ESP teaching practices: Fostering cultural bonding

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to reflect upon the importance of promoting teaching practices that foster cultural bonding through the development of communicative skills when working with future tour guides in an ESP context. Our reflection will be supported by the practice of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and the ideas developed by the postmethod pedagogy. We will analyse our role as ESP teachers in the 21st century in our own particular context, and how this role is constantly changing .We will also consider how the theoretical principles mentioned above influence our teaching practices. Our practice will be described, analysed and evaluated so that it might be replicated in other contexts.
Keywords: ESP teaching practices; CLIL; cultural bonding; postmethod

RESUMEN

Este artículo intenta reflexionar acerca de la importancia de promover prácticas docentes que ayuden a crear lazos interculturales a través del desarrollo de habilidades comunicativas con grupos de futuros guías de turismo en un contexto de IPE. Nuestra reflexión estará sustentada por el Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenido y Lenguas Extranjeras (AICLE) y los conceptos de la Pedagogía Posmétodo. Analizaremos nuestro rol como docentes de IPE en el siglo XXI considerando nuestro contexto en particular y cómo este rol se encuentra en constante cambio. También tendremos en cuenta de qué manera los principios teóricos antes mencionados influyen en nuestras prácticas docentes. Describiremos, analizaremos y evaluaremos nuestra práctica de modo que pueda ser replicada en otros contextos.
Palabras claves: Prácticas docentes de IPE; AICLE; lazos interculturales; posmétodo

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THIS ARTICLE AIMS to reflect upon the importance of promoting teaching practices that foster cultural bonding through the development of oral communicative skills when working with potential future tour guides in an ESP context. If we agree that encouraging the development of intercultural communicative abilities and promoting intercultural awareness is of the utmost importance in university students in the 21st century, we can say that the role of the ESP teacher has been broadened and enriched. In the present paper, we will analyse how our ideas about what a good teaching practice implies have changed in the light of the postmethod pedagogy extensively developed by Kumaravadivelu (2012), and how our practice as ESP teachers has been influenced by Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Although Kumaravadivelu (2006, 2012) does not refer to ESP practices specifically or to the role of the ESP practitioner in particular, we have found that his tripartite model (particularity, possibility and practicality), together with his five-module model (Knowing, Analysing, Recognising, Doing and Seeing) reflect both the reality of ESP lessons and the changing role of the ESP practitioner in the 21st century.

With regards to our own ESP teaching practice, we have attempted to make it more relevant to students' interests by including more discipline-oriented content. In doing so, we have adopted certain CLIL concepts, mainly those connected to cultural aspects.

As a result, in trying to develop more efficient teaching practices we benefit from both the ideas and concepts present in the postmethod pedagogy and in the CLIL approach.

Teaching Practices in Our Context

As we intend to analyse and refer to our own context with its *particularities* and *possibilities* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), we should first briefly describe why this course of studies was designed to suit local needs. Until 1991, the National Parks Administration offered courses which trained locals to guide within the area of the National Parks. At that time, San Martín de los Andes had already begun to grow as an international tourist centre, and foreign tourists had started to visit our town, making use of the regular flights coming from Buenos Aires to our local airport. In 1991, Comahue National University decided to introduce a course of studies to meet the demands of the community as there was a need for professional tour guides. From the very start, English as a foreign language was included in the curricula.

The particularities of our town are worth mentioning. As has been described in Tavella and Fernández (2013), San Martín de los Andes is a melting pot of cultures and nationalities. This includes descendants of European immigrants who moved to Patagonia in the early 20th century - the so called NyCs (nacidos y criados/ born and raised in the area), people from other regions of Argentina who settled in the town during or after the 1970s - called VyQs (venidos y quedados/ those who came and stayed), and the descendants of Mapuche communities. In other words, intercultural communication has always been a distinctive feature of this community.

Our classes have always reflected the local reality: the groups are usually composed

of students who come from Mapuche communities in Neuquén province, students who have been born and raised in our town (NyCs), and other students who come from around the country. Within this broad cultural context, it was essential to design a syllabus that promoted the development of diverse local identities through the foreign language.

Sometimes, as teachers and course designers, we tend to assume that students who take up the same course of studies come to university with common interests. However, this is not usually the case. Learners' aims are as varied as their cultural identities. Some students coming from Mapuche communities see this course of studies as a means to help their families provide better tourist services; other students who come from different social and cultural backgrounds love mountain sports and see themselves as future mountain guides, just to mention a few examples. Their attitudes towards the learning of the foreign language are also varied and, to a certain extent, their previous experiences with language learning contribute to their failure or success on the course. Sometimes, their prejudices towards the English language in particular, together with the lack of familiarity with the topics do not facilitate the learning process at all. We believe that teachers working in ESP contexts should be sensitive to these aspects, for they will shape the class identity and determine the success of their teaching practice.

Having worked with many groups of learners over the years who come from diverse cultural backgrounds, we have observed that most of them were more enthusiastic about learning the language through content which was close to their own realities and to their cultural identities. Some groups were even reluctant to spend their time learning about world famous tourist centres, monuments around the world, biographies of renowned personalities and they usually demanded regional topics. This brought about major changes in the syllabus, in the selection of materials and thus, in our daily teaching practices.

In many senses our town can be considered a *laboratory* of sorts for the training of future tour guides. San Martín de los Andes is a tourist centre in the Andes mountain range with its own ski resort, a beautiful lake and breath-taking scenery all around. It also offers activities for tourists such as skiing, trekking, hunting and sport fishing. At the same time, the town struggles to maintain some of its traditions, with festivals and celebrations that date back to the time of the settlement of the first European inhabitants, usually called *first settlers*. Nowadays, San Martín de los Andes also offers visits to well-maintained historic buildings and museums and a variety of cultural activities. Consequently, visiting our town is a must for many foreigners who come to Patagonia. In this context, learners encounter the need to speak English as soon as they come across a foreign tourist in the street. By analysing this reality, we have gradually increased the use of the local resources available to us in order to promote oral language development. If we wish to encourage a context-sensitive practice in which the learners' cultural identities play a key role, then we should make use of this *lab* as much as possible. Thus, nowadays, in many cases the natural and cultural resources in the area shape our daily practice. For instance, we have worked in class

on topics such as answering tourists´ questions for many years. After meetings with the other teachers in our discipline, we started to implement interpretive walking tours. This shift in our practice brought about changes in the language learners, which were required by being in the actual place. At the *interpretive stop*[1], students can provide much more information than in the classroom; they try to sound polite and use their body language when unable to find the appropriate words. Not only have their linguistic needs changed, but also their willingness to provide information.

Students who attend our classes have some previous knowledge of the foreign language, generally around A1 level. The University offers 3 four-month terms of English classes in the whole course. In this very short period of time, learners have to develop intercultural competences and oral linguistic skills to tackle the discipline-specific content. All activities implemented are intended to foster intercultural awareness. Our work is facilitated by the core subjects, for students come to our classes having previously worked with specific concepts and content. We, as teachers, have to adapt these concepts and specific content to the linguistic competencies of the students.

Classroom activities intended to connect the L2 with other topics of the curricula include retelling local stories, describing natural processes in the region (glaciation and volcanoes), describing historic houses, talking about relevant locals, guiding in the local museums, describing winter activities in the ski resort and giving information about regional products and souvenirs. The constant interaction between the development of oral language skills and culture is a key aspect in the English classroom. Tasks are carefully planned and the necessary scaffolding is provided.

To take an example from one of our lessons, in the retelling of local stories, we carry out a variety of tasks. As a kind of introduction to the topic, we recount stories that usually belong to the oral literature of indigenous peoples of our region. Different support tasks to aid understanding are provided, such as the teacher talking, visuals, and the use of the L1 as suggested by Clegg (2016). Afterwards, students work in groups of their choice and write other local stories using the support tasks provided. In order to create their own versions, they are given writing frames, sentence starters, key words and phrases. Draft copies are corrected and finally, students prepare their own oral presentations. The format of these presentations can be roleplaying, puppet shows, video presentations or any other form suggested by the groups. The assessment of this last task is dually-focused on language and content. Assessment rubrics are designed to suit each oral presentation; they are clearly delineated and shared with students beforehand. We adhere to Llinares et al.'s (2012, p. 12) concept of "assessment *for* learning, that is, the ongoing actions by which teachers and students obtain feedback which can help them make adjustments to their learning or teaching".

The creation of intercultural bonds with other members of the wider community is also one of our objectives as members of a National University. We intend to fulfil this task

by promoting different activities: young learners from local schools are invited to go on guided tours to museums or historic buildings in town, and students from rural schools are visited by university students who give oral presentations on topics taken from the syllabus.

We believe that in sharing and learning from others we grow as human beings. In a foreign language class of future tour guides, the encouragement of cultural exchanges through the development of intercultural communicative competence is imperative. As Byram, Gribkova and Starkey (2010, p. 10) state, intercultural communicative competence is the "ability to ensure a shared understanding by people of different social identities, and [the] ability to interact with people as complex human beings with multiple identities and their own individuality".

In their future profession, our students will need to share aspects of their own culture in English with people from around the world who are not necessarily native speakers. Consequently, the development of intercultural awareness is as important as the development of linguistic skills. As Sudhoff (2010, p.32) states, "interculturally competent language learners are (more) aware of the cultural conventions underlying the wor(l)ds they encounter and use".

In our experience, connecting the learning of the foreign language with content and interculturality has made language learning more relevant and motivating for our students, and thus has clearly promoted language development. Learners' feedback throughout the years has confirmed our subjective impressions. Students state they enjoy working with others, learning from others and further developing their oral language skills.

To conclude, when teaching an L2 to future tour guides, we think of a learner as described in the Common European Framework of Reference (2001, p.43):

> The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know- how. They enable the individual to develop an enriched, more complex personality and an enhanced capacity for further language learning and greater openness to new cultural experiences.

Analysis of the Theoretical Framework: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Postmethod Pedagogy

The CLIL approach and the postmethod pedagogy have shed light upon our ESP teaching practices. We have found adequate theoretical grounding for many of our teaching practices in both of them.

CLIL pedagogies place cultural awareness at the core of the language class. The cultural dimension developed in the CLIL Compendium (2010) considers understanding as well as the building of intercultural knowledge, the development of intercultural

communicative skills, learning about neighbouring regions and countries and as a result, the construction of a wider cultural context. In our experience, teaching practices that try to foster the value of our own culture and a respect for difference provide learners with new perspectives from which to approach diverse contexts and relate to peoples from around the world. We consider it essential to imbue future tour guides with these skills.

Coyle (2007) considers the interrelation between context, communication, cognition and culture in her 4 Cs framework, and though she does not make a distinction between language and content, she places culture at the core. However, she also highlights that culture is the least researched principle. According to Coyle, in a CLIL context, culture permeates the social construction of knowledge and the learning process. As Devos (2016, p.13) states, "cultural aspects ought to be considered in the choice of content and how to use culturally appropriate discourse and language".

Furthermore, Sudhoff (2010) promotes a tripled-focussed approach in which the learners of an L2 combine the learning of the foreign language, the learning of content, and the development of interculturality. He states that through the implementation of CLIL pedagogies, students develop the skills to decentre. Understanding that cultural differences are not a barrier, and the resultant adoption of different cultural perspectives help us to interact empathically with others.

There is no doubt that our class is a case of CLIL as a language teaching approach, as we teach a foreign language by using discipline-specific content. Our challenge would be to develop CLIL as an educational approach, in what Cenoz (2013, p.391) defines as "an educational program that takes into account the whole curriculum and not only the learning of a foreign language".

In the 21st century, when the concept of method is being questioned by postmethod ideas, CLIL with its "wide spectrum of methodological and practical possibilities", as stated by Devos (2016, p.11), is very much in line with Kumaravadivelu´s (2006) views on *particular* teaching practices.

The postmethod pedagogy is ruled by three operating principles as developed by Kumaravadivelu (2012, pp. 11-15). The principle of particularity is related to the interpretation of *particular* situations and to the improvement of those conditions in order to construct meaningful teaching practices. The second operating principle is practicality, which refers to both the relationship between theory and practice and to the teacher´s ability to assess the effectiveness of their practice. The third principle, possibility, considers the learners' cultural identities and their attitude towards the learning of a language in particular.

According to these three postmethod parameters (Kumaravadivelu, 2006): particularity, practicality and possibility; the *postmethod teacher* has a broader and more direct role. This teacher makes decisions in light of the particular group of students, their objectives and needs, the institution, and the socio-cultural background in which these learners are immersed. This teacher is context-sensitive and adopts a critical mindset

towards the local conditions (particularity), focussing on reflection and action according to their experience and intuition. This teacher bears in mind that they themselves as well as the learners enter the classroom with their own identities, beliefs, and prejudices, and that these aspects shape the success or failure of their teaching practice.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) states that teachers should try to develop their own theory of practice and to *practice what they theorize*. He rejects the blind adherence to a method, and we support his idea that methods in general are designed and thought-out with what he calls a "common clientele" (2012, p.10) in mind.

To conclude, we can state that our daily teaching practice is informed by the CLIL approach, and that many of our ideas about foreign language teaching are reinforced by the postmethod conditions.

The Role of the ESP Practitioner in the 21st Century

Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) use the term ESP *practitioner* rather than teacher as they consider that "ESP work implies much more than teaching" (p.13). ESP practitioners fulfil five key roles: teacher, collaborator, course designer and materials provider, researcher and evaluator (pp.13-16). Anthony (1998) highlights that teachers must work with either a specialist in their field or with learners, as they will help them to gain further insights into the target discipline. Anthony (2007, p.3) also refers to the "teacher as student", meaning that teachers are "students of the target field". In an ESP class, students help teachers to better understand the concepts of the target field, while teachers act as language facilitators.

Kumaravadivelu (2012) develops a five-module model for language teacher education, the KARDS model (Knowing, Analysing, Recognising, Doing and Seeing). This model constitutes a cyclical and holistic system which is based on the idea of questioning teaching practices instead of adhering to transmission models. We believe that each of these modules is relevant in the analysis of the role of the ESP teacher at university level. Briefly, as language teachers, we should *know* about our discipline, we should *know* how to manage our classroom and we should be aware of our identity as teachers. We should *analyse* our practice and *recognise* our values and beliefs, as they constitute our *teaching-self* and affect our practice. *Doing* implies *dialogising* with colleagues and with our *teaching-self*, while *seeing* involves looking at our practice with a critical eye by placing the learner in a central role.

Both teachers and students at university should be critical about their own values and beliefs, and thus be able to change and transform the teaching and learning contexts.

Although these concepts are derived from reflective teaching, they challenge teachers to go beyond the ideas of reflective teaching and to become "change agents" as stipulated by Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.16) and Zeichner and Liston (1996) in their analysis of the role of a reflective practitioner. According to these authors, a reflective practitioner

examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice; • is

aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching; • is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches; • takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and • takes responsibility for his or her own professional development (p. 1).

Moreover, critical pedagogies view teachers as

professionals who are able and willing to reflect upon the ideological principles that inform their practice, who connect pedagogical theory and practice to wider social issues, and who work together to share ideas, exercise power over the conditions of their labor, and embody in their teaching a vision of a better and more humane life (McLaren, 1998, xxiii).

As ESP practitioners in the postmethod era, we utterly adhere to the notion developed by Kramsch (2000) that "language is both culture and voice". Consequently, placing learners at the core of the learning process implies listening to their *voices*, being aware of the fact that everybody learns in a different way, and looking at our practice with a critical eye. Bringing culture into the foreign language classroom implies major risks, as the teacher cannot plan and foresee every single language need. This can represent a considerable challenge for the ESP teacher who will not always be able to respond to students' demands.

The ESP teacher's role has also been challenged by information and communication technologies (ICTs). The World Wide Web has placed the teacher in a different position, they are no longer *the* content provider, *the* source of knowledge or *the* entity responsible for establishing cultural liaison. 21st century students have many opportunities to connect with people from around the world, and can access information about any culture by surfing the web. Introducing students to the differences and similarities between cultures is very important for the creation and development of intercultural bonds. It is essential to provide our students with the necessary tools to confront the challenges of the 21st century.

Conclusion

We are certain that foreign languages can be a valuable resource for our own culture, as well as providing a means to share it with others. As Byram (2011, p.11) states, when we recognize the cultural differences and similarities, we will be clearly promoting internationalism in the sense that "internationalism in education would promote the 'bonding' of groups across national and state frontiers".

By providing them with intercultural communicative abilities, we empower students and allow them to share aspects of their own identity with others, thus allowing them to create links with groups of differing cultural identities. We support Cohen et al.'s idea that "in successful culture-tourism tour guides play an essential role because an effective guide can act as a 'culture broker' who interprets the given culture for tourism" (as cited in Ya-fen

& Chuen-maan, 2008, p.80). Consequently, in the context of potential future tour guides attending a foreign language class, it is vital to foster teaching practices that provide our students with the content, language and intercultural communicative abilities that will enable them to be effective tour guides.

Note
   1. According to Gutierrez, Maragliano and Montecinos Ongini (chair of Professional Practice, AUSMA, FATU, Univ. Nacional del Comahue, Argentina), an interpretive stop can be a monument, building and/or a natural element with heritage value at the time it is selected, analysed and included within the tourist attractions of an area.

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