



Do Teachers Learn What They Are Taught? The Impact of a Hybrid in-Service Teacher Course on the Perceived Role of Content in an EFL Classroom

Anna Krulatz

Sør-Trøndelag University College (Norway)

anna.m.krulatz@hist.no

Abstract

The main premise of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is that language is taught through meaningful, engaging content. CLIL programs can range along a continuum from content-driven, in which instruction is guided by content objectives and the role of language learning is to support mastery of the content, to language-driven programs in which the focus is on language learning with content in a secondary role [1]. Even though CLIL has been advocated in most European countries since the late 1970s [2], the degree to which the approach is actually applied in foreign language classrooms is unclear. In fact, Cloud [3] suggests that because integrating language and content places high demands on teachers, “content-based instruction [...] is often translated into isolated fact and vocabulary learning, largely ignoring what we’ve learned about how true subject-specific conceptual understanding develops in children.” This project used a survey method to examine how participants in a hybrid in-service English teacher course perceive the role of content when teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). The project also aimed to determine whether participation in the course lectures and activities that focus on implementing the CLIL approach in a foreign language classroom has an impact on the degree to which the teachers integrate CLIL in their own teaching. The findings suggest that whereas teachers’ views and practices have changed to some degree, changes to the in-service course curriculum and activities should be implemented to obtain better results.

1. Introduction

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is an approach to language curricula and instruction in which a foreign or a second language is taught through the medium of meaningful content. CLIL and its North-American counterpart, Content Based Instruction (CBI), have been advocated and used in language classrooms around the world for decades. It has been reported that integrating non-linguistic content into language instruction benefits students’ second or foreign language development [4] as well as their academic achievement and first language development [5]. In fact, in its attempt to support the attainment of multilingualism among the citizens of Europe, the European Council has made an explicit recommendation to adapt CLIL for foreign language instruction in all its member countries [6]. However, because of the high demands it places on teachers, it is not always clear to what extent content is integrated into foreign language classrooms. Cloud suggests that “content-based instruction [...] is often translated into isolated fact and vocabulary learning, largely ignoring what we’ve learned about how true subject-specific conceptual understanding develops in children” [7]. The goal of this paper is to explore how teachers in the Sør-Trøndelag area of Norway perceive the role of content in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and to what extent they implement content in their own language classes.

2. The project

This project was conducted during an in-service teacher course at Sør-Trøndelag University College in Trondheim, Norway, in the academic year of 2013/2014. Due to the recent accreditation changes for teachers in Norway [8] primary school teachers are now required to obtain 30 credits to teach English, while high school teachers need to obtain 60 credits. Prior to the reform, no credits in English were required. While it is not mandatory for the in-service teachers who had obtained their teaching certificate prior to the educational reform to receive additional training in English, they are encouraged to do so. Consequently, Sør-Trøndelag University College in Trondheim and other institutions of higher education in Norway have been offering in-service courses to address this growing need.



2.1 Research question

In an effort to assess the effectiveness and usefulness of the in-service course curriculum, this project investigated how teachers' classroom practices related to integrating content and language and their views on using content to teach language change as a result of participation in the course.

2.2 Participants

Twenty-eight English teachers working at 27 different schools in Sør-Trøndelag were enrolled in the course. None of the schools implements a school-wide content-based foreign language program. However, teachers are required to follow the national English curriculum which stipulates that "English as a school subject is both a tool and a way of gaining knowledge and personal insight" and that "working with various types of texts and other cultural expressions is important for developing linguistic skills" [9].

2.3 Survey

Data for the project were collected using a survey administrated at the beginning of the course, during the first session devoted to second language acquisition studies and language teaching methods in the fall of 2013, and then again at the end of the pre-service course, during the last session in the spring of 2014. The survey consisted of 5 questions, but only the following three questions are discussed in this paper:

1. Do you think it is possible to teach English through content areas? For example, could you teach your students about the future of the universe or about photosynthesis using English? Why or why not?
2. In what ways do you use meaningful content and materials in your English classes?
3. How does your English instruction center on content? If content is not what you teach in your English classes, what is the main focus of your instruction?

3. Results

The analysis of the responses revealed that teachers' perspectives on the integration of language and content as well as their classroom practices changed to some extent during the two semesters when they were enrolled in the English endorsement course.

The first survey question asked the teachers whether they believe it to be possible to teach English through content areas. Interestingly, when the survey was administered at the beginning of the course, most of the teachers (17) said that it is possible. Eight teachers responded that it might be possible but expressed some serious concerns about the issue. Only two teachers said that teaching language through content is not something they would do. The same number of teachers (17) responded positively in the post-survey. Only one teacher said it is not possible to teach English and content together, and five stated that it might be possible. The responses are represented visually in Figure 1.

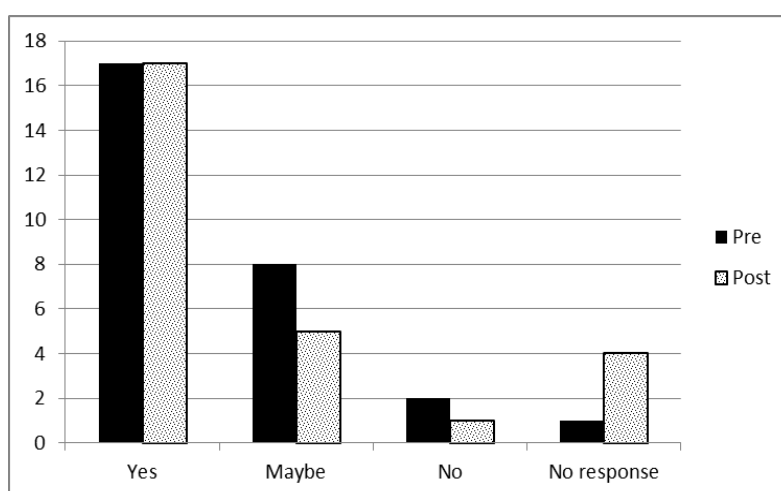


Figure 1: Teacher beliefs about the feasibility of using content to teach EFL

Both in their pre- and post-course responses, most teachers pointed out several difficulties associated with teaching English through non-linguistic content. Among these were the lack of time to prepare materials and therefore a preference to rely on textbooks, the lack of self-confidence on the part of the



teacher, insufficiently developed vocabulary on the part of the students, and the need to collaborate with other teachers. However, most of the teachers appeared to be quite enthusiastic about this approach to teaching English and they perceived it as superior compared with more traditional approaches.

The second question asked the teachers whether they use content to teach English, and if so, how. At the commencement of the course, 6 teachers indicated that they use content and they provided examples of topics, themes and activities that testify to the reliability of their responses. Some examples include learning about Australia and integrating authentic texts such as the musical “Annie.” Twenty-two statements in the remaining responses suggest that these teachers believe that they integrate content and language, but the provided explanations are not clear or cast doubt on the self-report. For instance, these teachers listed watching films or using web-based materials, learning numbers in English, or relying on games and songs to learn new words. Seven of the teachers explicitly admitted to not using any content at all. For example, one teacher stated “Even if I really think it is a good idea, I don’t do it a lot,” and a few others explained that they mainly follow the textbook. In contrast, only one such comment is found in the post-course survey. Seven teachers indicated that they use content and themes and 10 stated that they had started using more authentic materials as a result of the course.

Recall that the last survey question the participants were asked to answer was as follows: How does your English instruction center on content? If content is not what you teach in your English classes, what is the main focus of your instruction? In the pre-course survey, most of the teachers indicated that their English instruction focuses on non-content areas such as language points, for example vocabulary and grammatical structures, and texts and assignments from course books. Three of the teachers named “fun” as main focus of their lesson design, 2 responded that they build their lessons around a topic/theme, and only one stated that content was the main focus. The exact number of teachers focusing on each of the discussed categories is represented in Figure 2.

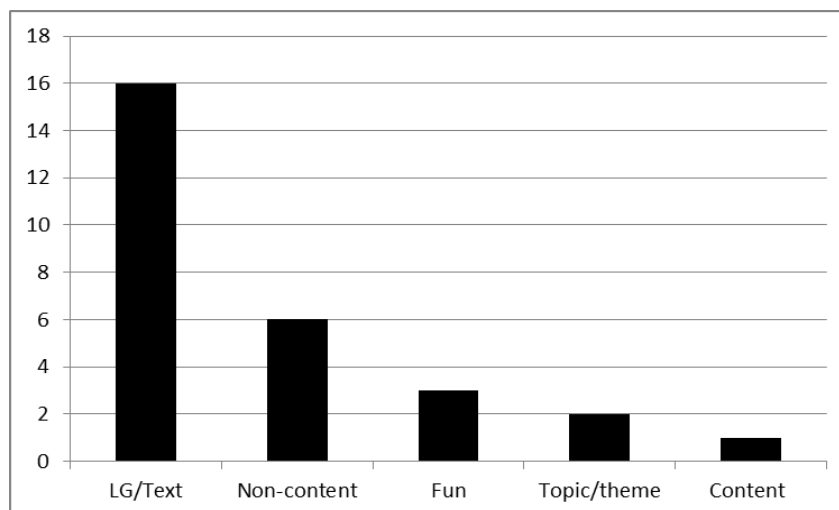


Fig. 2 Main focus of EFL instruction: pre-course

In the post-course survey, the responses were quite different. Overall, it seems that the teacher awareness of the importance of integrating content with language has increased. Content was mentioned much more often in the responses, although in different ways. Eight teachers stated that they mainly focus on content and demonstrated a relatively high degree of awareness and monitoring of their own teaching practices, as exemplified in the following response, “I tend to focus more on content than earlier. I realize that both I and the students can talk about and discuss much more complicated topics than the ones covered in our course book.” Seven of the teachers respondents mentioned content in their answers, but they seemed to lack a clear understanding of what integrating content and language entails. For example, they explained that they were mainly concerned with providing opportunities for oral practice or building vocabulary. For this reason, their responses were categorized separately as “Content ???” That is, their awareness of the benefits of using content seems to have increased, but their classroom practices do not exactly reflect this belief.

The remaining three categories distinguished in the post-survey responses to question two are “Content awareness,” “Other improvement” and “Language/textbook.” Three of the participating teachers displayed an awareness of the role of content, but openly admitted that they are still working

on integrating it into their English classes. Three teachers showed an improvement in other areas discussed during the course, such as lesson planning, focusing on activating students' schemata at the beginning of each lesson, and using communicative and total physical response activities in their lessons. Only two of the teachers named language points or textbook as the main focus of their instruction. These results are illustrated in Figure 3.

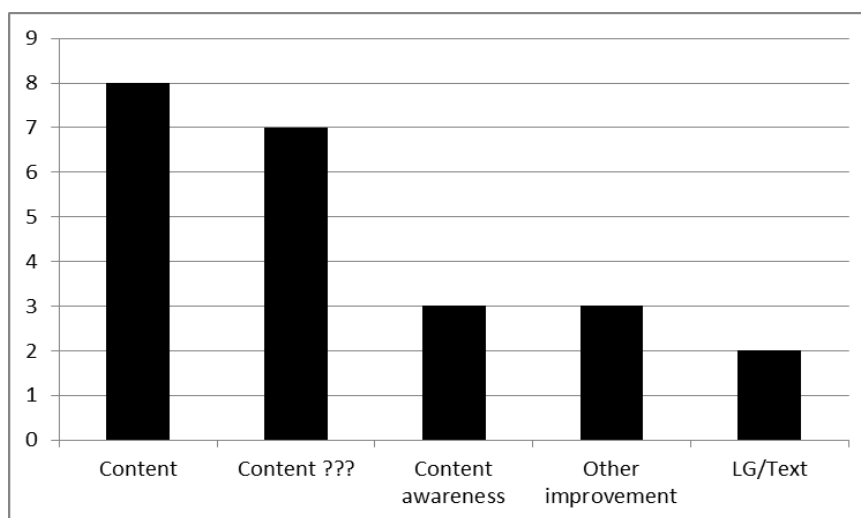


Fig. 3 Main focus of EFL instruction: post-course

4. Conclusion

The goal of this project was to examine the beliefs of Norwegian teachers of English as a foreign language in Sør-Trøndelag hold about using non-linguistic content to teach EFL and the extent to which they integrate content in their own teaching. Teacher responses were collected before and after a two-semester English endorsement course at Sør-Trøndelag University College. Overall, the findings suggest that most of the teachers have changed their beliefs as well as to modified their teaching methods as a result of participation in the course. In comparison with the pre-course responses, more teachers reported using content as a basis of their lessons and several demonstrated an increased awareness of the benefits of such instruction. However, many teachers still seemed to lack an in-depth understanding of what teaching language through content means. The results of this project have important implications for the future renditions of the in-service course. It seems justifiable to devote more time to different models of CLIL and different ways in which non-linguistic content can be used as a medium of language instruction. It may also be beneficial to provide more examples of content-driven lesson plans and activities from a range of academic subjects. As the course is scheduled to run again in the academic year 2014/15, the monitoring of its effectiveness is will be continuously implemented.

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