

Implementing CLIL for young learners in an EFL context beyond Europe

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Grassroots support and language policy in China

Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is ‘a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language’ (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010: 1). It represents a model of bilingual education which, broadly speaking, involves some use of two (or more) languages of instruction in connection with teaching courses other than language *per se*.

According to the latest survey by Eurydice (2012), almost all European Union member countries have implemented some form of CLIL, at primary and general secondary levels, where the learners fit into the definition of ‘young learners’, viz. those aged below 18 (see Ellis, 2014). English-language research into CLIL for young learners in Europe is burgeoning, as evidenced by two special issues, published respectively in 2007 and 2013, by the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. In contrast, English-language reports on CLIL-related issues in such regions as Latin America (see the biannual online publication *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, founded in 2008) and Asia have only recently started to become accessible (see a special issue of the *Asian EFL Journal* entitled ‘CLIL in Asian Contexts: Emerging Trends’, published in December 2013).

Asia has the largest number of English speakers in the world. The sustainability of CLIL in this region, where in most cases English is the ‘additional language’, may shed light on the development of this potentially ‘very effective’ ELT approach (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010: 374)

beyond Europe. In what follows, we examine grassroots support and language policy, two factors impinging upon the implementation of CLIL



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(cf. Baetens Beardsmore, 2009), in Mainland China and explore issues pertinent to implementing CLIL in this EFL context. While mainly focusing on Mainland China as a case study example, we suggest that analogous processes may be observed in other Asian countries where a foreign language (usually English) serves as an additional language in CLIL.

We focus upon Mainland China for two reasons. Firstly, in connection with the extent of grassroots support for CLIL, two large-scale surveys conducted by the Chinese authorities provide the best available data from government sources, but the relevant empirical evidence from these surveys has not been utilized in English-language publications. One is the Survey of Language Situation in China (hereafter ‘the 2000 survey’ as most of the data collection was completed in 2000), ‘the largest of its kind in the history of China’ (Wei & Su, 2012: 10), whereas the other, the Survey of Current Situation of Putonghua Popularisation (henceforth ‘the 2010 survey’), conducted in 2010 and covering three regions (viz. Jiangsu Province, Hebei Province and the Guangxi Autonomous Region), represented a partial replication of the former. To ensure comparability, the 2010 survey employed an abridged version of the questionnaire used in the 2000 survey and followed similar sampling procedures. Although the data from the 2000 survey are ten years old, ‘it does provide very valuable insights into the sociolinguistics of English in the PRC’ (Bolton & Graddol, 2012: 7). The first English-language report (Wei & Su, 2012) on the 2000 survey did not come out until 2012. Few attempts have been made to update international colleagues with findings from these two surveys. In this article, therefore, we try to bridge this gap in the English-language literature by synthesizing data concerning the preferred medium(s) of instruction for young learners from the 2000 and 2010 surveys.

Secondly, regarding language policy (Spolsky, 2004), recent research has focused on the ten nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (e.g. Kirkpatrick, 2012), where the spread of English is likely to be propelled by supra-national language policy favouring English. However, China and other non-ASEAN countries merit equal if not more research attention, as they, without supra-national policies promoting the use of English, represent more complex cases for research into the spread of English, language policy and the subsequent implications for ELT. Our assumptions are: (1) if English manages to spread into the medium-of-instruction domain

(e.g. in the form of CLIL) in the public sector with sufficient grassroots support, such a phenomenon then can hardly be characterised as ‘transient’, and will hence merit more serious research attention; and (2) proper measures of language management (Spolsky, 2004), or what we call ‘formal language policy’ can regulate the spread of English and enable ELT professionals to address the challenges of CLIL.

Stakeholders’ support for CLIL in major Chinese cities: A contributing factor to CLIL implementation

In Mainland China, the practice of English-medium instruction, where English is used as a medium of instruction to teach part of the subject matter of non-language subject(s), has emerged in government-funded schools for young learners since the 1990s. English-medium instruction in the Chinese context is also known as Chinese–English bilingual education. Most of these bilingual education programmes follow the model of CLIL, rather than that of immersion as claimed by some researchers (see Wei, 2013 for a review). This is primarily because in such programmes the time of exposure to English usually falls between 5–15 per cent of the total instruction time, whereas such a percentage in a typical immersion programme exceeds 50 per cent (Wei, 2013).

In connection with the question of grassroots support, Cheng (2012: 380) observes that ‘bilingual education programmes are now popular with parents and therefore have attracted increasing numbers of students’ in ‘major cities as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan and Xi’an’. This observation is substantiated by the empirical data from the 2000 survey, in which the respondents were aged 15–69 (inclusive), and most were parents of pupils attending primary or secondary schools. When asked about their preferred medium(s) of instruction respectively at local primary and secondary schools, they could choose up to two options from the following: Putonghua, a Chinese dialect, an ethnic minority language, a foreign language, ‘don’t care’, and ‘can’t answer’. The responses from over 165,000 randomly selected respondents were weighted and the collated percentages are believed to be generalisable to the whole population (for a technical report of the statistical calculations, see Sgo, 2006: 327–38). Amongst the respondents in the 2000 survey, 2.30 per cent supported using a foreign

language as a teaching medium at local primary schools; the proportions in the 31 provinces, autonomous regions, and *zhixiashi* (meaning a municipality that reports direct to the central government) in Mainland China ranged from 0.49 per cent (Henan) to 6.10 per cent (Shanghai) (SGO, 2006: 91). As for local secondary schools, 6.24 per cent of the people supported using a foreign teaching medium; the regional percentages ranged from 2.52 per cent (Gansu) to 13.62 per cent (Shanghai) (SGO, 2006: 95). As the 2000 survey did not specify ‘a foreign language’ but an overwhelmingly high percentage (93.8 per cent) of Chinese people with foreign language learning experience learnt English (SGO, 2006: 119), we may roughly equate the percentages concerning ‘a foreign language’ here with those concerning English.

However, considering the size of China and the large regional disparity in terms of socio-economic development, it is more meaningful to use a city as a unit of analysis than to focus on the averages about the whole country. To this end, drawing upon the raw data from the 2000 survey concerning five major cities, we constructed a variable named ‘support for foreign-medium instruction’ (see Table 1). The four cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen were selected because they are generally regarded as the first-tier cities in China, and because they aim at achieving international city status. Hence a foreign language (usually English) was more relevant to their residents; furthermore, the emergence of ‘*Beishangguangshen*’, an abbreviated version of ‘Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen’, as a catch-phrase in recent years adds one more reason to examine these cities together. The city of Dalian is added to the list because it is the most cosmopolitan city (albeit not the provincial capital) in Liaoning

Province, where there are provincial-level policies encouraging pre-tertiary CLIL. On this constructed ordinal variable, the respondents received a score of 2 if they indicated support for using a foreign teaching medium at local primary *and* secondary schools (i.e. picking the option of ‘a Foreign Language’ in both questionnaire items asking the medium-of-instruction preferences respectively at these schooling phrases), a score of 1 if they expressed support for a foreign teaching medium at local primary *or* secondary schools (i.e. selecting the ‘a Foreign Language’ option in either of the items concerned), and a score of zero when no support was indicated.

Although the national percentage (5.8 per cent, see Table 1) appears to be marginal, its significance should be understood in light of two facts: (1) the Canadian immersion programme, a bilingual education model highly comparable to CLIL in China (Wei & Xiong, 2008), was provided to only ‘some 6% of the total school population in Canada’ after more than three decades of steady development (Baker, 2001: 205); (2) in China, CLIL for young learners did not emerge in the public education sector until the late 1990s, only a few years before the commencement of the data collection for the 2000 survey.

According to Table 1, a fraction of residents in the five cities, viz. Dalian (30.1 per cent), Shenzhen (26.5 per cent), Guangzhou (23.4 per cent), Shanghai (21.6 per cent) and Beijing (12.8 per cent), supported CLIL involving a foreign teaching medium at primary and/or secondary schools. However, these figures best represented the grassroots support around the year 2000.

The current strength of grassroots support can be extrapolated from two sources. First, according to the 2010 survey, which employed the same two questions to elicit people’s medium-of-instruction

Table 1 : Support for Using a Foreign Language as a Teaching Medium (%)

Area	Score			No response	1 + 2
	0	1	2		
Mainland China (N = 164,219)	89.0	4.1	1.7	5.2	5.8
Beijing (n ₁ = 820)	87.2	4.8	7.7	0.4	12.5
Shanghai (n ₂ = 599)	77.8	10.4	11.2	0.7	21.6
Guangzhou (n ₃ = 560)	75.4	16.4	7.0	1.3	23.4
Shenzhen (n ₄ = 170)	71.2	11.8	14.7	2.4	26.5
Dalian (n ₅ = 349)	68.5	11.5	18.6	1.4	30.1

preferences as in the 2000 survey, in Jiangsu, the most economically prosperous amongst the three surveyed regions, 6.53 per cent of the residents supported the idea of using a foreign teaching medium at local primary schools whereas 15.49 per cent supported this idea at secondary schools; these percentages were double that of their counterparts in the 2000 survey (Su, 2012).

Second, some recent studies based on ‘convenient’ samples have revealed much higher percentages of stakeholders’ support for CLIL. In 2008, Wei (2011) surveyed 199 parents of students who, at the time of data collection, were receiving some form of English-medium instruction (‘BE parents’) and 196 parents of those who were not (‘non-BE parents’) at four government-funded schools in Shanghai, a city spearheading pre-tertiary Chinese–English bilingual education in China. The government-funded schools in Shanghai, based on the time when they received official recognition for their efforts on Chinese–English bilingual education, could be categorised into three groups: the first-batch model bilingual education schools certified by the Shanghai authorities (totalling 28), the second-batch (totalling 26), and the other schools that were conducting bilingual education but had not yet received the official recognition prior to data collection. Two of the schools in this survey respectively belonged to the first two categories, while the other two fell into the third category. A major finding was that 78 per cent of non-BE and over 85 per cent of BE parents were supportive of the idea of English-medium instruction.

Therefore, it is suggested that a sizable fraction of stakeholders (e.g. parents) support using a foreign language (in most cases, English) as a teaching medium, and that such support has grown stronger in the past few years especially in major cities. The disparity between the proportions of people supporting CLIL in more recent studies and those reported in the 2000 survey could be attributed to sampling bias and/or the fact that those studies targeted stakeholders living in socio-economically prosperous regions such as Shanghai. The latter factor again underlines the necessity of using a city as a unit of analysis in future research because of the potentially significant socio-economic disparity in a place larger than a city.

Popular support for CLIL (with English being a target language) is largely attributable to the belief in the importance of English (see e.g. Wei, 2011). However, one recent development in China’s capital Beijing signals the waning of such a belief:

although China, like South Korea and Vietnam (Lee, 2010; To, 2010), has implemented the national policy of providing ELT from lower primary grades for over a decade, the education authorities in Beijing have laid down a new policy (effective from autumn 2014) of scrapping mandatory English lessons, which currently begin on the first day of primary school, before the third grade; furthermore, Beijing has decided to reduce the point value of English as a school subject in the all-important *Gaokao* College Entrance Examinations, from 150 to 100 points starting from 2016, while increasing that of the Chinese subject from 150 to 180. It is reported that following Beijing, ‘Shandong and Jiangsu provinces, as well as Shanghai, may remove English from the *Gaokao* entirely’ (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/22/china-english-college-test-gaokao>). It will be interesting to examine to what extent Beijing’s new initiatives may affect regional policies in other Chinese cities, China’s policy concerning ELT in the long run, and/or the policy of CLIL provision to young learners.

Discrepancies in formal language policy in China: A hindrance to CLIL implementation

Despite stakeholder support for foreign-medium (English-medium) instruction, two discrepancies in formal language policy respectively at the national and regional levels hinder the implementation of CLIL in China. One is that the state departments (e.g. the Ministry of Education, see Wei, 2013) have issued a series of policy documents supporting tertiary CLIL without mentioning pre-tertiary CLIL. As a result, CLIL provision has taken root in many universities across the nation and is likely to steadily grow. Although statistics about the scale of tertiary CLIL nationwide are not readily available, one survey drawing upon a ‘convenient’ sample provides a glimpse into the status quo: in May 2006, 132 (97.8 per cent) out of the 135 tertiary institutions involved in this survey were providing CLIL (Wu *et al.*, 2010: 4). In contrast, pre-tertiary CLIL has yet to receive explicit endorsement from the state and is largely at the discretion of regional authorities in terms of policy making. In the public education sector, since the late 1990s pre-tertiary CLIL has been promoted by local governments in Shanghai, Jiangxi Province, Liaoning Province and some cities including Shenzhen, Guilin and Wuxi (Cheng, 2012; Wei, 2013). Unfortunately, regional policy

from local authorities does not seem sufficient to sustain CLIL provision, even in Shanghai, which used to spearhead pre-tertiary CLIL nationwide. Wang (2011), Head of the Research Steering Group for The Shanghai Bilingual Education Experiment at Primary and Secondary Schools (an official at the local educational authorities), acknowledges that this project is stalling but voices his 'strong belief' that CLIL in Shanghai will again flourish once given 'strong support in terms of policy-making and funding'. This can be interpreted as a call for support from formal policy from 'the above', i.e. the state departments.

The other discrepancy manifests itself at the regional (provincial and/or municipal) level in regions that issued policy documents encouraging pre-tertiary CLIL. These regions include Jiangxi Province and Liaoning Province, and cities such as Guilin, Suzhou and Wuxi, where the policy documents seemed to be one-off endeavours. Most notably, although the Shanghai authorities pledged to certify 100 exemplary CLIL schools by 2007, the number of such schools has only reached 54. On the other hand, the annual number of official documents germane to pre-tertiary CLIL reached a peak between 2001 and 2005 but dropped to virtually zero after 2005 (Wei, 2013). CLIL's sudden falling out of favour in municipal policies was so drastic in the past years that it was clearly felt by some front-line teachers in 2008 (see Wei, 2013). Wang's (2011) call for more policy support cited earlier is indicative of the inconsistency of municipal policies at different phrases. If the Shanghai government genuinely commits itself to achieving the goal of certifying 100 municipal-level exemplary schools, initiatives concerning CLIL should continue to be spelled out in more rather than fewer or even no policy documents. In a word, discrepancies in municipal policy are the culprit for Shanghai's stalling CLIL provision.

Beijing's new policy concerning ELT mentioned above, albeit formulated under the banner of 'reform', represents a divergence from the current national policy of providing ELT to lower primary students. Although this discrepancy has not in itself hindered CLIL implementation, future research needs to examine how it may affect CLIL provision in the long run, as Beijing's regional policy seems to have sent a signal that English is no longer so important.

Discussion and conclusion

According to Spolsky (2004: 5, emphasis added), the language policy of a speech community

comprises three components: 'its *language practices* – the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire; its *language beliefs or ideology* – the beliefs about language and language use; and any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of *language intervention, planning or management*'. We concur with Spolsky (2004: 217) that 'language practices, beliefs and management are not necessarily congruent' and argue that a formal language policy works optimally only when these three components co-exist in harmony with each other.

In the case of mainland China discussed above, the stakeholders' attitudes towards medium of instruction correspond to 'language beliefs' (Component 2) in Spolsky's model and the formal language policy concerning English-medium instruction to 'language management' (Component 3, equivalent to the conventional restricted meaning of the term 'language policy'). Although there has been consistent grassroots support for pre-tertiary CLIL (with a foreign language being the target language) in major cities across the past decade, two discrepancies in formal language policy unfortunately arise. In other words, these two components of language policy do not co-exist in harmony. This has led to some undesirable results in the implementation of some formal policy initiatives. For instance, Shanghai's initiative of certifying 100 model bilingual education schools has been shelved and some school-level measures (e.g. assigning qualified CLIL teachers to teach the subject of English only) at several model bilingual education schools are to the detriment of such teachers (Wei, 2013).

Evidence from other Asian countries besides China shows that CLIL suffers when the three components in Spolsky's model do not work in harmony. According to To (2010: 112), who notes that in Vietnam, CLIL (with English being the target language) 'will move very fast in the years to come', barriers to the implementation of formal CLIL policy include 'lack of understanding and support from leaders and managers', which correspond to 'language beliefs' in Spolsky's terms. Lee (2010: 48) documents the demise of a CLIL policy intended to be implemented within the national curriculum system of South Korea; she identifies 'many worries and complaints from teachers, parents, students and from the media' as a major cause. According to Lee (2010: 56), if there were individuals or groups who opposed the policy, efforts should 'be made to help them change their mind' (2010: 56). In other words,

the mismatch between stakeholders' language beliefs and formal language policy constrains the development of CLIL.

In conclusion, then, while we share the view that 'CLIL may prove very effective in producing proficient foreign language speakers' (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010: 374), we would argue that the benefits of CLIL programmes for young learners can only be maximized when people's language practices, beliefs and the authorities' management are consistent with each other.

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