

Optimising classroom communication: Verbal scaffolding in CLIL

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ABSTRACT

To ease the transition into Higher Education, more and more international students enrol on “pathway” courses where subject knowledge is taught alongside EAP. This raises important pedagogical questions as these students typically have lower English skills than direct-entry students, yet they face intellectually challenging concepts and authentic academic discourse. Based on a practitioner enquiry undertaken on a pre-Masters course, this article investigates to what extent subject teachers’ language use supports this kind of Content and Language Integrated Learning. It will be argued that training is needed to raise pathway teachers’ awareness of verbal scaffolding strategies to optimise classroom communication.

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With the increasing pressure on universities to recruit highly skilled international students the number of pathway courses that offer discipline specific training is rising. Given that students enrolled on such programmes typically have lower language skills than those required for direct university entry, pathway teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching subject knowledge while at the same time developing the students’ language skills, a setting referred to as “Content and Language Integrated Learning” (CLIL) (European Commission for Multilingualism, 2008). While the interest in CLIL has grown in recent years and effective CLIL teaching methods such as the use of scaffolding have been identified (de Graaff et al., 2007; Lyster, 2007), little is known about the extent to which such strategies are employed by teachers on pathway courses. A small-scale research project was therefore undertaken on a pre-Masters programme to explore this issue further. Particularly, it was asked what kind of verbal scaffolding strategies teachers use to manage the classroom discourse and to what extent their verbal behaviour actually creates opportunities for CLIL. Based on the findings, it will be argued that specific training is needed to raise subject teachers’ awareness of verbal scaffolding strategies in order to optimise classroom discourse and enhance international students’ learning experience.

Teacher talk and verbal scaffolding in CLIL

The term scaffolding was coined by Bruner, who explained the concept as a process “that enables the child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his [sic] unassisted effort” (Wood et al., 1976, p.90). This assistance, Bruner continues, is provided through six different means: by stimulating interest, by simplifying task requirements, by keeping the learner motivated and focused, by relieving stress and by modelling solutions (ibid.). While this concept can be applied to almost all learning situations, it poses a two-fold challenge in the pathway classroom where a supportive environment needs to be created that allows for deep engagement with the subject as well as for interaction and communication to foster international students’ language skills. How teachers use their language is of crucial importance as it is through language that knowledge

is mediated and learning opportunities are created. This requires a high level of skill and language awareness on the part of the teacher and it is therefore crucial to gain greater understanding of the strategies involved. While research has been undertaken in this area – Dalton-Puffer (2007) for example highlights the importance of initiation-response-feedback (IRF) patterns and Lyster (2007) focuses on feedback and reformulations in CLIL – little is known about how such strategies are employed in HE pathway contexts with international students.

The institutional context

The small-scale research project presented here focused on a pre-Masters programme at a UK university. The majority of students typically enrolled on this course are of East Asian origin and many find the transition from their previous educational experiences, which they often describe as rather didactic and teacher-centred, to the Western style of learning and teaching challenging. With regards to English language skills the students are required to have a minimum IELTS score of 5.5 (or equivalent) in each sub-skill at the point of entry, which needs to be improved to the equivalent of a 6.5 over the course of the two semester programme in order to allow them to progress to selected postgraduate courses. In addition to attending classes in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and Study Skills, the students also take different subject modules related to their future degree course. These include a social sciences module, from which the data was collected. The content taught on the academic modules compares to the third year of an undergraduate degree and the students need an average of 60% across academic modules to progress. The improvement of language and subject skills, therefore, needs to go hand in hand if the students are to meet the progression requirements. This cannot be done by EAP teachers alone, but also requires the academic experts – i.e. the subject teachers – to support students in bridging the gap between their language abilities and the complexity of the specific academic content taught. However, not all pathway subject teachers have received CLIL training or have experience of language teaching. Insight into verbal scaffolding strategies could therefore assist in gaining greater understanding of how classroom discourse works in a CLIL setting as well as for teacher training and development.

Research questions, data collection and analysis

To investigate how teachers in this context use verbal scaffolding strategies to assist their students, the following research questions were drawn up:

- What kind of verbal scaffolding strategies do teachers use in whole-class seminar discussions?
- Do these strategies mainly focus on content or language learning?
- To what extent do these strategies create opportunities for learning?
- To what extent do these strategies differ between teachers with and without language teaching experience?

Data was collected from two native English speaking teachers who had volunteered to take part in the research: the first a subject specialist who has had eight years' experience of teaching international students in HE, the other a subject specialist who has also had ten years' experience of teaching EFL/EAP in the FE and HE sector. The teachers were

interviewed about their educational background, teaching experience and lesson aims, then two 50-minute lessons were recorded. A week before the recordings were due to take place, the students were informed about the research project and their right to withdraw from the study to ensure they gave informed consent to participate. Across the two seminar groups, 26 students were involved.

Based on the principles of applied Conversation Analysis (CA), the recordings were transcribed and analysed. Such an approach is particularly well-suited for the analysis of classroom discourse as it focuses on talk-in-interaction and thus ties in with the notion of sociocultural theory that learning and knowledge are co-constructed through language use (Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

Results

Both recorded lessons focused on the same topic and materials, and both teachers stated that their lesson aims were to ensure students had understood the main ideas presented in a reading and to discuss them critically and fluently. As is common in many subject classrooms (Lyster, 2007), both teachers relied heavily on IRF (initiation-response-feedback) patterns. While Dalton-Puffer (2007) argues that IRF can serve a scaffolding function due to its potential to create shared space for meaning construction in which the teacher's utterance guides the student through a task, the microanalysis of the teacher talk revealed that the two teachers used the IRF patterns to very different effects.

The subject-only teacher initiated discussion by asking an open question to allow the students to voice their comments on a text. Such open or referential questions are often described as beneficial in a CLIL context as they invite students to express their ideas relatively freely and can thus allow for the construction of longer and more complex utterances (Llinares et al., 2012). However, when the students in this particular instance were hesitant to answer, the teacher quickly changed his strategy and asked a series of closed display questions (i.e. questions that require specific, often factual answers that leave little room for students' own ideas and are therefore very predictable for the teacher). These assisted the students in focussing on the task, yet did not require them to produce a lengthy response. The students were thus guided through the task and all the key content areas were covered. This kind of teacher behaviour was repeated numerous times throughout the recorded session, with very little evidence of other verbal strategies being used. While it could be argued that this strategy fits Bruner's definition of scaffolding in the sense that the closed display questions simplify the task by keeping the students focused (and by modelling the correct answer should all questions fail), it has to be recognised that this discursive practice is not without problems in a CLIL context. From a language learning perspective, the closed display questions mean that discussions become very teacher- rather than student-centred as it is the teacher who undertakes most of the linguistic effort (the longest teacher utterance was 2 minutes compared to 13 seconds for students). Thus, there is only little need for students to practise oral fluency. Further, the opportunities for content learning are limited too, as the students simply resort to providing "cues" (or "labels" cf. Dalton-Puffer, 2007, p.261) for the teacher to expand on rather than engage in true co-construction of knowledge. As a result, the students engaged in little discussion and opportunities for CLIL were limited.

The second teacher was not only a subject specialist but also had ten years' experience of teaching EFL/EAP. Like in the first classroom, this teacher used an IRF pattern to manage the classroom discourse; however, the micro-analysis of the recordings revealed that display questions were not the only means of providing verbal assistance. Rather, there were several other features in the teacher talk that functioned as scaffolding:

- new lexical items were explicitly pointed out and their pronunciation and use in context modelled (e.g. extract 1, lines 3, 10, 15):

<i>Extract 1</i>		
1	L1	Our statement is ((reads)) Power is what is used in adversarial relationships
2		involving conflicts between those with power and those without.=
3	T	= Could everybody hear that? There was a word used there (2.8) that is
4		probably ((writes)) °if I can spell it° [ad-ver-]
5	Ls	[(Mumble)]
6	T	[Thank you] Am I right?= = Yes, yeah= = Thanks °I'm not the best speller° ((laughs)). ((laugh))
7	Ls	
8	T	
9	Ls	
10	T	Adversarial. That might be a new word to some of you. Could you tell us what
11		it means? [Adversarial?]
12	L1	[Adversarial.] =
13	L2	=Against= =Clash= =Clash. Fighting. So an adversarial relationship is one that is based on
14	L1	
15	T	
16		disagreement and often fighting. (1.3) So ah this statement, could you tell us
17		what you discussed what does it say about power ?

- words were fed in when students found it hard to finish an utterance (e.g. extract 2, 1. 2) or when they were uncertain which word to use (e.g. extract 2, 1. 7):

<i>Extract 2</i>		
1	L	Not for real it's really hard to to (<1.0) to distribute the the power ah (<1.0)
2	T	Equally= = Equally yes= =Why:? Because because the people have the the they have they are human beings they
3	L	
4	T	
5	L	
6		have some like greed (1.5) [they they]
7	T	[Desire] =
8	L	=Yeah

- emphasis and stress were used to guide students' focus on critical features such as key words and phrases (e.g. extract 3, line 2, 14);
- students' linguistically incorrect or basic utterances were repeatedly reformulated and extended into more elaborate phrases (e.g. extract 3, line 11,12);
- such reformulations and extensions were accompanied by use of word stress to highlight that a linguistically more sophisticated alternative had been provided (e.g. extract 3, l. 12); as Lyster (2007) has shown, such use of emphasis is particularly

important as students need to be made aware that an utterance has been reformulated in order for learning to take place:

Extract 3

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1 | L | Ah ((reads)) power includes the ability to not act= |
| 2 | T | = to <u>not</u> act (<1.0) that was interesting [can you] |
| 3 | L | [Hmm] |
| 4 | T | Yeah to not act can you give us |
| 5 | | an example of of that (1.0) |
| 6 | L | Like a coup a couple of weeks ago you mentioned a black woman, (1.5) |
| 7 | | American woman she is in a low status in on that time= |
| 8 | T | =Aha= |
| 9 | L | =And she went to the buses but she do not want to give her seat to to white man (1.0) |
| 10 | T | Mhm |
| 11 | L | So so she said no= |
| 12 | T | =Remember I told you that story about Rosa Parks who <u>refused</u> to stand up |
| 13 | | (<1.0) so she chose not to act yeah aha but in a way she <u>did</u> act didn't she and |
| 14 | | she took the power mhm so power can be when we refuse to do something when we choose <u>not</u> to do something as well ya. |

While the teacher still dominated the classroom talk in terms of turn control and length of utterances, the flexible approach to scaffolding had consequences for the classroom interaction: there were overall a greater number of longer student utterances than in classroom one, with students regularly holding the floor for considerable lengths of time (the longest being 53 seconds). The teacher contributed to the discussion and moved it on, but without taking over for disproportionate periods of time (the longest teacher utterance in the discussion was 1.10 minutes). The focus of the lesson shifted flexibly between content and language and the teacher used verbal scaffolding strategies for both. Thus, more instances of negotiation of linguistic meaning and co-construction of subject knowledge were created. Therefore, the teacher's use of language was aligned with the lesson aim to practise oral fluency and students had more opportunities to engage in CLIL (cf. Walsh, 2002).

Discussion and Conclusion

The results show that both teachers used verbal strategies to assist their students. While the subject-only teacher focused almost exclusively on content and produced a series of display questions as a scaffold, the teacher with EFL/EAP experience used a more flexible approach, focussing on both content and language and using a range of different scaffolding strategies. While it needs to be emphasised that this analysis is not intended as an evaluation of the teachers' overall skills – both teachers were experts in their fields with long and successful teaching careers – it has to be recognised that their different verbal behaviour had an impact on the CLIL opportunities that were created. As this was only a small-scale research project, the results can by no means be generalised; however, the findings tie in with previous research in similar areas. Musumeci's (1996) investigation of content-based language instruction found that subject teachers showed a similar focus on content matter with long teacher turns, an extensive use of display questions and few opportunities for students to engage in negotiation of meaning. Similarly, Milne and Garcia (2008), who looked at verbal repetition in CLIL, found that teachers who were trained in EFL had succeeded in providing

feedback that served both content and language learning. In the light of this wider research, the results of this small-scale research project therefore highlight the need to raise subject teachers' awareness of, and flexibility in, using verbal support strategies. For subject teachers without English language teaching experience, training needs to be provided that emphasises both the importance of co-construction of subject knowledge and negotiation of meaning in language learning to ensure that teachers manage classroom communication effectively. This is particularly important in the growing pathway sector to ensure that the increasing numbers of international students are best supported in their efforts to understand complex content knowledge, while at the same time improving their language skills to give them a head start in their academic progress in the UK.

It is recognised that this study is limited in its scope and further research is needed to understand the role and impact of verbal scaffolding in CLIL pathway classrooms. It does, however, raise important questions about how findings from second language learning theory and best practice can be shared amongst subject and EAP staff. Equally, further research is needed to explore to what extent such shared best practice might not only enhance the learning and teaching experience on pathway programmes but also on regular degree programmes with a high intake of international students. It has even been argued that insights into pathway pedagogy can be beneficial for home students too, particularly widening participation students, as they can face similar challenges in terms of linguistic and cultural adaptation to their international peers when entering HE for the first time (Marshall, 2013). Thus, research into how teachers can use verbal scaffolding strategies to create effective learning opportunities for their students promises to enhance our understanding of an effective, inclusive HE pedagogy further.

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