2019 cohort

Elisabeth Wallmann – MFL Teacher

Can combining 'soft CLIL' and Extensive Processing Instruction enhance both progress and motivation in language learning?

Project Background

Although the UK government is currently seeking to increase the uptake of foreign languages in schools, the number of students opting for a foreign language at GCSE and A-Level continues to decline, particularly in state-funded, non-selective schools.

One common explanation for this decline is the rise of 'global English', which has weakened the economic and practical case for foreign languages for Britons (Lanvers, 2017; 2014), even as both government and employers' organisations have repeatedly stressed the dire need for language skills.

In fact, students mostly choose their subjects because they enjoy them, not for economic reasons (Wenchao, Muriel & Sibieta, 2011, p. 25). Repeated questions in my classroom, such as 'why are we learning French' and 'do we have to do this at GCSE', confirm that students question the value of this curriculum content. These pupil questions have provided the motivation for my study.

The Intervention

One approach that has been touted as a potential solution to reviving interest in modern language is content-and-language-integrated learning, or CLIL. This involves the teaching of another subject in a foreign language, with both language and content objectives. CLIL, then, allows teachers to use their foreign language to introduce students to content that is culturally relevant as well as cognitively challenging.

Lasagabaster, in a 2019 summary of research on the effect of CLIL on motivation, actually documented a slight decrease in language learner motivation. Given the increased cognitive demand in CLIL, this is perhaps not surprising. CLIL on its own, then, did not seem like an appropriate solution to the problem of low motivation I was facing in my classroom.

A version of the communicative approach, Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI), that has increasingly gained traction in the UK has been developed by Gianfranco Conti, published in several books (e.g. Conti & Smith, 2016). Conti bases his approach on the findings of cognitive studies on memory, arguing that language teachers should 'teach less, not more' by focusing on the drilling of a limited set of language chunks.

Given its emphasis on reducing cognitive overload, this method is likely to succeed in allowing students to feel competent. However, its mantra of 'less is more' has attracted criticism from teachers for demotivating pupils by limiting their vocabulary and hence their ability to communicate on topics of interest to them (Determined Linguist, 2021).

The main research question guiding my project was whether a language teaching approach combining CLIL and EPI could enhance student motivation in year 8 learners of French (the age group when motivation in MFL dips), in the long term making it more likely that they will choose to continue with foreign languages at GCSE and beyond. I asked:

1) To what extent does an approach combining CLIL and EPI improve pupil motivation in language learning?
2) To what extent does it improve pupil self-efficacy?
3) Does combining these approaches balance out the respective weaknesses of each (the challenging nature of CLIL; the banal, repetitive content of EPI)?

To test these questions, I designed a short intervention consisting in a five-week, two hours per week, programme of instruction.

The topic scheduled at departmental level was 'Going Out'. To deliver the language objectives from this topic, I decided to teach a course on the history of the French eighteenth century, a period which I had researched for my PhD studies and thus had expert knowledge on. I designed my intervention so as to equip students with the language needed to describe and explain the relationship between politics just before and during the French Revolution and aspects of the cultural history of 'going out' (which social groups enjoy which forms of leisure; fashion and politics).

Research Methodology and Design

I decided to adopt a mixed-methods approach combining pre- and post-intervention online surveys, in-class observation and journal entries written after intervention lessons. This diary included my impressions of what happened during the session, as well as reflections on key incidents and on students' contributions in the lessons.

Results

The evidence I collected is not strong enough to suggest a general increase in motivation, but there were observable changes among some participants. In particular, three students showed marked improvements in questions asking about both their enjoyment of, and self-efficacy in, French.

These results suggest that the approach tested in the intervention may not have the potential to increase motivation in all our students. However, given that the intervention was only five weeks long, an improvement in three students can be considered a success. Furthermore, nine out of fourteen students agreed or strongly agreed that 'Learning about the French Revolution has made France as a country more interesting for me'. This result is encouraging, as research in applied linguistics has demonstrated that perception of the target culture is one of strongest motivating factors in second-language acquisition (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Further Research

Given my observations during the lessons, and some of the positive responses by students in their surveys, the approach I trialled for this project deserves to be developed and tested further. In particular, given that the intervention coincided with the national lockdown, I want to test the approach during in-person lessons, so that the effects of the approach itself are not drowned in the effect of an entirely different way of learning.

An important direction for further research is the role of *teacher* motivation in the effectiveness of different approaches to language teaching. Policy developments have meant that teachers are less likely to experience autonomy in their own classrooms (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). At the same time, the role of teacher motivation in affecting outcomes for pupils has arisen as a distinct field of study (Han and Yin, 2016). As a teacher, I felt more motivated to teach the CLIL course. Future research might ask how this increase in teacher motivation in courses that are based on both language and cultural objectives affects pupil motivation, especially in the long term.

References

Conti, G. & Smith, S. (2016). *The Language Teacher Toolkit.* Independently Published.

Determined Linguist. (2021, March 30). 'Less is more': is it true? Or is less, in fact, less? [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://transformmfl.wordpress.com/2021/03/30/less-is-more-is-it-true-or-is-less-in-fact-less/

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2009). *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*. Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters.

Lanvers, U. (2016). On the predicaments of the English L1 language learner: a conceptual article. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 26(2), 147–167.

Han, J. & Yin, H. (2016). Teacher motivation: Definition, research development and implications for teachers, *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1-18.

Lasagabaster, D. (2019). Motivation in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) Research. In M. Lamb (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Motivation for Language Learning* (pp. 347-366). London: Palgrave.

Wenchao, J. and Muriel, A. & Sibieta, L. (2011) *Subject and course choices at ages 14 and 16 amongst young people in England: insights from behavioural economics.* Institute for Fiscal Studies, Department for Education.

Worth, J. and Van den Brande, J. (2020). *Teacher autonomy: how does it relate to job satisfaction and retention?* Slough: NFER.