

## **Reflections on “Deconstructing the ‘bilingual programme’ ”**

*Based on the debate at the 6th Regional Teacher Development Event “Breakthrough to Excellence in ELT”, February, 2018 in Salamanca, hosted by Nora Kaplan, Annie Altamirano and Carmen Arias.*

Little time was spared to have a much deeper and extended open discussion on this issue, which worries professionals and parents alike – including those who only appear to address it as a trophy in bringing together cultures and the boasting of a bilingual programme increasingly implemented in state, private and state-funded private schools.

Nora Kaplan, and her colleagues, Annie Altamirano and Carmen Arias, presented this debate at the 6th Regional Teacher Development Event “Breakthrough to Excellence in ELT”, with the heading “Deconstructing the ‘bilingual programme’”, which was an invitation to discuss today’s view on the bilingual programme and its results up to now.

Certain questions were left unanswered. It was clear that one thing was the British Council’s and Ministry of Education’s intentions, and quite another what parents’ conclusions were. At no time have I heard any teachers’ opinions, though there are many. But it seems of no importance to too many. Or is it? As a teacher, the right implementation of the bilingual programme is my concern and seeing its effectiveness as a whole, taking into account the classroom features and the students’ progression.

Frankly, as a mother, whose child in Primary Education brings home long vocabulary lists of unknown words and no clear concepts, I do wonder if the knowledge acquired could open doors to job opportunities in the long run or if my child will ever learn to speak English at all.

Carmen Arias Blázquez, talked about her own experience at Vela Zanetti Secondary Education School in Aranda de Duero (Burgos) where she works as a full-time teacher. As Area Coordinator for Castile & Leon Northern area and member of the C.E.P.I for regional teacher training, she was able to give explanations and figures to follow up the survey registered in 2014 at her college. Various surveys on this issue have been done, and the different results can be seen from different points of view.

The justifications suggested basing the programme on three points: cognitive, emotional and economic. What is more, the bilingual programme should enhance the learning of languages and other subjects, testing their positive ‘can do’ attitude as described by Marsh (Marsh 2000). The existing approach is through CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) that leads to success using the technique known as SCAFFOLDING. The guarantee of constructivist methodology resides in the requirements of the bilingual programme, meshing with code-switching for non-

native speakers who attend lessons and find their level of L2 to be adequate regarding their knowledge of the language and the subject.

This is a daily testimony from 520 bilingual schools, both primary and secondary, in the Region of Castile and Leon. If we are only considering official surveys on this matter, it would be questionable to know the results of such success. There are factors which are not taken into account, including where the school is placed, the economic wealth of its families, the family members' social position and general knowledge, the subject or subjects chosen for CLIL, the teachers' preparation and training for the purpose of teaching a subject with linguistic aiming goals apart from the subject contents and the unfulfilled expectation for those wanting to prepare themselves for University. All this leads to an unreal number of successful schools putting in the balance with the state schools, mentioned earlier, and those run privately or being financed by the state.

Most of all, we cannot forget the students' profile. For Carmen and her colleagues this has to be de-mystified, so that they agree to revive Lightbrown's quotation on "the younger the better" and "kids soak up languages like sponges", as commonly heard assertions, although we can see that young children develop their skills in learning and acquiring the right competencies as they grow up. Nevertheless this takes time. For older students, their learning comes together with the skills of knowledge and attitude. But their stage of processing the language learning comes faster, as the knowledge is there, though there is a difference when we are talking about acquiring the L2 for academic or leisure interests.

The purpose of learning at an academic level demands a high level of linguistic competence and not many manage to achieve this. Carmen gave us figures and graphs showing the results of students (from 1st to 4th Year of Secondary Education) and students' parents at the school where she works. The bar chart from the end of the course, 2011, had a satisfactory response regarding the teachers' performance in the classroom. Parents' comments were based on the importance of the teachers' role in students performing well in English rather than in the subject itself. The chart represented the subjects studied in English (CLIL), and the course in which they are taught. It is interesting to compare responses at 1st Year of Secondary Education. Parents expressed the highest mark of satisfaction (18) for Social Science, in contrast with Technology (with the lowest result, 7). This was the only group to give a negative response 11 answers. For the other answers, satisfaction is high in subjects chosen for CLIL: Social Science, Music, Technology, and PE from 1st to 4th Year of Secondary Education and parents were satisfied with the teachers' performance in general. The fact that there is 100% agreement here, gives recognition to the implementation of English in the Vela Zanetti Secondary School, and corroborates that English in the bilingual programme at this college is progressing well. In fact, it has come up to everyone's expectation: parents, teachers, the institution and the Ministry of Education.

At the end of the discussion, some questions were left in the air, to be continued in other groups and other circles. So only time will tell.

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