Assessment for Learning in EBE/CLIL: a Learning-oriented Approach to Assessing English Language Skills and Curriculum Content at Early Primary Level

Ana Xavier

FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS E HUMANAS DA UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA

Abstract

Assessment is usually viewed as an inevitable event in teachers' and learners' lives resulting from an imposition from education systems. However, if done well, assessment can provide learners, teachers and other stakeholders with sound information about learner performance and progress which will boost learning and feed into school success.

This article aims at presenting a synopsis of a Master's dissertation[1] conducted at Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas/Universidade Nova de Lisboa (FCSH/UNL), which was defended before a jury in early 2016 and shared at the 1st Junior Researchers in Anglo-American Studies Seal Conference, held in Porto, Portugal, in June 2016.

The original dissertation discusses ways of assessing both English language and curriculum content at early primary level and aims to provide learning-oriented guidelines and a principled framework for such assessment. It is meant for learners and teachers involved in Early Bilingual Education (EBE)/Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at early primary level.

Key words: Assessment; learning-oriented assessment; bilingual education; CLIL; Bilingual Schools Project; Bilingual Schools Programme.

Introduction

As inferred from the title, the focus of the dissertation underlying this article was CLIL assessment at early primary level,[2] notably the assessment of English language skills and curriculum content. This focus was basically connected to my working context at the Directorate-General for Education/Ministry of Education which has involved the coordination and monitoring of the Bilingual Schools Project,[3] a national pilot jointly implemented by the Directorate-General for Education and the British Council in a number of state schools in Portugal from 2011 to 2015.

Within this project, content teachers taught part of the curriculum through the medium of English using a CLIL approach and they were assisted by their English language colleagues who also taught English as a foreign language.

Since this was an innovative project in the Portuguese educational context, where there are not many CLIL provisions at national level, there were practical challenges for the classroom, notably in terms of how to cope with assessment in a specific setting where content is learnt and taught in a foreign language.

Furthermore, I came to understand the importance of the relationship between learning, teaching and assessment and the benefits of knowing more about assessment approaches that support learning and teaching, particularly in a national context where summative assessment has traditionally been highly valued in practice, though there are no guidelines to support teachers in classroom assessment let alone CLIL assessment, and where English language teaching has gained higher status, notably with the introduction of English in year 3 and the creation of the new teacher recruitment group 120.

As a result, this has motivated me to think something was needed to help the teachers working in this context.

Research question and methodology

My working context has provided me with the reasons to decide on this particular research question: *How can language and content be assessed in a CLIL context at early primary level so as to promote effective learning?*

In order to investigate this question, my aims were to review assessment essentials and frameworks, CLIL and young learner assessment, to understand the bilingual teachers' assessment beliefs, knowledge and practice, to learn from experts' best practice and to develop a framework outline for assessing language and content.

There were three stages which reflect the aims mentioned above. First, a more theoretical stage based on the literature that is relevant for the context under study. Second, an empirical stage entailing data collection from several sources, such as teachers working in the Bilingual Schools Project and in similar provisions, also experts, and four methods were used: questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation checklists and classroom assessment sample material. Third, based on the

findings from the previous stages, an outline for a framework for assessment was devised, accompanied by a sample with practical examples to clearly model how teachers can incorporate assessment in their teaching.

Literature review

The literature review has attempted to show how teacher assessment literacy is critical in good teaching and has provided a profile for the CLIL teacher to assess, drawing on the CLIL teachers' competence grid (Bertaux *et al*. 8) and its assessment ability descriptors which suggest both the need for teacher understanding of learning-oriented assessment approaches and CLIL specific features of assessment dealing with the use of language to convey content knowledge.

This profile of the CLIL teacher and their ability to assess has turned the focus to the supportive nature of assessment and to its pedagogical purpose. Given the macro level factors influencing the context under study (*cf*. introduction), this needs to be fostered and be in line with the principles of young learner and CLIL assessment. These principles can provide a rationale for assessment in an EBE/CLIL setting, namely based upon the questions we need to ask ourselves before assessing: *what* we assess, that is, what the construct or focus of our assessment is (language, content or other), *who* can assess in it (learners and teachers), *how* do we do it (child-friendly methods), *when* should we do it (regularly and systematically) and *what* assessment approaches should be used in this context (mainly formative to support summative).

Accordingly, an overview on learning-oriented approaches to assessment was provided with contributions from other education systems on how to assess young learners,[4] which conveyed one key message: that assessment in primary school has to entail formative assessment approaches. Such a framework is needed for our context but to devise it we need to understand what formative assessment, assessment for learning and learning-oriented assessment (LoA) are and what they can offer to this context.

These three assessment approaches have contributed to the design of a framework for assessment planning and practice. In a nutshell, their major contributions were: (i) the processes, strategies and the frequency for planning for assessment which enable learners, peers and teachers to keep learning on track (William); (ii) learner and teacher roles which train the first to start early in thinking about their learning and the latter to demonstrate how children can best get there; (iii) self- and peer assessment to get information from the child's point of view; (iv) feedback to communicate progress; (v) observation to collect evidence; and (vi) a system for planning, using and recording assessment based on the LoA Cycle (Cambridge English Language Assessment) and the LoA Framework (Carless).

The literature review also looked at how some European research projects in CLIL assessment[5] and the specific young learner and CLIL literature[6] can contribute to assessing in the context under study. Their key concepts provided valuable starting points for understanding what the assessment reference points (the curricula and the

language reference documents) and the assessment focuses in this specific early bilingual context should be: content, language, behaviour/attitudes and learning to learn. The latter can be viewed as the first step in cognition which is crucial in order to take the other assessment focuses to a higher level, notably as it enables tackling the complexity levels of learning content in a foreign language and dismissing rote learning.

The literature review also helped clarify that content and language are intrinsically connected and therefore it is in this integrated manner that both should be assessed in the light of well-defined assessment criteria, learning tasks used as mini-assessments, valid and reliable weighting and marking schemes, reporting progress and achievement, and supporting strategies, such as scaffolding and accommodation that will help learners keep sight of learning progress.

Action research

The purpose of the action research was to understand what the teachers working in an EBE/CLIL context at early primary level think, know, do and need as regards assessment; and to find out how experts in the field view assessment best practice.

An action research design was chosen because the research pointed to teacher behavioural and attitudinal change, professional development and improvement of classroom practice in assessment and also given my professional involvement in the research context – the Bilingual Schools Project. However, elements of other research designs were also incorporated, such as the case study design, since this research was limited in scope to a group of teachers (teaching year 3 in the Bilingual Schools Project in 2013/14) and focused on a specific aspect of their teaching dealing with assessment.

Furthermore, data from multiple sources (observations, questionnaires, interviews and samples) was obtained which enabled triangulation and reinforcement of results and a real-life context (the Bilingual Schools Project) was examined which could be used to generalise results to other teachers working in a similar context.

Likewise, an element of experimental design was included given the decision of having two groups of teachers – the Bilingual Schools Project teachers and another made up of other teachers not involved in the project but involved in similar provisions at primary level in Portuguese state and private schools in one of the data collection methods used (questionnaire) to enable comparability of results.

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected by means of a combination of elicitation techniques (interviews and questionnaires), classroom observation schemes (classroom assessment observation checklists) and samples of classroom assessment material, which drew on the literature review on formative assessment and CLIL assessment. These four methods aimed to check the consistency of answers provided.

Main findings

From the literature review it was found that teacher assessment literacy is very important for school success and the CLIL teacher profile demands knowledge of assessment. Assessment is of a supportive nature and has a pedagogical purpose and this needs to be fostered in this context. This implies teachers employing learning-oriented assessment in the classroom as part of learning and teaching on a systematic basis. Knowledge of CLIL and young learner assessment concepts, strategies and tools, particularly those that show what success looks like, that can be recorded and that communicate progress to learners, can dutifully lay the basis for an assessment framework in a bilingual education/CLIL context at early primary level.

From the action research, it was confirmed that teachers working in bilingual education/CLIL contexts at early primary level in Portugal know little about assessment. Although they think highly of formative assessment, they rarely embed it in their teaching practice, as testing is what they usually do. Language ability is more often neglected as a focus of assessment to the detriment of the assessment of curriculum content.

Furthermore, as to the experts, their knowledge and best practice greatly contributed to showing which assessment constructs should be given more focus and weight (cognitive skills, autonomy, content and language skills), as well as to clarifying which should be the (weekly and daily) frequency of formative assessment strategies/tools and that content and language should be assessed together.

A reflection on the findings from the action research suggests that both teachers and experts think that content and language should be assessed together rather than separately. However, a greater focus on language ability skills is needed as this seems to be completely neglected in the assessment samples made available. There should be more valid, frequent, smaller and varied assessment formats such as more learning tasks used as mini-assessment tasks of a shorter duration, less content and more techniques per item, implying not just seating still reading and writing but also hands-on approaches. Accordingly, teacher training in this field is required.

Assessment framework – an outline for a sample

An outline and a sample for an assessment framework were then proposed targeting EBE/CLIL teachers. The framework was supported by theory and best practice, and addressed the needs of the teachers working in this EBE/CLIL setting in early primary level.

It was divided into three sections: the first focuses on building teacher confidence on key assessment concepts, the second on providing a varied repertoire of assessment methods and tools for planning a curriculum block as well as guidelines to help the teachers in their classroom assessment, and the third demonstrates how to integrate assessment in a lesson learning sequence.

As it is now, the framework is still incipient but nevertheless it can be a helpful start. It obviously needs to be trialled, reflected upon, extended so as to integrate other important focuses of assessment, and improved in collaboration with the teachers in the classroom. It is my assumption that such a framework would contribute to increase teacher knowledge of assessment and foster good assessment planning and practice, particularly in a field that still requires research at national and international levels.

Reflection and the future

A range of opportunities can be offered to English language teaching, CLIL and early primary assessment with this assessment framework, as there is nothing of the kind at national level and little at international level.

At national level, this proposal can be shared with teachers working in bilingual education/CLIL contexts and become the basis to develop an accredited teacher training course, because it has the value of gathering assessment essentials, showing and modelling how assessment can be done in early primary CLIL. As such, it may enable teachers to try out the framework in their actual classroom, get feedback from the teachers on the backwash of the classroom implementation of the methods, techniques and tools the framework suggests, and the findings of this trial can contribute to adjust and improve the framework.

Although this work targets an early primary level, it may further contribute to overall assessment of young learners as it has the potential of being extended to other education levels, such as preschool education and *2.º ciclo do ensino básico*,[7] which are now included in the Bilingual Schools Programme. Thus, this proposal may provide teacher support and guidance and readjust the national focus to learning-oriented assessment.

Another possibility, at an international level, would be to present this proposal to the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe with which the Ministry of Education has been closely working on the development of cascade training on classroom assessment since 2015.

One final note: despite assessment, young learners and CLIL being major research areas nowadays, they are not often combined in research. Thus, it was not straightforward to intersect their major contributions into the specific CLIL assessment at early primary level in the context under study. Hopefully, the dissertation underlying this article will be beneficial for learners, teachers and schools in this educational context and elsewhere.

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[1] Available at <https://run.unl.pt/handle/10362/17973>, accessed 20 Oct. 2016.

[2] This corresponds to *1.º ciclo do ensino básico* in Portugal which lasts for 4 years and involves 6-10 year-old learners.

³ This has become a national programme in 2016/2017 entitled the Bilingual Schools Programme and it covers 11 school clusters and 18 schools/kindergartens in mainland Portugal. More information available at <www.dge.mec.pt>

⁴ "Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum" (2007) by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment from the Republic of Ireland and the "Curriculum for Excellence" (2010), by the Scottish Government.

⁵ The Assessment and Evaluation in CLIL Project (AECLIL Project) (Barbero; Maggi) which focused on how to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of learning a content subject in a foreign language, by simultaneously improving language and enhancing cognitive/thinking skills; and the CLIL Learner Assessment Project (CLILA project) (Massler, Stotz & Queisser) which developed an enquiry and assessment tool to measure primary school learners' content and foreign language ability in CLIL lessons.

⁶ In terms of the CLIL literature, the 4Cs framework (Coyle), the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl) and the Language Triptych (Coyle *et al.*) specifically provided links to embed cognition in the focuses of assessment.

⁷ This corresponds to upper primary level, comprising years 5 and 6 and involving 10-12 year-old learners.