

A Prototype Study Evaluating the Linguistic Proficiency of Year 1 ELTE Students at Eastern Mediterranean University, North Cyprus

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ABSTRACT With English being the lingua franca and the most commonly taught foreign language worldwide, many institutions such as the Eastern Mediterranean University in Northern Cyprus have adopted the English language as the medium of instruction in order to meet social and educational needs. Yet, although the final year students of the mentioned university are regarded to have acquired proficiency in English, the teaching staff are purporting that the first year courses are, in fact, language learning sessions for students whose language competency even at the end of their four-year undergraduate studies continues to be debatable. Based on this controversy, this case study aims to determine whether the English language development of the EMU-ELTE year 1 students meets/satisfies certain predetermined educational and social requirements. This longitudinal study involves the continuous normative evaluation of students' language abilities through English.

INTRODUCTION

Global developments in the fields of education, politics, technology and science during the second half of the twentieth century led to a widespread expansion in foreign and second language teaching and this in turn initiated a significant increase in English language teaching and learning worldwide. Thus, methodologies and techniques were designed and materials were developed and implemented with the overall aim of making language learning as effective as possible. Developments in the sphere of language teaching led to a progression of programmes with varying exposure from varied levels of *immersion*, to the more focused *content based instruction* and finally to the latest approach *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)* (Cummins 1978, 2013).

This study was conducted at the ELT department of the Eastern Mediterranean University, where the medium of instruction is English and which embodies a student body approaching 16000 from 90 different countries and an extraordinary population of 1000 academicians from 35 different nations. Naturally, the use of English throughout its faculties and schools and its international status in the global arena of education is of utmost importance. Therefore, by means of a longitudinal study, this case study investigates the efficacy of English medium instruction

by assessing university students' English development through continual evaluation, specifically with the aim to examine whether the ongoing English medium instruction conducted through CLIL is achieving its goal.

Background of the Study

'English language teaching' students at the EMU-ELTE department undergo a four-year degree programme, during which the presumption is that the departmental vocational and language courses positively support the improvement of their language skills and hence their linguistic competence in English is positively reinforced, thus ensuring the production of highly qualified language teachers with exceptional foreign verbal skills gained while studying the requirements of the pedagogy.

CLIL, Language Development and Success in Other Courses

With language representing power (Crystal 2010), modernization and globalization, in such a small community as Cyprus, the essential inclusion of English in the curriculum throughout all levels of education has been inevitable. As Crystal (1997:101) rightly states, 'English is the medium of a great deal of the world's knowledge, especially in such areas as science and technolo-

gy. And access to knowledge is the business of education.

Institutions such as the Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus supposedly adopt English medium education through “CLIL – Content Language Instructed Learning” in order to satisfy/meet both societal and educational needs. Actually, ‘language learned through content has the further advantage of allowing an integration with higher order thinking tasks, so that students may communicate about thoughts, not just words’ (Met 1991: 282). Furthermore, ‘carefully constructed content-area language teaching programs are a sign of the times in second language teaching today (Morley in Kaplan and Grabe 1992:101).

As a multifaceted approach, CLIL is identified as a priority area in the EU Action plan for Language Learning. Hence, a CLIL lesson is in fact ‘not a language lesson neither is it a subject lesson transmitted in a foreign language...’ It combines four elements: ‘Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture’ where all four language skills, namely reading, writing, listening and speaking, should be combined, and, in fact, the language teacher is also the subject teacher

Problem Statement

Considering the significance of the use of English in institutions and the stance of English within the Cypriot society, the limelight is obviously to be turned onto the English language teachers and teachers-to-be. The general view is that the level and results of the on-going language teaching fail to meet the demands and expectations of society, and the English teachers’ shortfall in linguistic skills is claimed to be the main reason.

As an English medium institution, the Eastern Mediterranean University provides immense opportunities to the ‘English Language Teaching’ students from their first year onwards. Alongside the formal subject related terminology and methodology courses conducted in English, students are also linguistically supported throughout their four-year education with language development courses. This is where the problem needs to be analysed. With such intensive language exposure and schooling, the novice English teachers should develop their linguistic skills and eventually reach a highly advanced language level so as to function at ease within

the teaching context. Yet, the language development of the ELT department students does not seem to be advancing satisfyingly. This study assumes that CLIL increases students’ pace and efficacy in learning and employing the language.

Significance of the Study

The current case study’s aim is to analyse and evaluate the linguistic proficiency and improvement of the on-going ELTE year 1 students at the Eastern Mediterranean University, so as to define their development over a time interval. The results will shed light onto the efficacy of the CLIL applications of the EMU-ELTE programme and hopefully reinforce its application.

Research Questions

This research was designed to examine the English language development of ELTE Year 1 students at EMU in Cyprus. It further aimed to investigate the effect of the use of L2 in general and to determine skills development specifically in the English medium EFL classroom.

The research questions considered were as follows:

1. Does exposure to English in professional and language related courses over a specific period of time positively reinforce the students’ English competency thus leading to a significant difference in their language development?
2. Is there a correlation between the students’ department course results and their degree of L2 competency?

Dependant Variables

There was only one independent variable, that being the CLIL method.

Independent Variables

The students’ progress and their success in their subject lessons were reciprocally dependant on the CLIL application.

METHODOLOGY

The case study adopted a semi-longitudinal, process-oriented, experimental, correlational

method in terms of cause-effect relationship with a synthetic-deductive objective (Patten 2004; Seliger and Shohamy 2013) based on results obtained via pre-test/post-test design. It also employed a piloted and recognised test battery along with a personal questionnaire, which provided the quantitative data which was used for comparative purposes.

Research Design

The study was concerned with different types of quantitative data collection methods. Learners' language development was measured via continuous assessment and then enumerated and correlated through item analysis and the Statistics Programme for Social Sciences, SPSS. In the meantime, the participants' personal background information was matched and evaluated against their performance. Thus the study obtained different quantitative interpretative data employing 'within method' data triangulation' (Denzin 1970, 2012), in that instrumentation included focused questionnaires and tests administered as multiple choice and discursive writings in English. Data were collected at pre-arranged time intervals so as to obtain a valid picture of the language development level of the participants.

In order to achieve the aims of this study, the data collection commenced after the first half of the initial semester in the ELTE department. There was continuous assessment during the study and the students' midterm, and final course grades in chosen courses were also compared with their language test results. After the pre-test and post-tests had been administered within the group, the results were analysed on the SPSS programme for quantitative results. The implications for these results were consequently used in the prediction of the study group's language development competency level at the end of the four year formal study period. It also provided input in reference to the program design itself. Subsequently, overall suggestions were made related to the field of ELT and education.

Population Sample and Data Analysis

The case study was carried out in a state-trust university in North Cyprus. The participants were specifically chosen from the ELTE 106 Listening and Pronunciation mainly because

they displayed a more homogenous structure in their language background, and secondly they were more actively involved in these courses, which were listening and pronunciation courses.

One difficulty for the researcher was the fact that she was not a member of academia and therefore had only limited contacts within the higher education realm. In addition, another constraint was the time requirement for the longitudinal study and therefore the study was kept in its prototype structure with the intention of expanding it in the future. Yet, although the number of participants was initially 85 students, 62 females and 23 males, within the age range 18 – 21 the final number was limited to 39 partakers (29 females and 10 males) who completed all levels of the continual tests twice and the questionnaire. The pre and post-tests were the same multiple choice tests administered over a time interval of 6 months.

FINDINGS

English Language Development

For the first research question, paired sample t-test was conducted. Results indicated that the mean for pretest ($M= 52.62, Sd= 16.62$) differed significantly from the mean for posttest ($M= 62.10, Sd= 9.74$), $t(38)= 5.751, p>.05$. This result was achieved by looking at how statistically different the two condition Means were; that is, by looking at the Sig.(2-tailed) value – p. Since the result was smaller than 0.05, it was concluded that there was a significant difference between the results of the pre-test and post-test taken by the participants, indicating that the foreign language linguistic competency of the students who had been exposed to both profession and language-related courses showed a significant difference. Consequently, these results suggested that being exposed to both profession and language related courses led to a significant development in the students' foreign language competency.

Correlation between Courses and L2

The second research question of the case study focused on the correlation between course success and the L2 competency of the participants and was formulated to ascertain whether there was a correlation between the success in

the ELTE course results and the degree of L2 competency. For this question, the results of professional and language related courses of the EMU students were used and correlated with their second multiple choice test and writing task results. The course results used for the study were for Listening and Pronunciation I and II, and Approaches in ELT I and II. The relationship between the success in the department courses and the degree of English language competency was analysed by Pearson Correlation analysis. Results indicated that there is positive significant correlation between department courses and English language competency ($r=.364, p<.05$).

Overall, the results showed that there was a positive correlation between the two variables with the Pearson coefficient correlation being $r = 0.364$ for a total of 39 participants ($n= 39$), and since the statistical significance Sig(2-tailed) correlation value, p was smaller than 0.05, that is, in this research it was calculated to be a small 0.024, it was concluded that there was a statistical significant correlation between the two variables. This meant that studying academic and profession related courses in English did in fact have a positive effect on the students' English language development and competency. In short, overall, there was a positive correlation between the participants' ELTE courses and their L2 competency.

Moreover, to further verify the results, the relationship between LC1, LC2, PC1, PC2 and language competency was explained by linear regression.

DISCUSSION

With respect to the results obtained from the paired sample t-test and considering the first research question, it can be concluded that students' English language skills are positively reinforced even over a period of two semesters. Many factors are involved in this consequence, the first being the fact that ELT students experience intense exposure to the English language in the ELT classroom. Moreover, they are obliged to use English in various daily used sources such as the internet, the library or during meetings they may have with foreign professors. In short, the English language that the ELT students are exposed to in their ELTE classes is sufficient to favour/promote the development of their English language skills.

In the next step, the second research question, was scrutinized and results provided a pos-

itive answer to the question. Vocational and language development courses taken by students positively reinforced their language skills after a two-semester period. In addition, the students' performance, specifically in their language courses, was a direct prediction of their language competency during the following semester. All in all, the English medium education structure of the department and the CLIL (Lorenzo 2007) approach are obviously proving to be successful. Zarobe and Cenoz (2015) argued that the agenda of CBI/CLIL needs to move towards integration; integration in a number of domains that include pedagogical, geographical and even terminological issues in CBI/CLIL.

Students' department course results were in correlation with their degree of L2 competency. The courses taken during a two-semester period reinforced the students' language skills. This result is also in line with the results of the first research question which proved that the language skills of ELTE students showed a significant development over a two semester period. Thus, when both results are examined, it can be concluded that there is a positive correlation between the students' L2 language competency and their department course results, resulting in a positive effect on their language development over two semesters. Hatipoglu (2015) stated similarly that her study's findings show how lectures should work well with their students if the aim is to create more useful ELTE courses.

CONCLUSION

The study proved that the English language skills of the students in this study were positively reinforced over a period of two semesters. Several reasons may account for this result. Firstly, there is the fact that the ELTE students are exposed to English in the ELTE classroom, a formal learning context, where they feel obliged to function, discuss and communicate in English. Furthermore, their obligation to use English via the internet or during short meetings with their foreign professors obliges them to utilize their English language skills effectively and efficiently. Moreover, the language to which they are exposed in their profession-related courses is mainly technical jargon which provides them with further and diverse awareness of the employment of their general language skills thus confirming the result obtained for the first question. In short, the English language that the ELT students are exposed to in their ELTE classes sup-

ports the development of their English language skills.

Overall, the implications of this prototype study and the action to be taken can be summed up as follows:

1. The current CLIL structure may be continued with a more intensive concentration on the development of the students' English language skills.
2. There should be constant and persistent concentration on the English language and increased practice during both formal and informal gatherings.
3. The language preparation period for ELTE students should be revised/amended so that students will have the opportunity to experience a longer and more intensive English learning and development period, preferably before the formal vocational studies commence.
4. An intensive language course abroad would provide students with the fluency, understanding and flexibility of both the language and the culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the current study can be expanded with further research. Suggestions for related research could be as follows:

1. The on-going study which was conducted for two continuous semesters could be extended to 3 – 4 semesters to enable an evaluation of the students' language development and the effect of the CLIL instruction over a longer period.
2. The prototype study can be expanded and used with a larger universe.
3. Since the L1 and English comparative study focused solely on the writing abilities of the participants, a further comparative study may be conducted for the reading and listening skills in the two languages, thus enabling an overall comparison to be made.

LIMITATIONS AND DELIMITATIONS

There were several limitations: The study, administered at only 1 university in solely North Cyprus, was a prototype and thus involved a

relatively small size of a study group with limited exposure to language outside the classroom. Moreover, the time constraint on the study did not allow the researcher to expand the study to all levels of ELTE students and for a longer period than 2 semesters. Finally, the impracticalities related to data collection, namely accessing data which in some cases was regarded as confidential and the reluctance of the participants to contribute to the research were further limitations of the research.

The delimitations were the homogenous structure of the study group, the reliable test battery (the Michigan test), the employment of numerous statistical tests, and the university itself with its highly international structure.

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