CLIL practices in higher education: Exploring translanguaging phenomena in the content classroom

Lucía Bellés Calvera, Universitat Jaume I, Castelló de la Plana, Spain
ORCID 0000-0002-1329-6395

Abstract

The internationalisation process of higher education institutions has prompted the implementation of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, where instruction occurs in a language other than students' mother tongue (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). Previous research on CLIL focused on learners' outcomes as a final product (Lahuerta, 2020). Nonetheless, current research delves into the learning process itself (Nikula & Moore, 2016). The aim of this study is to examine translanguaging functions in CLIL seminars delivered in History and Nursing degrees at a Spanish university. These practices have been audio-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of this study. As for the participants, there bilingual and multilingual strategies are expected in the learning environment. Results have been interpreted qualitatively to describe participants' discourse in detail. The analysis of this corpus shows some similarities and differences in terms of interaction and production. Teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction is determined by participants' command of the target language. These findings may be useful for scholars and educators concerned with the design of effective CLIL programmes in higher education.

Keywords: *Content and Language Integrated Learning, History, Nursing, discourse, translanguaging, interaction, corpus*

Introduction

Multilingualism has become an important asset in our current society, having a huge impact on educational practices. A well-known approach adopted at an international scale is that of CLIL, which calls for the improvement of students' communicative competence in the target language while acquiring specialised contents of an area of study (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010). Within this type of initiative, English has become the dominant foreign language par excellence in the higher education landscape (Carrió-Pastor, 2021), and more specifically in Spain.

Past studies on multilingual education have focused on the acquisition of vocabulary in CLIL and EFL contexts, proving that retention and lexical growth is higher among CLIL learners (Agustín-Llach & Canga Alonso, 2016). Another issue has to do with the

examination of learners' outcomes as a final product (Lahuerta, 2020). In fact, Lahuerta (2020) reported that CLIL learners improved their written accuracy compared to non-CLIL learners. Over the past few years, scholars seem to be interested in the foreign language process itself, either in the development of speaking or writing skills (Bellés-Calvera & Bellés-Fortuño, 2018; Nikula & Moore, 2016). Nikula and Moore (2016), however, were concerned with the use of participants' multilingual repertoire, known as translanguaging, in CLIL learning contexts. Actually, their research aimed at determining the L1 as a potential tool in CLIL learning environments. Other scholars have examined the integrated use of languages from a multimodal perspective in the Biology classroom, with body language having a positive impact in the construction of CLIL students' knowledge (Wu & Lin, 2019).

Communication needs to be effective in all the disciplines, including Humanities, Social Sciences and Health Sciences, where the role of English has been determined by historical and economic reasons, among others (Crystal, 2003). Within Humanities, the fact that undergraduates learn to master a foreign language may be useful for the recognition of multiculturalism, the latter being essential in the area of History. Language may also work as a tool to interpret historical events and political decisions. In line with this, English is one of the main languages employed in well-known museums around the world, linking the domains of History and Tourism, the latter belonging to the field of Social Sciences. Regarding disciplinary areas in Health Sciences, most materials and resources can only be accessed in this language, since English has become the language of science (Drubin & Kellogg, 2017). For nursing professionals, on the other hand, the mastery of a foreign language not only grants them access to the latest research in their field. Still, it also facilitates interpersonal exchanges with patients whose L1 is different. Bearing these aspects in mind, the core of our study has delved into the spoken discourse produced in History and Nursing modules following a CLIL approach, which in turn, depict the different nature of Humanities and Health Sciences.

Research questions

Bearing in mind the relevance of qualified multilingual speakers in educational and occupational settings, the objective of this study is to recognise translanguaging instances and examine their functions in the CLIL classroom. Hence, the research questions (RQ) guiding this study can be read as follows:

RQ(1): To what extent can English, Spanish and Catalan be observed in the CLIL classroom?

RQ(2): What translanguaging functions can be identified in CLIL learners' speech?

RQ(3): Are there any discourse differences between History and Nursing undergraduate students?

The study

An accurate overview of the methodological aspects considered in this study will be provided. Contextual details, including the disciplines and individuals taking part in this research, as well as data compilation and analytical procedures will be reported in the next sections.

The sample

The current study was carried out at a Spanish higher education institution concerned with the linguistic strategies set out by the European Council (2008). The participants involved in this research study enrolled in History and Nursing CLIL programmes. Within the History degree, twenty-eight undergraduates contributed to achieving the aim of this study. A female lecturer was in charge of this elective module. She had an official certificate proving she had mastered the English language at a B2 level according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). As regards vehicular languages, Spanish, Catalan and English were present in classroom discourse, even though exposure to English occurred primarily through the use of audiovisual aids.

In the Nursing area, twenty-seven students learning about women's vital cycle agreed to participate in this research. Unlike the History specialist, the Nursing lecturer had a C1 level of the target language. In this context, multilingual exchanges in English, Spanish and Catalan were also identified. The linguistic background of educators and students involved Spanish and Catalan as co-official languages of the university where the study was conducted, and English as the international language fostered at this Spanish higher education institution.

Classroom data and analysis

For the analysis of this research, an audio-recorder was used to keep track of the translanguaging instances produced in the CLIL classroom. The modules under study were totally taught in Spanish except for some specific seminars in which English was meant to be the vehicular language. Nonetheless, the presence of the three languages was allowed in the classroom setting. The fact that two 120-minute CLIL sessions were scheduled and audio-recorded enabled the compilation of this small corpus, which is part of a larger study. Drawing on the conventions established in the *Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English* (MICASE) (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens & Swales, 2002), CLIL initiatives were regarded as small since the class consisted of forty or less students.

Transcription codes were employed to guarantee the privacy and anonymous identities of the speakers. To this end, CLIL History and Nursing lecturers were referred to as H2

and N1 respectively. Students involved in each of the practices were given a number based on their first time producing speech. On this account TLANG_Eng, TLANG_Sp and TLANG_Cat were employed to identify the occurrence of English, Spanish and Catalan contributions.

Qualitative methods were applied for the analysis of the transcripts in combination with some statistics, which were key for the variables concerned with the frequency and variety of translanguaging functions. Qualitative research was conducted through the examination and categorisation of the functions. As illustrated in Table 1, these were based on five of the categories used in Pacheco's typology (2016) and García et al. (2011), namely to request information, to affirm information, to provide information, to invite others to the speech event and to show disciplinary knowledge. Two new functions, those of negotiating and engagement, have been added since the discussion of meanings and participants' involvement are key for comprehension and communication to be effective. Therefore, seven translanguaging roles have been considered in this research.

Table 1. Translanguaging functions adapted from Pacheco (2016) and García et al. (2011).

TRANSLANGUAGING FUNCTIONS
1.   To request information
2.   To affirm information
3.   To provide information
4.   To invite others to the speech event
5.   To negotiate
6.   To show engagement
7.   To show disciplinary knowledge

Results and Discussion

The results of translanguaging practices in CLIL contexts are discussed below. What is evident from the analysis is that Nursing undergraduates used far more English as the means of communication, whereas History learners interacted primarily in Spanish and Catalan (See Figure 1).
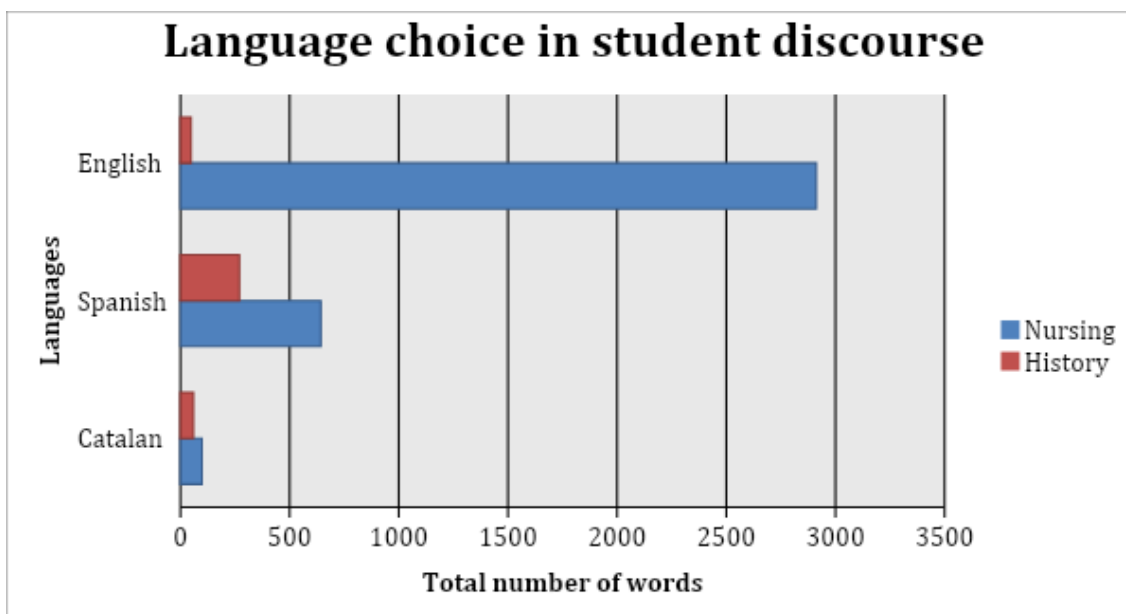
Figure 1. Language choice in student discourse: Interaction in the History and Nursing classroom.

In analysing the Nursing classroom, 79.72% of student discourse mainly occurred in English, whereas the presence of Spanish dropped to 17.60%. As illustrated in Figure 1, turns in Catalan were even lower, representing a total of 2.68% words in student speech. On the other hand, the linguistic behaviour of History participants was characterised by the use of Spanish (71.43%), followed by Catalan (15.61%) and English (12.96%). Such language choice may be influenced by the classroom dynamics and their low proficiency levels, the latter being obtained through a placement test, namely the *Outcomes Placement Test* (National Geographic Learning, n.d.), completed after the seminar session. Thus, whereas production in English was expected to take place through the discussion of subtitled videos in the History module, Nursing undergraduates' discourse was based on reading summaries taken from specialised journals written in English as well as on the presentation of group projects dealing with pregnancy in other cultures. In order to compare participants' oral outcomes, only the speech produced during students' presentations were taken into account in the Nursing session. Apart from that, these results suggest that older students, who are enrolled in the History module, seem to be reluctant to communicate in the target language.

A closer look at the translanguaging phenomenon is necessary to examine the functions observed in CLIL contexts. Figure 2 shows the most common translanguaging functions in the Nursing module under study. As can be observed, negotiating (24%) and disciplinary knowledge (23%) functions were the most usual in Nursing students' multilingual turns. Both of them were closely followed by affirmative responses (18%), but a lower number of cases concerned with the provision of information (11%), requests (10%), invitations to the speech event (9%) and speakers' engagement (5%).
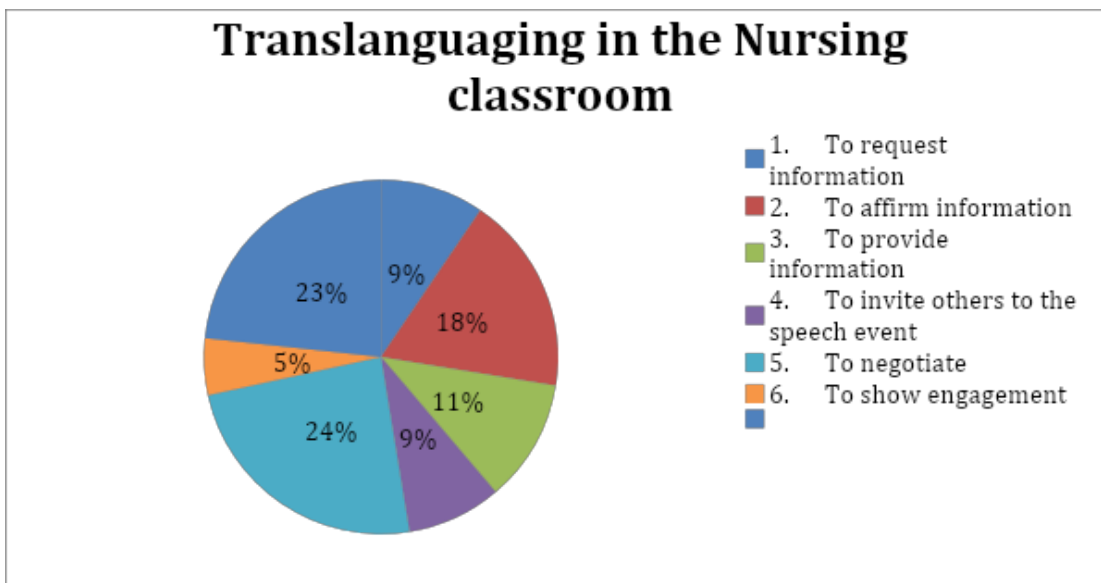
Figure 2. Translanguaging functions in the Nursing classroom.

As seen in Figure 3, the presence of such functions differs to a great extent in the History classroom, with requests (30%) being the most typical category. The second most common function is that of affirmations (22%), as opposed to the Nursing module, where it occupied the third position. Translanguaging patterns are slightly lower when participants show their engagement in the learning process (18%) or when they try to include other interlocutors in the communicative event (17%). Unlike the field of Nursing, showing disciplinary knowledge (7%), negotiating (3%) and sharing information (3%) are the least frequently used categories by History undergraduates.
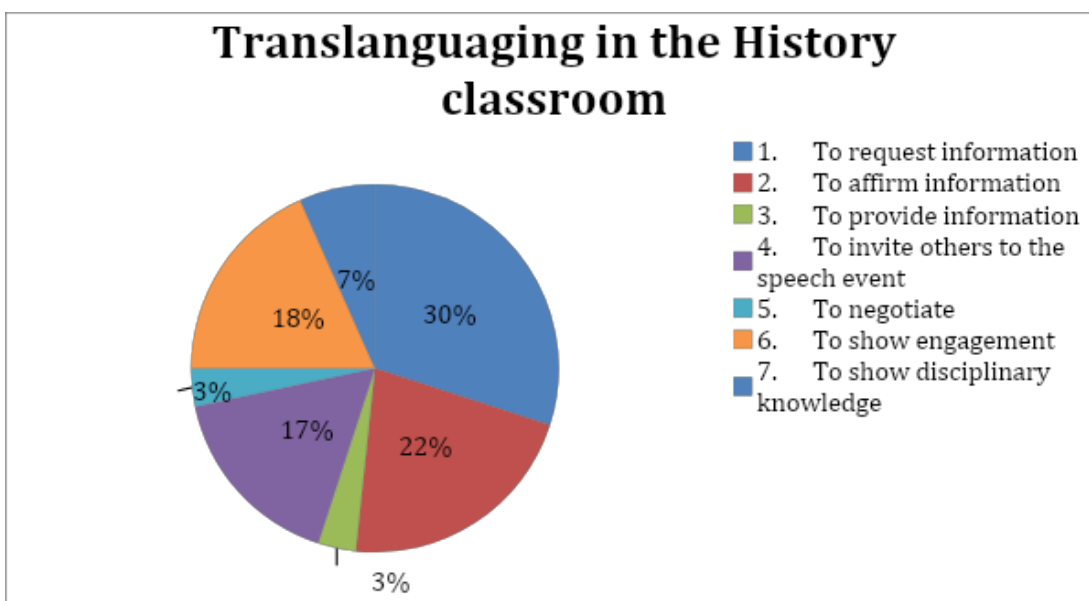

Figure 3. Translanguaging functions in the History classroom.

Conclusions

Multilingual education has spread through the policies developed by international organisations like the European Council, prompting the emergence of the CLIL approach. The focus of this type of practices, which focus on subject-matter instruction through a target language, seem to play a significant role in the disciplines of Humanities and Health Sciences. So far, students involved in History and Nursing degrees have the opportunity to develop their skills at communicative, cognitive, intercultural and interpersonal levels.

Translanguaging practices – conceived as multilingual exchanges integrated in speakers' repertoire – may take place in these learning environments. The incidence of languages may vary when fulfilling different functions. Hence, this paper aimed at exploring the co-existence of languages as well as the main functions found in History and Nursing undergraduates' discourse. In this way, differences between both fields of study could be pointed out.

When it comes to RQ(1), the distribution of languages varies in the areas under study. It should also be stressed that Nursing participants are eager to interact in English. As regards the area of History, it is apparent that the use of the Spanish language is favoured. The same is true for Catalan, which comes as the second recurrent language. Even though these CLIL practices are intended to promote instruction in the target language, English is barely used in History learners' discourse due to their limited command of the target language, as evidenced in the placement tests they took following the seminar session.

Focusing on RQ(2), the seven translanguaging functions can be observed in History and Nursing undergraduates. The categories referred to as negotiating and disciplinary knowledge were the most persistent in the Nursing classroom on the grounds that they took place during the presentation of group projects. Notwithstanding, requests and affirmations happened to be the most frequent categories in the History classroom since interpersonal communication was triggered by the need to understand the information shared in a number of videos.

As to RQ(3), significant differences could be observed with regard to the translanguaging functions found in the CLIL modules under study. English remains as the main vehicular language employed in the Nursing classroom, with 79.72% of students' productions occurring in this language. However, this happened to be the language with a lower presence in History undergraduates' contributions, where English was spotted in 12.96% of the cases.

The practice of translanguaging acknowledges the use of multilingual speakers' repertoire to make disciplinary knowledge accessible and thus facilitate the construction of knowledge. All in all, further research on the benefits of

translanguaging should be conducted in other multilingual learning environments, paying attention to attitudinal and motivational factors.

Acknowledgements

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