

CLIL IN BRAZILIAN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS: REFLECTIONS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND PEDAGOGICAL POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract

This article aims to analyze the situation of additional language teaching in Brazilian public High Schools, especially with regard to the English language. We will also examine current policies for language teaching in Brazil, particularly the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC). Finally, we highlight the benefits of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach as a suggestion for effective pedagogical practice in High School, based on an experience carried out at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo (IFES), Montanha campus, where students were exposed to lessons involving geography and cultural studies content in English. Research was conducted on this experience, and the data will be discussed here. This study is grounded in analyses of beliefs about additional language teaching in public schools, such as those conducted by Lima (2011) and Leffa (2011), as well as in discussions on bilingual education and CLIL by García (2009), among others.

Keywords: CLIL, High School, English language teaching.

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to say that, in globalized economies, knowledge of English seems to have been included among the basic skills, and this is bringing about profound changes in who is learning the language, their reasons for learning it, and learners' needs.

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In this scenario, the English language has come to hold considerable market value. According to Bourdieu (1998, p. 98), knowledge is a form of symbolic capital, which is an indicator of prestige that may, at a given moment, be converted into cultural or economic capital, insofar as access to these other forms of capital is enabled by the valuing effect exercised by the individual who possesses it. Thus, today, knowledge of several languages and, above all, of English, would constitute valuable symbolic capital in the contemporary linguistic market.

All these considerations invite us to reassess the reasons for learning an additional language as a subject in the school curriculum, both from the perspective of students' expectations and from that of what would be desirable for the development of a critical awareness of the role that languages play in the world (Gimenez apud Lima, 2011). According to the same author, its teaching could thus explore the hegemonic role that English plays in contemporary society, establishing connections with economic issues. If economic questions are not secondary even for other languages, in the case of English it is impossible to disconnect it from globalization, since it enables the mobility of capital and resources (Graddol, 2006, p. 49).

The acceptance of the high value of English worldwide and the recognition of the existence of attributed meanings that distinguish it from other languages allow the political and ideological aspects involved in language teaching to become more visible. The recovery of an educational dimension that is not only humanistic but also critical appears to be one of the main objectives in the education of English teachers.

Despite the importance of the language, many regular Brazilian schools experience a precarious reality in additional language teaching. Leffa (2011, p. 20) points to some of the reasons for the persistence of teachers who “pretend to teach while students pretend to learn,” such as, in public schools, lack of government investment, poor infrastructure, teachers' lack of preparation, and student indiscipline.

Especially in the context of High School, foreign language teaching in Brazil has historically been guided by approaches that frequently reduce the learning of a second language to mere grammar and vocabulary learning.

However, in the contemporary educational context, there is a growing need for methodologies that integrate the teaching of academic content with foreign language learning, and it is in this context that CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) emerges as an innovative and potentially effective approach.

CLIL proposes a form of teaching that not only teaches the English language, but also uses the language as a tool for learning other academic content, offering students an opportunity to acquire knowledge and develop linguistic competencies simultaneously.

The CLIL proposal is supported by contemporary theories of language teaching and acquisition, such as those of Stephen Krashen, whose hypotheses on language acquisition (Krashen, 1982) highlight the importance of comprehensible input and constant exposure to the language in meaningful contexts.

Krashen (1982) emphasizes the need for students to be exposed to a language in situations of real use, in which interaction with content is more relevant than excessive emphasis on the formal structure of the language. In this sense, by integrating academic content and language, CLIL provides a natural learning context aligned with input theory, which favors the development of linguistic competence.

Ofélia García (2009), in her research on bilingualism and language teaching, also argues for the importance of methodologies that value the active use of language in academic and sociocultural contexts. The author emphasizes that language teaching should not be dissociated from students' sociocultural and cognitive context. In this sense, by allowing English language learning to occur in interaction with other subjects, CLIL creates a contextualized and meaningful learning environment that favors the construction of both linguistic and disciplinary knowledge.

In addition to its theoretical foundations, the use of CLIL in Brazil is supported by educational regulations that promote foreign language learning as an essential component of student education. The

Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB)—Law No. 9,394/96—establishes, in Article 26, that High School must provide students with a broad education that includes the development of competencies in different areas of knowledge, including foreign language learning.

In addition, the National Common Curricular Base (BNCC), approved in 2017, emphasizes the importance of language teaching integrated with the development of cognitive, social, and cultural skills, reinforcing the potential of CLIL as a pedagogical model that promotes more integrated and contextualized learning.

Given this reality, and considering the importance of proficiency in an additional language in the current context, this article is justified by its discussion of possible paths for language teaching in regular Brazilian schools, as well as by its investigation of the use of CLIL in English language teaching in High School, discussing its pedagogical implications and the advantages of this approach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

With regard to elite bilingualism, that is, the teaching of a prestigious additional language, bilingual education in Brazil for children from the dominant group has been increasingly gaining ground, as demand for bilingual schools has grown considerably.

Within this scope, the proposal under consideration here would be an adaptation of the theoretical and practical contribution of the CLIL approach used in bilingual schools to classes in regular Brazilian schools, in High School, with the aim of achieving learning that is more consistent with students' daily needs, as well as more motivating for both teacher and learner.

It is worth noting that such an approach would be in line with the principles of Brazilian policies for language teaching² since it involves interdisciplinary teaching focused on students' real possibilities.

Perhaps the first CLIL-type program of which we are aware dates back approximately five thousand years, in what is now modern Iraq. The Akkadians, who conquered the Sumerians, wanted to

² Specifically, we could say that the CLIL approach would follow the principles of the PCNs (1998) and the PNLD call for proposals (2011) with regard to more interdisciplinary education.

learn the local language. To this end, Sumerian was used as a medium of instruction to teach various subjects to the Akkadians, including theology, botany, and zoology.

In Europe, in more recent times, many people came to understand the value of multilingualism. However, bilingual education seemed, above all, to be a privilege reserved for the wealthiest.³

In the 1970s, with the expansion of language immersion programs, bilingual education became more accessible to children from different social classes—at least in more developed countries.

In the 1980s, Stephen Stryker and Betty Lou Leaver began their research on Content-Based Instruction (CBI), or content-based education. Until then, the use of this methodology was a “rare phenomenon” worldwide (Stryker & Leaver, 1997, p. 281).

The studies by these authors covered a large number of centers that taught additional languages through CBI in the United States, from New York City to California.

According to the authors, the objective of the pioneering teachers using this method was to free learners from old and monotonous approaches and to develop students’ motivation, self-confidence, and personal skills. For Stryker and Leaver (1997, pp. 285–286):

This “new objective” is to “empower” students so that they become autonomous learners. This happens most effectively when we address students’ needs and motivations, help them understand their own learning process, and allow them to take control of their learning from the outset. We believe that CBI, more than any other “method,” stimulates these new roles and objectives. (our translation)

In this sense, CLIL emerged as a new proposal for bilingual education and encompasses any program that uses a second language to teach non-linguistic content. This generic term represents what already exists in different forms in different countries and, moreover, this proposal is capable of supporting language maintenance for groups that speak minority languages (García, 2009, p. 209).

³With regard to elite bilingualism, this type of education is still strongly associated with the financially privileged in Brazil, as we saw in the previous chapter.

The CLIL approach is a way of teaching language in regular schools from preschool through voluntary education for all populations. It is not a special program for some schools, as is the case with immersion bilingual education.

CLIL is providing a practical and sustainable way of leading citizens toward plurilingualism. Although this approach emerged in Europe and was originally used there, it has been gaining ground around the world in many countries that seek to educate children as bilingual individuals through the teaching of one or more school subjects in the additional language.

This approach also makes it possible to adapt it to monolingual communities and to language teaching contexts such as private language courses, since it is broad, flexible, and dynamic. CLIL has already shown favorable results in preparing its students for the bilingual world, since it is based on content learning and thus leads students to learn the second language in real teaching and learning situations.

In addition to all the reasons already mentioned for using a language teaching practice that is more flexible and consistent with the world in which we live, we can identify and present a highly relevant factor characterized by the intense immediacy that surrounds new generations.

Considering CLIL, we can clearly identify that its main characteristic is a policy aligned with this demand for immediate applicability, since this teaching approach is defined by its dual focus: what matters is not only the learning of an additional language or the reinforcement of school content in another language, but rather the integration of the two.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This article was based on essentially qualitative research involving the analysis and discussion of data collected through a semi-open and anonymous questionnaire⁴. However, quantitative data will also

⁴ Disponível no anexo I.

be relevant and will therefore be counted, especially those derived from the objective questions in the questionnaire administered.

In order to collect data on the experience with CLIL in English language classes, we chose to administer a questionnaire to third-year High School students at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo, Montanha campus. These students are generally between 16 and 18 years old and come from the city of Montanha and nearby towns.

The choice of third-year High School students at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo, Montanha campus, was due to the experience of a teacher in applying CLIL during the second year, involving topics in geography and cultural studies, such as different celebrations around the world. The culmination of this work was a Nations Fair, in which each group presented, in English and Portuguese, issues related to the geography, history, sociology, philosophy, arts, among other areas, of a particular country; this work involved the partnership and evaluation of teachers from these subjects.

The questionnaire prepared contains nine questions, eight of which are multiple-choice, and four of these ask for justification of the previous response. Only one question is entirely open-ended: “What is your conception of the English language?”

This is because our theoretical framework includes, among other themes, the concept of representation and its implications for the language teaching/learning process, in this specific case, English.

It is worth noting that the questionnaires (attached) were not intended to be English proficiency tests, but rather questions designed to assess students’ beliefs regarding their own learning and linguistic confidence after one year of study with CLIL.

One relevant variable would be individual limitations in learning an individual language, as well as motivation and the time outside of class devoted by each student to improving their linguistic knowledge. This factor is undoubtedly relevant, but it is not the focus of our research, which will use data reflecting the reality of the majority of students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 65 (sixty-five) questionnaires administered, the majority, in the first question, referred to the importance of the English language, confirming Bourdieu's (1998) idea of symbolic capital. Among some responses, we have:

“Without a doubt, the most important language to be learned, mainly because it is the world language, giving people the opportunity to communicate all over the world.”

Or also:

“The English language is of utmost importance, as it allows us to have greater knowledge about the world beyond us; everywhere in the world, there are people who speak English, so it allows us to learn about cultures and places.”

And we also have:

“An extremely important language nowadays, because it is almost a language that can be used throughout the entire world for communication.”

In the second question, which sought to identify whether Elementary and Middle School took place in a public or private school, only 29.2% had studied entirely in a private school or had completed half of their schooling in a public school and half in a private school.

In the third question, regarding what English classes were like in Elementary and Middle School, among those who studied in public schools, we obtained the following results: 10.86% classified them as very poor, 15.21% as poor, 45.6% as average, 19.56% as good, and only 6.5% as excellent. As justification, many students wrote that they had studied only the verb “to be.”

For the same question, among those who had studied for at least some years in private schools, only 5.2% rated them as very poor, 21% as poor, 26.3% as average, 36.8% as good, and 10.4% as excellent, highlighting the existing differences between public and private schools in Brazil.

The fourth question, regarding the use of English in the classroom at IFES, following BNCC guidelines, yielded 64.17% who considered it “excellent,” 26.86% who considered it “good,” and only 4.47% who considered it “average” and “poor.”

The fifth question, which addresses the integration of English language classes with geography and cultural studies in the second year of High School (the previous year), obtained 63.07% “excellent,” 35.38% “good,” and 1.5% “average.” There were no “poor” or “very poor” responses, demonstrating interest in classes using the CLIL approach.

Among the justifications for these responses, we have:

- “It was good to learn about other cultures in English.”
- “With the Nations Fair event, our knowledge of geography and the integrated English language expanded.”
- “Excellent, because the study gave us more background knowledge about various cultures.”
- “I really liked the classes; I learned a lot about the culture of other countries.”
- “It made us learn new terms about this subject in English, as well as bringing English into everyday life.”
- “I thought it was excellent because, besides learning English, I learned about the culture and customs of other peoples.”
- “I found the integration with other subjects interesting, because we learned about other cultures in English and the Nations Fair was really cool to do.”
- “We combined the two subjects at the Nations Fair, and this helped us learn and study both subjects together.”
- “Because it became more enjoyable to learn; because of this, I can pay close attention.”
- “It was a challenge, but a challenge within our reach, and for that reason it made learning dynamic.”
- “It brought us knowledge of other cultures, broadening our view of the world.”

- “It was possible to write, read, and speak in English, learning the content and also the English language, with more specific topics and words.”

The sixth question investigates whether the student felt more motivated to study the language. Only 7.69% stated that they did not, while 92.31% emphasized that they did. In this regard, it may be said that CLIL proposes an environment in which the student is the protagonist of the learning process and becomes aware of this, while also proposing that the student's innate motivation be activated toward the understanding that the learning process can become enjoyable once they know the reasons for which they are participating.

The next question concerned the experience of giving presentations in English, contributing to students' oral practice. Regarding this item, 44.26% considered it good, nearly 30% considered it excellent, 22.95% considered it average, and 1.63% considered it very poor or poor.

Regarding the belief in “school English,” nearly 63% stated that it is possible to learn English at school. Among those who wrote that it is not possible, the main justification was the low number of class hours, which seems interesting in light of the common belief that “school English” does not work, as explained by Leffa (2009).

The final question refers to a score indicating how students evaluate their experience with English in the second year, with options ranging from 0 to 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 8, and 8 to 10. Thus, 49.12% answered from 6 to 8; 47.36% from 8 to 10; and only 3.5% from 3 to 5. Among the justifications for the score of 6 to 8, a large number wrote that they should have dedicated themselves more. Among some responses, we have:

- “Excellent approach by the teacher and very dynamic classes.”
- “It was the year in which we had the greatest depth and diversity in learning.”
- “Because I love English and I loved watching the videos about cultures.”
- “Despite my difficulty with English, I loved the methodology.”

- “I really liked the classes and the teacher’s didactics; I was able to learn several things, and I thought it was very good.”
- “The classes were well explained by the teacher, and the method helped me a lot.”
- “It was one of the best experiences in English, in which I felt most comfortable trying.”
- “I learned a lot; the experience with geography was very nice.”
- “The teacher made the content more interesting with videos, seminars, and activities, creating more motivation to learn.”
- “I found it very dynamic, and it made studying easier without that kind of tiresome content.”
- “It was a new experience and moved away from the obvious.”

It should be noted that all these data point to a very positive understanding of the experience with the CLIL approach, involving topics in geography and cultural studies in English in High School at the Federal Institute of Espírito Santo.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In an increasingly globalized world, the need for an education that prepares students to interact in different contexts and cultures has never been more urgent. Within this scope, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) emerges as an innovative approach that not only enables the teaching of the English language more efficiently, but also motivates students to learn in a contextualized and meaningful way. As the studies by Krashen and Ofélia García emphasize, the acquisition of a new language becomes more effective when embedded in an authentic and relevant context, far from the dichotomy between content and language.

By integrating English with topics such as geography and cultural studies, we are not only teaching a language, but also bringing students closer to a broader world that awakens their curiosity and engagement.

The BNCC, in turn, reaffirms the importance of methodologies that develop linguistic competencies while also promoting the construction of interdisciplinary knowledge. Thus, CLIL fits perfectly within this paradigm by allowing students to appropriate the English language through content that makes sense for their reality and for their understanding of the world.

The data obtained from the questionnaires administered to students demonstrate that those who experienced classes with geography and cultural studies themes in English showed greater involvement and significant progress both in linguistic competence and in their understanding of the topics addressed.

Based on what has been discussed, it is possible to affirm that CLIL presents itself as a promising path for making English classes more meaningful and motivating in High School. By integrating content and language, this approach not only facilitates English language learning, but also contributes to the formation of critical citizens who are able to engage in dialogue in an increasingly interconnected world.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire on second-year English language classes

1. What is your conception of the English language? Explain.

2. Did you attend Elementary and Middle School in a:

☐ Public school ☐ Private school

3. What were your English classes like in Elementary and Middle School?

- ☐ Very poor
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

Justify.

4. At IFES, teachers use English in the classroom, following the parameters of the BNCC. What do you think about this?

- ☐ Very poor
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

5. What was it like to have integration with geography and cultural studies?

- ☐ Very poor
- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

Explain.

6. Did you feel more motivated to study the language?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

7. What was the experience of giving presentations in English like?

- ☐ Very poor

- ☐ Poor
- ☐ Average
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Excellent

8. Do you think it is possible to learn English at school?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Why?

9. In general, from 0 to 10, how do you evaluate your experience with English in the second year?

0 to 2

3 to 5

6 to 8

8 to 10

Briefly, why?
