

Abstract

To what extent does content and language integrated learning impact on pupils' critical thinking in a beginners' S5 Business Italian class?

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Background

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a dual-focused pedagogical approach which enables educators to teach a foreign language alongside another academic subject by providing the learner with authentic, subject-specific materials in the target language to develop critical thinking (CT). There exists, however, a significant gap in the literature regarding the effects of CLIL on CT, especially in modern languages other than English.

Aim

This practitioner inquiry sets out to examine the eventual impact of CLIL on learners' CT skills in a beginners' S5 Italian-Business class, both in terms of language learning and content.

Method

This action research was conducted over a 7 week period using a mixed-methods approach. The sample consisted of a group of 8 students in S5, studying Business alongside Italian in a school in Argyll and Bute. Data was collected through both quantitative and qualitative data, all based on Bloom's Taxonomy of CT. Students initially answered a questionnaire prior to the implementation of CLIL, indicating their views on their lower order thinking skills of remembering and understanding, as well as their higher order thinking skills of analysing and evaluating. After the implementation of CLIL, learners answered the same questionnaire for a second time to see if CT skills had evolved. The questionnaire included open-ended questions and Likert-scale answers. Each participant was also invited to take part in a focus group discussion with another participant, talking about their experiences of learning Italian and Business. This discussion took place pre- and post-CLIL intervention. All questions asked by the researcher adopted Bloom's Taxonomy verbs of CT. Finally, a reflective journal was kept by the researcher allowing the learners' CT development within the classroom to be monitored over time.

Results

The findings of the study suggest that the CLIL methodology does indeed promote CT in learners. The higher order thinking skills of evaluating and analysing are key post-CLIL, compared to pre-CLIL. The category within Bloom's Taxonomy which indicated the most impact on learners' CT, in respect to both content and language, was analysis. Evaluation skills also increased post-CLIL, especially regarding the connections between language and business, as well as the increase in challenge. In terms of lower order thinking skills, the need for understanding in students increased post-CLIL, while remembering was not valued as much post-CLIL, suggesting that memory is not as valued in this pedagogical framework. Overall, the results of this study suggest that through the dual-focused approach of CLIL, learners develop and increase CT skills, especially with regard to higher order thinking skills.

Recommendations

CLIL and CT are already firmly established within Scottish Education policy including the 1+2 Policy and Languages for Life and Work as well as Gaelic immersion schools. In fact, the universality of CLIL enables foreign language learning to be incorporated into teaching any subject on the curriculum. There is currently a lack of research (due in part to limited sample size) and therefore there is a need for the provision of workshops at local and national levels, to encourage the implementation of CLIL across the curriculum through cross-disciplinary collaborations, especially for those who may be unsure about how to put this challenging learning and teaching method into practice. This practitioner inquiry suggests CLIL increases learners' lower and higher order CT skills and that the pedagogy warrants further investigation.