stories related to our field. We discussed how something was reported in mainstream media, compared to peer-reviewed books and articles. So, you could say there was a focus on perspective by looking at the same topic through different types of texts.

7

What are the main linguistic characteristics of the aforementioned genres and text types that you focused on or provided support for so that your students could successfully harness these sorts of texts?

As for the textbooks, I don't think I supported the students in any special way. The EMI students were more than capable of understanding them with a little assistance. On the other hand, the language of scientific articles is quite different, and not only the language but also the structure of how to say and explain things. Here I supported them in understanding the structure, and the rationale for the structure, on a macro and sentence level. Although the real problem was not their comprehension of (specialist) English per se, it was more their willingness to grapple with the text.

8

Can you describe an instance or two of exemplary teaching strategies you have used and the outcomes of these?

> **"Through EMI I was using English over an extended stretch of time for a significant goal-driven, defined purpose in a context of higher education."**

> **"Through language you produce the *discourse* of your field, [...] A discourse conveys the very concepts, the ideologies and the particular style of thinking proper to a discipline."**

In both EMI and non-EMI classes, when someone offers an answer to a question, instead of me paragraphing it into a more academic form, I ask *them* to do it for the rest of the class. This works very well. And when I find students asking about a particular point or concept repeatedly, I say to the class "Here is the mic, we need a volunteer to explain xyz to the rest of the class." Surprisingly, the volunteers normally give really good explanations! In fact, sometimes better than me! Things click into place and you can see that 'ah!' moment on the other students' faces. So those students act like translators. They help me teach. In both EMI and non-EMI, this strategy engages everyone in a discussion, rather than just me talking to them.

9

Can you provide an example of a learning task that you have used in your classes that is useful in both EMI and non-EMI teaching?

I didn't really prepare tasks for either of the classes, and as far as I know, there were no differences regarding approaches. Both EMI and non-EMI classes were quite organic and aimed to encourage student involvement as much as possible. When students participate, they are delivering, translating and transforming information, so I find student participation alone very effective. Participation empowers students and, in a way, it puts some of the responsibility for learning on them.

10

Can you describe the ways in which you adapted the materials from non-EMI teaching for the EMI classroom?

I don't actually adapt the materials - I just make a different part of my brain work, either the English part or the Spanish part! I use the same slides, but I might change the examples I use, because remember I said the classes were somewhat organic. The examples I draw on depend on the day and situation. The EMI and non-EMI classes were scheduled back-to-back; first EMI *or* first non-EMI. I noticed that, regardless of which class came first, there was a positive knock-on effect on the second class, where examples and ways of framing ideas from the first class would then appear in the second one quite naturally, but improved.

11

In what way has teaching EMI classes impacted your way of teaching in your Spanish /non-EMI classes?

As I mentioned before, it was a shock to hear that I was clearer in English than in Spanish. I reflected deeply on how my teaching could be more precise, more accurate and more engaging in English than in Spanish. So, when I teach, particularly in Spanish, there is a part of my brain that says, "Whoa! Take it easy...don't get too complicated... you're messing around… you're confusing them...get to the point!" So, I visualise a tree, I remove the branches and concentrate on the trunk to stay focused and not go down a rabbit hole with my explanations.

I want to mention the insights I gained from teaching Erasmus students *in Spanish* in my previous university. When I switched into an informal register, the Erasmus students would (politely) request I shift back into the formal *academese* mode. But then, the Spanish-speaking students would complain! Whilst for the Erasmus students it was a matter of comprehension, for the Spaniards, the issue was the 'distance' the academic tone created, not comprehension. So these insights have shaped how I teach in English and in Spanish, in that I harness the different registers to support the explanation of a concept.

12

Do you have any final thoughts to share with the readers?

I like languages; they allow us to see things differently. Teaching the same content in Spanish and English is not just an exercise in translation... it's something more, and it's beautiful. ∎

Notes

1 "Clua Serrano, M." (dissertation reference) and "Clua, M." (book chapter reference) are the same author.

2 Researches from the Department of Applied Linguistics collected audio-visual data from his classroom sessions.

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