

Assessment in CLIL

A case study

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Despite the burgeoning growth of research in CLIL from different perspectives, assessment in CLIL has so far been an underexplored area. If the subject is addressed in the CLIL literature, it is commonly referred to as being difficult and problematic, but still unsolved (Ernst 1995, Schmid-Schönbein and Sigismund 1998, Vollmer 2001, Koch 2002).

My qualitative study investigates assessment in CLIL, focussing on two particular issues: the role of the language in assessment and the appropriateness of traditional assessment tools. The study was conducted in history lessons taught in English in an upper secondary grammar school and comprises interviews with 4 CLIL teachers, observation in 2 CLIL classes (grade level 9 and 12; the students were 15 and 18 years old respectively) with video-taping, and one teacher's comments on 9 transcribed oral exams.

The teachers in this study hold a dual qualification in history and English and have an experience of CLIL teaching of 8-10 years. As the basis for assessment they predominantly set oral exams. Regarding the role the language plays in assessment the teachers unanimously stated clearly and with conviction that for the grade it is only the content that counts; they entirely exclude language from assessment.

“It's a history lesson, not an English class”.

“The language element doesn't count. They can make mistakes or use German words as many as they want”.

“It's their content knowledge they're assessed on. How they put it across doesn't matter”.

At the beginning of CLIL teaching the teachers inform their students that their language performance will not affect the grade they can achieve in the exams.

Actual classroom practice, however, completely contradicted the teachers' assertions to ignore language in assessment. The teacher not only assessed language proficiency but used it as a major criterion in grading her students. She justified the higher grade she had given a student for her performance with:

“You see, her language is so much better”

This finding was underpinned by the teacher's comment on transcribed oral exams. Here she admitted that although students who had covered the content satisfactorily but were less articulate received lower grades than those who were eloquent, because

“it doesn't sound like a 1” (=the highest achievable grade).

Oral exams are “fleeting”, which means that the teacher must simultaneously listen to the student and judge their performance. She must decide very quickly without having the

possibility to check the answers a second time. Given this circumstance, it is very difficult or I would say impossible, to separate the content from the language.

My findings both correspond to and contradict what the teachers had told me about their judgement of the language in exams. They go along with the teachers' assertion that language errors and code-switching do not affect the grades; students can indeed make mistakes and use German words as many as they want (see above). What teachers however leave out of consideration with regard to the language in students' performance are fluency and speed of speech as well as the proportion of the student's speech in the exam. It is here, where they assign their grades as these linguistic factors are associated with higher competences and abilities (Jäger 2000, Neuweg 2000).

These findings further indicate that traditional assessment tools such as oral exams are invalid: they do not assess what is intended to assess. Consequently, it would be necessary to look around for assessment instruments that incorporate both content- and language-focused criteria and help students to get due credit for the knowledge and skills they demonstrate. But what we should begin with is raising the language awareness among teachers and to define its role in teaching and learning, and consequently in assessment. Because it is here where the problem lies.

I had to overcome major obstacles to gain tangible results in my investigation, which were characterised by denial, breakdown and lack of communication between the CLIL teachers and me. Retrospectively, these obstacles foreshadowed the main problem inherent in assessment in CLIL: CLIL teachers do not communicate their assessment practices among each other, nor do they exchange their experiences, which was expressed by a CLIL teacher:

“We're working here in a vacuum, nobody knows anything about the other one.

With this in mind, it can be concluded that an open and intense discussion among the teachers involved in the CLIL process is the only chance to progress satisfactorily in this area. Otherwise, assessment in CLIL will remain a problematic issue.

References:

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