

Commentary on Rumlich dissertation summary

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades European institutions have expended considerable efforts to boost multilingualism in education systems. It is in this context where CLIL (content and language integrated learning) programmes have mushroomed, as this approach is believed to help improve foreign language competence without having any detrimental effect on either students' L1 and content learning. The current CLIL boom has led Graddol (2006) to predict that it may eventually replace English as a foreign language (EFL) and "English teachers may largely lose their 'subject' as a timetabled space and may take on a wider support and remedial role" (p. 86). In any case, the implementation of CLIL programmes has grown much faster than measures of its impact.

The research results available so far tend to show linguistic benefits in some language aspects when CLIL students are compared to their non-CLIL counterparts (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). However, several voices (see Breidbach and Viebrock, 2013, among others) have warned that these allegedly positive outcomes may be caused by other variables that have little to do with the CLIL approach *per se*, such as student selection procedures or the blurry definition of some CLIL experiences. In fact, one of the challenges to be faced by researchers is that CLIL realizations may vary considerably not only between countries, but also within the same national education system.

As far as research on the impact of CLIL on non-linguistic outcomes is concerned, the available evidence is still rather scarce. That is why Rumlich's dissertation is very much welcome, because it strives to address some of the aforementioned gaps, namely, the need to control pre-treatment data and participants, and to focus also on non-linguistic results.

2. Discussion

Rumlich aims at examining the impact of CLIL through a study which incorporates two outstanding features: (1) it is a longitudinal study that follows almost a thousand students over a two-year period, and (2) it focuses on both linguistic (EFL proficiency) and non-linguistic (self-concepts and interest) outcomes. In the following I will elaborate on the issues that, in my view, stand out in Rumlich's dissertation summary: namely, a methodologically sound study on CLIL, the attempt to avoid sample-related biases, the choice of a longitudinal design, and the combined analysis of linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes.

In the introduction Rumlich points out that there is a lack of robust empirical research on CLIL, as many of the previous studies revolve around a limited number of variables, which is why we cannot see the forest for the trees when analysing some results. Rumlich's dissertation presents several strengths, but its multivariate approach is one of the most conspicuous ones.

The samples on which much CLIL research has hitherto relied have also raised concerns. In fact, when describing the German context Rumlich refers to the habitual selection of voluntary participants in CLIL streams in Germany, which has led to criticism of some studies on the grounds that the positive results obtained in CLIL settings are due to such selection processes. In this sense, the distinction between non-CLIL and regular students is also worth pondering, as Rumlich proves that regular students should be used as controls because non-CLIL students are often considered unsuitable for the programme at its outset (as a matter of fact Rumlich labels them "a negatively selected group of students with below-average EFL proficiency").

A review of the literature similarly reveals that the vast majority of CLIL studies follow a cross-sectional approach. Rumlich's dissertation shows that longitudinal studies are of the utmost importance, because they shed light on many aspects that may have remained in the background in cross-sectional studies. Thus, his attempt to develop a comprehensive longitudinal model of general EFL proficiency that incorporates cognitive, affective-motivational, and additional individual variables, albeit challenging, is well worth the effort.

As for the analysis of linguistic results, in Rumlich's study CLIL and regular students progressed quite similarly, and the results revealed that time had a significant effect on English proficiency, as both groups' English proficiency improved over the two-year period, although no statistically significant interaction was observed between the variables time and group, results which concur with those obtained by Merino and Lasagabaster (2015) in Spain. Nevertheless, one of the limitations of Rumlich's study relates to the test used to measure general EFL proficiency. Studies show that CLIL students are better at some language skills due

to their more active role as foreign language users and their increased participation in class (Admiraal, Westhoff & de Bot, 2006), but Rumlich relies on a written text that does not encompass skills such as speaking and listening, which seem to significantly benefit from the CLIL approach (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). Likewise, a focus on the impact of CLIL on subject-specific language development is missing, since this is a mostly untapped research avenue that deserves further attention.

In the case of the non-linguistic results, Rumlich focuses on the affective dimension (self-concept and interest) of CLIL programmes. Particularly interesting are the results concerning the similar increase in EFL interest among CLIL, non-CLIL, and regular students once a longitudinal approach is considered. These results confirm that, contrary to previous studies in the field, students' interest in EFL does not wane as time goes by, and this is so irrespective of the teaching approach. These results are in accordance with those obtained by Lasagabaster and Doiz (2015) in Spain and which seem to indicate that students assign great symbolic value to English due to its hegemonic position as the current lingua franca, which helps students to maintain their interest in learning this particular foreign language. Although it has been observed that students' motivation towards other foreign languages decreases over time, Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006) also bore out in the Hungarian context (albeit not in a CLIL setting) that English represents the exception due its role as a world language. Therefore, it can be affirmed that studies undertaken in three diverse European contexts (Germany, Hungary, and Spain) show very similar trends in this regard.

3. Conclusion

Rumlich's summary of his alluring and thought-provoking piece of research does whet the reader's interest to learn more about the study. The reader is left wanting to read more about the interaction between some of the variables under scrutiny (such as spare-time English, verbal cognitive abilities, biological sex, age, and students' L1), which is why, since the study has already been published as a book (Rumlich, 2016), the extended version will more than likely be consulted by many readers of this shorter version. Similarly, many researchers will look forward to future publications based on the data gathered (writing skills, general learning, achievement, motivation) but still not analysed by the author. An enriching avenue of research (surprisingly neglected in the literature) could focus on the analysis of whether the different subjects taught in CLIL may have a different impact on English proficiency.

The most striking result of this study has to do with the fact that, despite CLIL students representing a selected group of students with a higher self-concept and their receiving one additional school year's worth of EFL teaching, no CLIL-related benefit on English proficiency was observed. This outcome clearly indicates that future studies need to focus on the methodology implemented in CLIL courses, as this will help to shed some light on the many methodological issues that these results raise. A reasonable conclusion to be drawn would be that the first L (language) of the acronym CLIL is not heeded by many CLIL practitioners and, therefore, the non-language specialists' language practices direly need to be addressed, while the prediction by Graddol mentioned in the introduction seems to be belied by Rumlich's results. It may be the case that the results obtained in Germany indicate that CLIL may have been implemented as simply a change of the language of instruction without further pedagogical adjustments. The discouraging linguistic results may also indicate that longer periods and higher CLIL intensity may be needed so that CLIL benefits may be reaped.

Finally, I would like to assert the need to complement quantitative data with qualitative studies in CLIL contexts. Rumlich's study relies heavily on statistical analyses, and this approach provides us with only part of the CLIL picture. As Ushioda (2009) highlights, a focus on persons rather than on abstract learners (and individual differences in a theoretical sense that provide uniform accounts) is also needed, because students are necessarily located in particular cultural and educational contexts in which their experiences and self-states may facilitate or hinder their learning engagement. This final caveat is obviously not intended to detract anything from the many merits of this dissertation.

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