

Surveys of Ph.D. Theses

Review of doctoral research on second language teaching and learning in Spain (2008–2010)

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This paper reviews a selection of doctoral theses on language learning and teaching completed in Spain between 2008 and 2010. A total of 16 theses have been identified as representative – in terms of the topics under investigation and the methodology employed – of the doctoral research undertaken in Spain. Current topics include the development of speaking skills, motivation, learner autonomy, pragmatics, learning context, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), language learning by immigrant populations and, especially, classroom teaching. A variety of research methods were employed in the theses under review, and while most of them focus on adult learners, some also consider children. The interest of researchers in these topics is consistent with the challenges faced by language teachers in Spain, as well as with the new realities of teaching in this country, with its recently-arrived immigrant population, the expansion of CLIL programmes and the use of new technologies.

1. Introduction and selection protocol

The purpose of the following review is to examine some of the most significant doctoral research on language learning and teaching in Spain completed during the years 2008, 2009 and 2010. Some of this research has been published in Spanish or Catalan, which may deprive it of an international readership, so we hope this review will contribute to the dissemination of its findings. The review will also provide a broad picture of Spanish research interests in this field.

In order to carry out this review, we first consulted several databases which list successful doctoral theses in Spain: Dialnet (*Universidad de la Rioja*), Tesis Doctorals en Xarxa, TDX (*Consorci Centre de Supercomputació de Catalunya, CIESCA*), and the *Consorci de Biblioteques Universitàries de Catalunya, CBUC* and, most importantly, TESEO (*Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación*). However, we soon discovered that all the theses included in the first two databases were also in TESEO, so we decided to use only this database, which was the most complete. In fact, all doctoral students are recommended to list their doctoral theses in TESEO once the viva has taken place. TESEO therefore offers centralised access to doctoral research in Spain.

To find all the doctoral theses published in the relevant period dealing with language learning and teaching, we performed a search using the following descriptors: LANGUAGE TEACHING, APPLIED LINGUISTICS, BILINGUALISM and, finally, LINGUISTICS, to make sure we did not miss any theses that might have been indexed under any of these terms. After examining the titles and abstracts of all the theses that included one or more of these descriptors, we identified those that were centrally concerned with language teaching and learning; this list comprised 34 theses in the year 2008, 24 in 2009 and 32 in 2010: a total of 90 theses. Once the relevant research was identified, we looked for the most frequent topics. This was not an easy task, as there was a great variety, but the following were identified as the most frequent themes: the development of speaking abilities and the acquisition of foreign language sounds; individual differences, in particular learner autonomy and motivation; pragmatics; context of learning; Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL); majority language learning by immigrant populations; and, most frequently, classroom language teaching. The popularity of these topics, as will be explained later, is not surprising, given the current importance attached to these issues in Spain. The doctoral theses under examination are concerned with English as a foreign language in Spain, Spanish as a foreign language in other settings (Germany and the US), and Spanish and Catalan as a second language (L2) in Spain and Catalonia respectively. However, it should be mentioned that, even if these languages are the most frequent targets of study in doctoral research on language learning and teaching in Spain, there are other theses, not included in this review, that focus on other languages.

Within the above-mentioned topics, we selected 16 dissertations that were considered to have great potential for the improvement of language teaching and learning in Spain and internationally and to have been undertaken in a methodologically sound way. These 16 dissertations were the result of a selection from the 90 previously chosen for consideration. Each of us first selected those she considered most relevant, and only those studies on which there was complete agreement were included in the final review. The theses analysed in this review constitute 20% of the doctoral research carried out on these topics in the years under study, and we believe the selection is representative. The 16 theses selected were submitted in 12 different universities: *Universitat d'Alacant* (Galindo 2009), *Universidad Antonio Nebrija* (Minera 2009), *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (Pinyana 2009), *Universitat de Barcelona* (Barón 2009; Llanes 2010), *Universitat de Girona* (Oller 2008), *Universidad de Granada* (Cortina 2009; Del Moral 2010), *Universitat Jaume I* (Vilar 2008), *Universidad de La Rioja* (Fernández-Fontecha 2008), *Universidad de Murcia* (Criado 2008), *Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, UNED* (Fernández-Agüero 2009), *Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibersitatea* (Mongelos 2008; Gómez-Lacabex 2009, Zenotz 2009) and *Universitat de València* (Osa-Melero 2009). All of these theses were presented in philology or translation departments, apart from two that were presented in education departments (Cortina 2009; Del Moral 2010) and two in psychology departments (Mongelos 2008; Oller 2008).

Our review of these theses will be organised by their main topic of inquiry, as described in the previous paragraph. Nevertheless, it must be emphasised that different classifications would have been possible, as many theses deal with more than one aspect of language learning and teaching.

2. Topics of special interest in the Spanish research community

2.1 The development of speaking abilities and the acquisition of foreign language sounds

Learners' spoken language development is a recurrent theme in the doctoral research carried out during this period. This is quite understandable, since learning English in a formal learning context, as most Spanish students do here, is a different acquisition scenario from a natural learning setting, where opportunities for oral practice are abundant. Additionally, the development of oral production can be inhibited in a context where input is not only scarce, but also often comes from non-native speakers.

Among these studies, two lines of investigation can be distinguished, and we would like to present an exemplary thesis from each (Cortina 2009 and Gómez-Lacabex 2009). The first branch is related to students' general speaking abilities; here, for instance, we can find proposals to develop their communicative competence, analyses of learners' conversational exchanges or studies on how to evaluate their oral performance. In this framework, a common target population is university students (probably because they have by this time received sufficient instruction to be fluent in English), especially future teachers. It is not surprising that this population is given special attention in this type of research: these students in particular will use English often and they need to be able to communicate effectively in the foreign language (FL); some will have to teach in English, and they will also have to participate in educational exchanges with other European professionals.

Cortina (2009) evaluates the English language competence of students on teacher training degree courses, focusing on their speaking proficiency. In the opening chapters, she emphasises that an effort has been made to develop their speaking abilities, as creating real communicative situations is seen today as a major target for language learning, despite the fact that language teaching in Spain continues to be largely grammar-based.

In her thesis, Cortina describes the competence of 53 would-be teachers and presents their linguistic and socio-academic profile. None of the students was taking a degree specialising in English and they were tested in the course of their sophomore year, during which they took English as a subject for three months, for three hours a week. The study combines quantitative and qualitative data: apart from using standard proficiency English tests, such as DIALANG or the oral part of the PET exam, the author also sought to identify the factors that enhance or hinder the development of oral competence. Therefore, students also responded to questionnaires about their linguistic experiences and were asked to self-evaluate their competence in different linguistic abilities. In addition, they were asked about their problems when speaking in the FL. This range of instruments provided detailed data from these participants and allows for the triangulation of results. Only one of the tests, though, was taken at both the beginning and end of the course (the speaking section of the PET exam). A point to be made here is that, since the study involved only 36 hours of instruction, other tests might have been useful to gauge any progress achieved in such a short period.

Analysis of the tests examined variables such as age, gender, extracurricular exposure and the minor subjects studied by each student. Findings show that those who have received

extracurricular exposure to the FL are more competent than their peers, but have still not attained a high oral competence after ten years of classes. Speaking is also confirmed as the ability that poses the most problems for learners and that is considered the most difficult to master. Students highlight the fact that the instruction received in this domain is insufficient and that there is also a lack of motivation on their part, due to the divergence between their real needs and interests and the prescribed content of the classroom. In the light of the results obtained, the closing chapter suggests some ideas that should be taken into account in a programme designed specially for future teachers and focusing on the oral language.

In sum, this study presents a good picture of these learners' interlanguage and provides interesting data about this large university group (the number of applicants for teacher training degrees has been very high in the last few years, with around 10% of university students in Spain applying to be primary school teachers). The results may be extendable to the oral competence of English learners studying other subjects in Spanish universities who have concerns about their expressive abilities in this language. However, further research should be directed towards students who plan to go on to teach English: they represent a smaller population, but are an obvious target group if language teaching and learning conditions are to be improved. Given the fact that this thesis focused on oral abilities, the inclusion of would-be English teachers would have been very valuable.

The second line of research deals more specifically with the acquisition of non-native sounds rather than general speaking abilities. Gómez-Lacabex's thesis (2009) can be placed in this line of research, as it analyses the acquisition of vowel reduction in a formal learning context. The main aim of the study was to determine the extent to which L2 sounds and weakening rules are acquired by Spanish learners of English in a formal setting after two different phonetic training periods (one based on perception and one on production). This work is particularly significant, as very few studies have dealt with the effects of administering both perceptive and productive treatments on the same element. The study does so by focusing on the English schwa, a central sound which is absent in Spanish and Basque (the two languages in which the participants are bilingual).

The first three chapters review studies conducted in the field and provide the framework for the thesis by presenting influential models of acquisition of L2 sounds. The experiment is carefully planned, involving three groups: two experimental groups receiving training at university over three months – one receiving perceptual training on vowel reduction ($N = 17$) and the other trained on production ($N = 17$) – and a control group ($N = 7$). Questionnaires were also administered, one to obtain background information from the students and another on motivation; the latter was used to exclude motivation as an intervening factor in the results.

The study shows that, in this particular FL context, students do not accurately perceive and produce schwa in unstressed syllables, as the weakening rule is not consistently applied without training. However, the phonetic training provided to both groups is shown to have a positive effect, although improvement is moderate: orthography may still play a part and a process of schwa overgeneralisation may occur after training. Further research should be conducted regarding a possible transfer of this training to new contexts and new stimuli (i.e. different from those of the treatment), as the tasks used in this study may have influenced the results. The relationship between perception and production is complex: it is important to

highlight that they do not develop in parallel in this case. Moreover, any form of training is shown to lead to improvement in the non-trained ability, but productive training is shown to be the most beneficial.

2.2 Individual differences

2.2.1 Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has recently become a popular topic of study, as new teaching approaches (in language but in most other disciplines too) have changed the focus from the teacher to the learner. It is therefore important to investigate what learners can do by themselves and how they do it. Two dissertations have been selected that pay particular attention to this, one that examines whether autonomy can be encouraged through special classroom activities (Mongelos 2008) and another that analyses self-assessment (Pinyana 2009).

Mongelos explores whether autonomy can be encouraged through a special classroom treatment. The author considers a group of university students ($N = 24$) from the Basque country who were studying English as a third language. The design includes a pre-test, a treatment and a post-test.

In her study, Mongelos develops a treatment designed to encourage learner autonomy through the completion of diaries and worksheets through which learners plan their work and evaluate their progress both individually and in groups. Mongelos then examines how such treatment affects these learners' proficiency in terms of written and oral comprehension and expression, as well as grammar and vocabulary. She then considers the effect of this treatment on learners' awareness of their own progress and involvement in their own learning. Finally, the last research question addresses the effect of the treatment on learners' beliefs about language learning.

The analyses show a statistically significant effect of the treatment on the development of proficiency in terms of the global scores in the proficiency test used, as well as on the scores in the reading, writing and oral production tasks. No significant differences were observed in listening, grammar or vocabulary. Although Mongelos seems to emphasise the positive change in degree of awareness and involvement in the learning process on the part of the students, very few significant differences with respect to these issues are found when comparing the answers given in the pre-test and in the post-test. Similarly, not many significant changes appear in learners' beliefs after the treatment, despite the general interpretation that some changes can be appreciated in learners' autonomy.

The experimental study is well conducted and the analyses are rigorous, although, considering the number of variables analysed, a multi-variate analysis could have thrown a different light on the results. The author is aware of the limitations of her study, such as the lack of a control group following a different teaching approach, as well as the fact that the intervention was quite short. The latter could be one of the reasons why so few changes in beliefs and awareness appear between the pre- and the post-test. Another reason, as the author mentions, could be that the learners are adults, who have more firmly established beliefs about language learning than younger learners.

Pinyana (2009), for her part, focuses on self-assessment and how it is related to proficiency and implicit training. Self-assessment is an essential aspect of the learning process, as it leads to critical reflection on what is being learned and how it is being learned. At the same time, it is a crucial component of monitoring, another fundamental part of learning.

Pinyana's dissertation consists of two main studies related to self-assessment. First, a large study ($N = 105$) investigates (1) what aspects of L2 oral performance learners focus on when they self-assess; (2) the effect of proficiency on self-assessment ('high proficiency' $N = 37$ vs. 'low proficiency' $N = 68$); and (3) the reliability of different types of self-assessment as compared to teachers' ratings. She then presents a case study ($N = 16$), which, in addition to the issues previously mentioned, examines the effect of implicit training in self-assessment through the repetition of self-assessment procedures for five sessions over nine months.

The use of statistics for the analysis of the results in this thesis is impressive, as is the overall methodology. The results reported by Pinyana are highly revealing in terms of learner autonomy, especially self-assessment. Not only are learners capable of self-assessing their performance, but the results obtained through some instruments of self-assessment correlate highly with teachers' assessments. If more studies are performed and similarly high correlations are found, there would be evidence in favour of the inclusion of students' self-assessment as part of their overall evaluation. However, it must be emphasised that it is important to use reliable instruments of self-assessment (in this study a range of instruments were used, and a holistic score was found to be more reliable than a checklist). Another important finding from this study is that high proficiency learners tend to underestimate their performance, while the opposite is true of low proficiency learners. Additionally, Pinyana shows that implicit training in self-assessment does not have any effect on the accuracy of self-assessment, which suggests that more explicit techniques might enable students to learn to assess their performance more accurately.

Given current trends in approaches to teaching, more studies are needed in the area of learner autonomy. Both Pinyana and Mongelos consider relatively implicit treatments to help learners raise their awareness and involvement in the learning process. There is a need for studies that compare such implicit treatments with more explicit instruction that teaches learners how to become more aware of the learning process as well as their performance.

2.2.2 Motivation

Motivation is also a key aspect of second language acquisition (SLA) (Gardner 2007; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009) and several dissertations have examined this variable, among which we highlight that of Minera (2009). She considers two groups of German learners of Spanish as a foreign language in Munich, Germany: a group of university students at Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU, $N = 96$) taking second-semester Spanish; and a group of learners from the Instituto Cervantes de Munich (ICM, $N = 86$) learning Spanish as an extra-curricular activity and with a range of proficiency levels (A2, B1, B2 and C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference). Although this study focuses on the learning of Spanish in the German context, many of its findings can be extrapolated to L2 learning in other contexts.

Minera analyses (1) the type and degree of motivation for learning Spanish; (2) the subjects' attitudes towards different aspects of the teaching/learning process; (3) how motivation, attitude and other individual variables relate to language proficiency and continuity in the study of Spanish as L2; and (4) how learners in the two contexts compare in terms of these variables. These two contexts were chosen because the students were expected to differ in their attitude and motivation. Data were gathered by means of a written questionnaire, a semi-structured interview (for motivational and attitudinal factors and other individual variables such as age and gender), a language proficiency test (one for all the students at LMU and one for each proficiency level at the ICM) and enrolment lists, to find out about continuity in the study of the FL.

A number of important findings are presented. First, regarding the relationship between different attitudinal/motivational factors and language proficiency and continuity, it seems that students with instrumental motivation stop studying Spanish earlier than those with integrative motivation. Another significant correlation is found between performance in the language test on the one hand and self-efficacy and continuity on the other: higher proficiency is related to higher self-efficacy and more continuity.

When comparing the learners in the two main groups, it was found that the learners in the two institutions are comparable except in a few variables. First of all, the students in the university setting have significantly higher scores than those at the ICM in terms of instrumental motivation and attitudes towards learning Spanish. On the other hand, the learners at the ICM have significantly higher scores in terms of their degree of motivation, self-perception, and attitude towards the teacher, the group and the context of learning. Also, continuity in the study of Spanish is significantly higher in the ICM group.

From these results the author concludes that the analysis of motivation is crucial: teachers should be aware of their learners' type of motivation and create an atmosphere in the class that motivates students towards the learning of the L2 through the use of a variety of teaching techniques, as well as adequate materials. The author sometimes finds conflicting results in terms of motivation and attitude between the questionnaire and the interview with the same subject. The thesis does not specify who was in charge of collecting the questionnaires or doing the interviews. If the classroom teacher was in charge of administering the questionnaire, this could have contributed to the more positive views reported through this instrument than through the interview. One important contribution of this research study is that it suggests how a range of factors such as self-efficacy, attitudes towards language learning and the target language culture and speakers are crucial determinants of motivation; these factors can certainly be dealt with in the language classroom. In such a learning context, conditions that encourage positive attitudes can be created, which will in turn lead to motivation. Then, whether such motivation is intrinsic, instrumental or socio-cognitive, it will surely facilitate and promote L2 learning.

2.3 Pragmatics

There is increasing interest in the acquisition of pragmatics by L2 learners (Alcón-Soler & Martínez-Flor 2008). While most research on SLA has focused on grammar and vocabulary,

or one of the four language skills, there is certainly a need to examine the sociolinguistic context of language use rather than just linguistic knowledge. The theses that will be reviewed in this section investigate pragmatics in a FL context (Barón 2009) and in an L2 context (Vilar 2008).

Barón's thesis (2009) is entitled *Pragmatic development in an EFL context*, and examines Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) from a developmental perspective in English learners in Barcelona. The study proposes three interesting research questions, to be answered by analysing the performance of learners who have received no pragmatic training at all. The first asks whether pragmatic development can be traced for the act of requesting, so the type of requests, their stage of development, the use of internal or external modification and their realisation in terms of sequence organisation are all taken into consideration. The second research question asks whether development can be found in the learners' pragmatic fluency, using measures related to the appropriate opening and closing of speech acts, the ability to change topics and turn-taking, as well as the use of routines, patterns or gambits (a particular type of discourse marker). The third question seeks to throw light on the relationship between grammar and pragmatics as the learner's interlanguage develops; consequently, grammatical complexity is seen in relation to aspects such as formulaic language.

Although the task used in the study (a role-play in pairs) may have some limitations, this research has several strong points, especially those related to the context in which it is carried out, the sample of participants chosen, the measures suggested and the possible implications for teaching of an understanding of pragmatic development (including its relation to the development of grammar).

Most research on this topic to date has been carried out in the context of the target language community, and very little is known about how pragmatics is acquired in EFL contexts, where pragmatic input is very restricted. Another strong point of this study is the participant base, which includes a cross-sectional ($N = 144$) and a longitudinal sample ($N = 32$), from 10 to 17 years of age (in the case of the longitudinal group) and also from university levels (for the cross-sectional sample). Including longitudinal participants is of the utmost importance when research focuses on development, and the inclusion of children and adults in studies of this kind adds another valuable dimension. As far as the measures proposed are concerned, on several occasions the author adapts tools used in other contexts. For instance, speech rate, pauses and repairs (used in previous studies) are replaced by response time and delays, which are considered more reliable for the type of data analysed. A seven-point scale for grammatical development was also redesigned in order to assess pragmatic development. These modifications offer clear benefits to the field and should stimulate further studies.

Finally, in relation to pragmatic development, it should be pointed out that research findings on the relationship between grammatical and pragmatic development have been inconclusive: some indicate that they develop together, while others give primacy to one over the other. In this study, they are shown to develop in parallel. This finding, together with the results of the first two research questions (the confirmation of development both in the act of requesting and in pragmatic fluency in the FL context), gives a clearer idea of how ILP develops in an EFL context and provides the necessary information for exploring ways of enhancing the development of pragmatic ability, which will be immensely beneficial for the language learner.

Vilar (2008) analyses the effect of proficiency level and length of stay abroad on the development of pragmatics in L2 English. Pragmatics is assessed through a discourse completion test (DCT) and a discourse evaluation test (DET).

The findings reported by Vilar are significant, and in some cases somewhat unexpected. That advanced learners perform in more pragmatically appropriate ways than intermediate learners is quite predictable, as is the fact that the former group uses more grammatically correct requests. This advantage for the advanced learners is more obvious in the production test (DCT) than in the awareness test (DET). Although the limitations of the DET are acknowledged in the dissertation, it would have also been pertinent to analyse the performance of learners of different proficiency using a more open/realistic task in which participants are faced with a situation in which they have to make a request, either in a role-play activity or in a naturalistic situation. It would also have been interesting to see how native speakers performed in these two tasks. The study included native speakers when piloting the tasks, but did not use native-speakers' production as a baseline for the L2 learners' production.

The results for the second research question (regarding length of stay) come, in part, as a surprise. It might be expected that the longer the participants stay in the target language culture, the more their language use should approach that of native speakers. Although the author offers a good explanation as to why participants who had stayed in the UK for the shortest period of time in some cases outperform those staying for longer periods (they are more aware of the new pragmatic rules), a discussion as to why more time (which tends to be beneficial for other skills) does not benefit pragmatic development would have been in order.

A positive aspect of this dissertation is that it includes a large number of learners ($N = 104$) from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. However, this diversity can be problematic, as it might interfere with the results. Learners whose cultures encourage more indirectness or the use of negative politeness strategies might be expected to have a certain predisposition to using such strategies in English – and thus to act more in accordance with English norms – than those from other types of first language (L1) cultural backgrounds. The author is also aware that there is individual variation even in their L1 in terms of how people make requests. Some learners might simply have been more direct or indirect, regardless of their proficiency or length of stay. Collecting data in learners' L1s would have been useful, to enable the study of such individual variation. Considering all the different linguistic backgrounds in Vilar's study (2008), it is understandable that she does not include such data, but it remains an interesting factor for further research. All in all, Vilar's thesis makes a good contribution to the study of the development of request strategies in the L2 country.

2.4 Study abroad

The dissertation by Llanes (2010) examines different aspects of the Study Abroad (SA) context in comparison to the typical FL setting. Although the popular belief has always been that learning an L2 abroad leads to more linguistic gains than learning through classroom instruction, it is only recently that empirical studies have started investigating this issue.

Llanes (2010) examines the language performance of L2 learners after a period abroad and compares it with the performance of their peers who stayed 'at home' (AH) receiving classroom instruction. Apart from the context of learning, this dissertation examines the role of age (children vs. adults) and how it interacts with context to account for linguistic gains in oral and written performance. Other objectives include investigating the effect of length of stay/length of instruction, and time-on-task.

The participants under study are 54 children and 66 university students. Their linguistic performance is measured at the beginning of the learning experience and at the end (after two or three months, depending on the group). The tasks used to gather data include an oral narrative, a descriptive essay and a questionnaire to investigate time-on-task and other issues related to language learning. The oral and written production data are analysed using several measures of fluency, lexical richness, syntactic complexity and accuracy. Two types of statistical analyses are performed: *t*-tests to examine gains from pre- to post-test for each group independently, and ANCOVAs to compare groups across learning contexts. The results section in this dissertation is detailed and makes rigorous use of statistical analyses. The results suggest that spending time abroad is beneficial for both children and adults. Nevertheless, when comparing the SA students and AH students within age groups, it appears that children abroad have a much clearer advantage over their AH peers than adults abroad over theirs. If we only examine the SA context, however, the adults almost always outperform the children. As a consequence, it is not easy to determine whether SA is more beneficial for children or adults. Additionally, the author finds no difference in terms of length of stay/instruction (two vs. three months). Finally, Llanes does not find significant correlations between the language use or time-on-task and language gains.

Llanes' thesis is innovative and its findings have important theoretical and practical implications. It is the first study to compare the linguistic development of children abroad with that of adults. One problem with this or any study analysing age is the confounding factors inherent in this type of comparison, such as cognitive development, or, in the case of the participants included in this study, experience abroad/or at home. When children go abroad, their living arrangements as well as their day-to-day experiences are very different from those of adult ERASMUS students in the same context. As a consequence, it is difficult to determine clearly why a particular group makes more progress in the SA context: is it because of age, cognitive development, or the whole experience abroad? Llanes's study is also valuable because it examines other variables, such as length of stay and time-on-task, which are key to an analysis of the SA context.

2.5 Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Due to increasing interest in bilingual education and integrated curricula, one of the most popular approaches to teaching foreign languages nowadays is Content and Language Integrated Learning. There has been a very rapid increase in the development of CLIL programmes in Europe in general and in Spain in particular, which explains a parallel increase in research studies looking at how CLIL is being implemented, what the outcomes of this approach are, and how to improve its application.

Fernández-Agüero (2009) examines bilingual programmes (the term for CLIL programmes in many regions in Spain) in the Community of Madrid. There are two types of programme in this region: (1) those organised by the regional government of Madrid (CAM; *Comunidad Autónoma de Madrid*) and (2) those organised by the Spanish Education Ministry and the British Council (MEC/BIC; *Ministerio de Educación y Cultura/British Council*). In these programmes, English is taught for at least one third of the instructional time. This thesis presents an in-depth description of CLIL in two schools (one CAM, one MEC/BIC) through direct observation, video recording, analysis of documents regarding language policy and syllabuses, questionnaires and open interviews. Additionally, a more general description of the teachers and practices in other schools in the area is presented through the use of interviews and questionnaires.

According to Fernández-Agüero, the teachers in the schools under analysis are mostly Spanish natives (66.41%) with a strong command of English, although there is also a high percentage of native English speakers (30.19%). Most of the non-native teachers have stayed abroad for approximately three months. Only nine teachers claim to have problems with their English, and most of them say that they are happy or very happy when asked about their experience in the bilingual programme. Some important practices described include the almost exclusive use of the L2, and the use of a wide range of activities to engage students, such as crafts, drawing, memory games and descriptions. Additionally, it appears that the schools implementing CLIL programmes have access to new technologies such as digital blackboards, PCs, projectors and DVD players, and most teachers tend to use these devices, although audio reproductions are still more popular than videos. An important finding reported in this dissertation is that during the interviews with those involved in CLIL programmes in Madrid, some of the problems with the approach become more evident. Among the most commonly mentioned problems is the very rapid implementation of the programmes, which sometimes happens for political reasons (the development of bilingual programmes has served as good propaganda for political parties). It is true that such programmes, to succeed, need sufficient funds as well as enough qualified teaching staff.

This thesis presents a very detailed analysis of CLIL in Madrid and contributes to the research on bilingual programmes. One limitation of this study, though, is the fact that the programmes portrayed might not be typical. First of all, the two schools under analysis, as well as the teachers, are probably model schools (or at least good schools) in the area, which may be a reason for their selection. Similarly, only 20% of the teachers responded to the questionnaires that were sent out (59 out of 289), and it is very likely that those who responded were those who were better prepared and more confident (as evidenced by their reported knowledge of English and their degree of satisfaction with the programme). As a result, this thesis may be presenting a description of successful CLIL programmes rather than of CLIL programmes in general; nevertheless, this rich description is useful for researchers and especially for schools that have started or are about to start to offer CLIL. More research is needed, however, on more typical programmes, to find out how most teachers function in such programmes and to find solutions for the problems that might arise from this new approach.

While the primary objective of Fernández-Agüero's study was the analysis of two types of bilingual programmes in Madrid, the main aim of Fernández-Fontecha (2008) is to contribute

to the improvement of CLIL provision in Spain through the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). She starts by introducing these two methodological approaches and exploring the possibilities that a combined framework could offer for language learning in non-university education, especially in monolingual Spanish communities. She then identifies the needs and shortcomings that may limit the effectiveness of CLIL research (in which most studies are focused on the learner rather than the teacher), at the official level (where a mismatch is detected between requirements imposed on CLIL practitioners and what they are offered in training programmes) and at the classroom level (where she conducts a survey of 92 teachers that finds possible areas of improvement in CLIL implementation).

The framework proposed for systematic guidance in CLIL has two domains: the first concerns the main decisions on the curricular relations between different school subjects and areas involved in CLIL (scenarios and teacher collaboration). The second deals with syllabus organisation and task design. In order to sequence the contents of the course and control the language, Fernández-Fontecha suggests a number of steps (which he calls the Content and Language Processing Sequence or CLPS) that teachers should follow when preparing their classes: from topics and subtopics to modules and *CLILQuests*. The last of these are inspired by WebQuests and are the ‘embodiment of the combination of CLIL and CALL’ (Fernández-Fontecha 2008: 314). In this way, an adequate setting for CALL integration is provided in a CLIL syllabus.

The author then applies the framework to the teaching of climate change in English and presents this as an example to be tried with high-school students at grade 11. This plan helps the reader understand how CLPS works in practice and how the theoretical part she has presented can be turned into *CLILQuests* to be used in the classroom.

In short, the thesis has clear potential to help improve FL teaching and learning, and although the framework is contextualised in Spanish education, it can also be applied to other instructional settings. However, piloting the proposal in real classroom settings is crucial, as the extent to which a framework of this kind can be implemented ultimately depends on many different elements: administration, language planners, institutions and teachers. As the author points out, the implementation of CLIL in this way is quite demanding of the teachers, as it requires not only a strong belief in task-based learning, but also a thorough knowledge of technology and an outstanding ability for materials design.

2.6 Language learning by immigrant populations

During the last few years, Spain has witnessed the arrival of a large immigrant population, especially from Morocco and other parts of North Africa and South America and, to a lesser extent, Europe and Asia. Schools and education departments have had to cope with this new reality and have been working to offer immigrant children satisfactory education appropriate to their needs. Several studies have described this new situation and looked for ways to facilitate the language acquisition of immigrant learners. We would like to highlight two of these studies.

The first is by Oller (2008) on the *Knowledge of Catalan and Spanish by foreign learners in primary education in Catalonia*. To date, most of the research on this topic in Spain has focused on

immigrants from a particular country of origin or has presented small samples of participants. In this case, more than 1,400 students in 49 schools, from 43 different countries and speaking 28 different languages, took part in the study, all of them at grade 6 in primary education. Another relevant aspect to take into account is that the research was carried out in Catalonia, where both Catalan and Spanish are spoken. Although the language of instruction in schools is Catalan, many of these students live in areas where the language is hardly used at all. They are therefore acquiring the language in a situation of DIGLOSSIA, which has important consequences for the linguistic development of immigrant learners.

The battery of tests comprises standard tests in Catalan and Spanish (including oral and written comprehension and production, morphosyntax, orthography and phonetics). Additionally, questionnaires were administered to both students and teachers: the former gave information on their language use, while the latter provided information on the sociolinguistic background of the students' families. Thus, individual and family variables as well as social and school factors are taken into consideration.

The results show that length of residence, together with the country of origin, learners' L1 and family socioeconomic level are good predictors of the students' linguistic gains, although immigrants do not usually outperform nationals by the end of primary education. Moreover, the development of oral abilities in the school context takes longer than previous studies had found: the larger the gap between social and academic use, the longer the time required to perform on a par with national students. The author explains that due to the limited opportunities for oral language development in social situations in Catalan, it is impossible for the students to transfer any linguistic knowledge to the school language, and the results are interpreted in the light of the *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* (Cummins 1978). It would have also been interesting to know to what extent the linguistic development of immigrant learners who have regular contact with Catalan outside school differed from that exhibited by nationals and the immigrants included in the study.

The findings reported in this thesis are informative of a new reality that has not been widely explored, and they have clear implications, especially if we take into account that more than 10% of students in public schools in Spain are of foreign origin and that some of the major goals for school and society are equal opportunities for all learners and the creation of social cohesion.

The second dissertation we would like to highlight is that of Del Moral (2010), which focuses on the learning of L2 Spanish in Melilla, a city in Northern Africa which officially belongs to Spain, but where most children have Tamazig as their mother tongue and have very little knowledge of Spanish. As most of them receive tuition in a language that is not their L1, Del Moral presents a programme (*Pedelex*) whose aim is to develop these children's lexical competence in the L2 and ultimately improve their discourse competence.

In order to design this programme, Del Moral started by reviewing previous work on vocabulary learning in the L1 and L2, on vocabulary teaching methods over the years and on vocabulary processing, highlighting the factors that have been shown to facilitate lexical incorporation. She also takes into account the contextual framework and the curricular situation in Melilla.

The programme she proposes follows the *Collage Method*, which is based on reading authentic texts that are comprehensible to the learner as the point of departure to learn

vocabulary. Different activities are designed for each text, the main purpose of these tasks being to enhance lexical learning by facilitating associations (semantic, morphological, etc.). Over the course of the teaching units offered, there is a thematic progression from the original texts and 16 different semantic fields are introduced. The programme also aims to promote autonomy and the development of intercultural competence.

In addition to designing and creating the didactic units, an important feature of this study is that the programme is evaluated in actual classrooms. An empirical study was conducted by comparing a control ($N = 28$) and an experimental group ($N = 27$). Both groups were assessed by means of a pre-test and a post-test, which comprised vocabulary, writing, reading and listening comprehension. However, only the experimental group was taught using *Pedelex* for six months (two sessions of 50 minutes a week). Questionnaires were also completed by learners with personal information and by teachers with data on matters such as how they usually teach vocabulary and the proficiency level of their learners. In the experimental group, intra-group comparisons were also carried out to evaluate the activities presented in *Pedelex* and to obtain extra information on vocabulary learning strategies.

The findings are that the experimental group outperforms the control group for some of the semantic fields introduced by the didactic units. However, the results are not always significant (a summary table showing the significant differences would have helped the reader appreciate the divergence, as there is a lot of variability). Other aspects investigated did not improve significantly either, apart from some specific writing traits and the ability to provide word definitions. It is possible that a more controlled experiment (taking into account, for instance, amount of word rehearsals) could have arrived at different outcomes. It may also be that any systematic approach to vocabulary gives an advantage to the students using it over learners not dealing with vocabulary in any structured way. It would be interesting to see how the approach presented here compares with other systematic approaches to vocabulary, as it clearly offers potential advantages for L2 acquisition. Finding ways to improve the lexical competence of learners rapidly is essential, especially in the first stages of language acquisition, as 'lexical competence is at the heart of communicative competence' (Meara 1996: 35). This is even more crucial in the case of immigrant children, who need to get acquainted quickly with the new language in order to succeed at school.

2.7 Classroom language teaching

In this section we will review two theses that analyse the effects of special treatments on reading skills (Osa-Melero 2009; Zenotz 2009). In addition, two other theses will be considered that examine important aspects of classroom teaching that have long attracted researchers' attention, namely the use of the L1 in the L2 class (Galindo 2009) and the sequencing of L2 contents/activities to promote more successful L2 learning (Criado 2008).

Osa-Melero (2009) examines the effect of pre-reading activities on students' reading comprehension. Research has shown that pre-reading activities are crucial for the activation of readers' schemata, which will facilitate reading comprehension, especially in an L2 (Carrell 1984). Osa-Melero compares different types of pre-reading activities: guided and structured

cooperative, traditional groups, and individual. In this study the definition of COOPERATIVE LEARNING, based on Oxford (1997: 442), is 'a group learning activity organized in a way that cognitive and social learning depends on the exchange of information between learners in groups, and in which each student is held accountable for his/her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others' (Osa-Melero 2009: 72). The teacher is responsible for providing clear instructions, guidance and feedback throughout the pre-reading task. The second type of pre-reading activity, TRADITIONAL GROUPS, also refers to the activities that students have to complete in groups before reading a text, but unlike the cooperative groups, there is no structure or guidance. The teacher makes sure everybody finishes their work and that there are no problems interfering with the completion of the activity. Moreover, when performing this type of activity, students are not dependent on each other and interaction and negotiation are not required. The last approach, INDIVIDUAL or TEXTBOOK-BASED INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE, emphasises individualism. Students work independently from each other, and the teacher provides assistance only if the students ask questions.

In this study, five groups of American learners of Spanish at an intermediate-advanced level are divided into 'cooperative classes' (two groups) and 'traditional group classes' (three groups). All the participants are asked to read four texts, and comprehension is assessed by means of a multiple-choice test and a recall protocol. Within-group and between-group comparisons show the cooperative learning approach has a significant advantage, though this is clearer in the case of the multiple-choice test than the recall protocol. Another finding from this study is that students' reading comprehension of texts tends to be better for the texts that are read first than the texts that are read last. The study concludes that pre-reading activities should be structured and students should work in cooperative groups for such activities to have a clearer impact on reading comprehension. The author admits that the comparison between cooperative and traditional pre-reading activities is a little problematic because the two treatments were carried out with different texts. Similarly, the within-group comparison is not without problems, since different texts were also used, and, as was revealed in the pilot study, the texts do not have the same degree of complexity. Another problem seems to be 'timing': texts that are read earlier in the semester often obtain higher scores than those that are performed later, and, more importantly, text 1 (which is part of the cooperative treatment) is the one that seems to get the highest scores when compared to the other texts in all the classes. All of these problems, however, are typical of quasi-experimental studies. Despite its limitations, Osa-Melero's study has important implications for how reading comprehension can be promoted in foreign language classrooms, encouraging not only the use of pre-reading activities, but also cooperative learning.

Zenotz (2009) is a perfect example of how action research can help make the most of a popular new practice: online reading. The aim of the investigation is twofold: first, it explores a new way of reading and the best strategies for understanding online texts and, second, it assesses the ways in which strategy training can have a positive effect on this activity and on other factors related to the learning of English, such as print reading, grammar, motivation, attitude towards new technologies and use of reading strategies. This study therefore fills a gap in the research into task design with online materials for FL learning purposes and also provides a theoretical framework for the implementation of such designs. To this end, the literature review on CALL and online reading is pertinent, pointing out that the emerging

new literacies should be studied in order to understand and promote their potential positive effects: in this case, for FL learning.

The study presents three groups: a pilot group ($N = 10$), to check the adequacy of the instruments; a control group ($N = 48$), receiving no treatment, and an experimental group ($N = 95$), which is taught how to use six different reading strategies in the course of four training sessions. The objective of the treatment is to foster the development of the metalinguistic awareness that will enable the students to improve online reading. In order to measure development and to collect information on the participants, several instruments are used. First of all, proficiency tests are conducted, including grammar and reading tests (comprehension exercises on printed texts and exercises on on-line texts). Secondly, students complete questionnaires on language proficiency and reading habits, motivation, new technologies and strategy use. Finally, the author also makes use of so-called ‘metacognitive tools’: questions for metacognitive reflection and a diary on the strategies learned in class.

The results show that strategic training effects can be seen in reading, even if the training sessions extend over a short period of time. Furthermore, the improvement is more noticeable for the learners in the experimental group who had not exhibited a high level of language proficiency. As the author states, it cannot be denied that some variables may have influenced these results (for example, the starting level of two of the groups was not the same). Nevertheless, care was taken to use a subsample from the experimental group with a level similar to that of the control group. The thesis is also valuable as it represents groundbreaking work in the field, one which is opening up for further investigation.

The use of the L1 when learning an L2 or a FL has always been controversial, especially in classroom settings. Falling back on the L1 during the acquisition of a new language has been considered either positive or detrimental, depending on the teaching methodologies popular at the time (see, for example, the opinions on the *English Only Movement* by Auerbach (1993) and Polio (1994)). Galindo (2009) is a study on *L1/L2 linguistic alternation in the acquisition of Spanish* (as an L2 in Spain and as a FL in the States, as the thesis includes both contexts). The goal is quite challenging, as she aims to answer nine different research questions all related to the use of the L1 in the L2 classroom, such as to what extent it is used by teachers and learners, whether it varies according to proficiency levels or contexts of instruction, and what functions it fulfils. The sample of participants is fairly large: 289 university learners of Spanish and a total of 25 teachers.

The thesis is valuable on several grounds. First of all, it examines the learning of Spanish in Spain. This is especially interesting because there has been quite a lot of research on learning Spanish in the US, but not in Spain, where it is learned as an L2 by an increasing number of students. Secondly, the thesis offers an extensive review of the literature (not only about learning Spanish but also about the role of any L1 in the acquisition of any L2). Thirdly, as indicated in the thesis, earlier studies often used small samples and usually investigated a reduced number of variables that can influence L1 use. In contrast, the number of participants is considerable here, and the project focuses not only on how much or how often the L1 is present in the classroom but on the functions it fulfils. Moreover, the researcher examines a wide range of variables that have been claimed to exert an influence on its use, such as the proficiency level of the learners (beginner, intermediate or advanced), the profile of the groups (monolingual or bilingual), the learning context (Spanish as an L2 or as a FL), the

learning materials employed (monolingual or bilingual), the profile of the teachers (native vs. non-native), and their beliefs and attitudes towards the L1 when teaching an L2 or a FL.

The methodology of the study is also excellent, as Galindo uses qualitative research methods that make it possible to obtain a wide range of data. Three main sources of data are used in this study: teacher interviews (which reveal information about their experience as language learners, their performance in the classroom, and their beliefs about language learning and the use of the L1), student questionnaires, and a large number of classroom observations. This allows the researcher to triangulate the results obtained and increases the internal validity of the study.

The results are also clearly described and carefully interpreted. They identify three variables most closely related to the use of the L1 in the classroom. In order of importance, these are, first, the knowledge the teacher has of the L1 and his/her beliefs about the best ways of teaching an L2. Second, the profile of the group (in terms of the languages all the students know) exerts a great influence on the use of the L1, as teachers and learners seem to fall back on it more often when the group shares a common mother tongue. Third, the language competence of the group is an influential factor. Galindo also shows that, although the use of the L1 in the classroom tends to decrease as the proficiency of the group increases, the language acquisition context is not a key element in predicting the amount of L1 presence. Another minor factor is the number of students per class, as the study shows that the more students in a group, the greater the use of the L1. In the light of these results, some of which had already been obtained in previous research, the author argues for a re-evaluation of the role of the L1 in the language learning classroom. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that the selection of tools (classroom observation sheet, surveys and questionnaires) is based on previous work, but with adaptations for the present study. The tools may therefore be very useful for other researchers conducting research on the topic, as they can be used in different contexts for the same purposes. Codification is also carefully explained in a way that allows for replication.

The last thesis we include on classroom teaching is Criado (2008). The author examines the effectiveness of a teaching approach (COMMUNICATIVE PROCESSES-BASED MODEL OF ACTIVITY SEQUENCING, or CPM) in order to promote students' development of L2 proficiency. The CPM model is based on the proposal by Sánchez (Sánchez 2001), in which 'the sequencing of the activities in the teaching lesson follows the natural sequence of real and specific communicative processes, which result in the accomplishment of a given communicative goal' (Criado 2008: 3). Therefore, COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSE is central in this approach but so is SEQUENCING. The author presents a well-justified theoretical framework to support the CPM model as well as reasons why CPM is more suited to encouraging L2 learning than the P-P-P model (Presentation-Practice-Production). Apart from the theoretical justification, the author empirically tests the effectiveness of the two models by examining language development in two groups: one group that follows a modern adaptation of the P-P-P model (control group, N = 16) and another which follows a CPM model (experimental group, N = 19). The CPM model in this study is an adaptation of the materials already provided by the textbook used in both groups, which followed a P-P-P approach. In the experimental group, Criado rearranges the activities proposed in the textbook and also introduces a communicative situation which encompasses all the activities in the unit. Seven files (or sub-units) are considered for the 35-session treatment, which the control group follow

as they appear in the textbook and the experimental group in the adapted version according to the CPM model. All the students are adults in their fourth year at the same language school (Official School of Languages, OSL). Language proficiency is examined through a pre-test/post-test design by means of two instruments: the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) and the OSL achievement test. Criado also uses two questionnaires in order to obtain information on individual variables.

The results of the statistical analyses demonstrate that the experimental group outperforms the control group in three out of the five FCE tasks, namely open cloze, key word transformations and word formation. No statistically significant differences are obtained in the other tasks or in the OSL test, which is interpreted by the author as meaning that the CPM model is at least as effective as the P-P-P model. When the information from the questionnaires is analysed, an interesting finding is that the learners in the experimental group seem significantly more positive about sequencing (which is one of the essential features of the CPM vs. the P-P-P) than those in the control group.

Criado's thesis is a rigorous, meticulous study of the effect of a treatment based on a teaching approach. Her theoretical framework is also well justified, and she gathered enough data on individual variables to ensure an accurate interpretation of the results. The author acknowledges the limitations of the study, including the small number of participants and the lack of a delayed post-test. A longer treatment would have probably revealed more significant differences between the groups. Despite these limitations, the research conducted in this study is outstanding, not only for its rigorous design and treatment of the data and strong theoretical background, but also for its real-world applicability.

3. Discussion and concluding remarks

The doctoral research reviewed in this paper has explored the most popular topics related to language teaching and learning in Spain. First of all, there is a common concern among teachers and learners that, after years of instruction (especially in the case of English), learners' oral skills do not improve as much as expected (or hoped). This outcome is a reflection of past teaching approaches that emphasised the learning of grammar and writing and attached less importance to listening and speaking skills. Different techniques might encourage the improvement of L2 oral skills, especially pronunciation, as Gomez-Lacabex (2009) suggests in her dissertation. Apart from oral skills, another area that has been neglected in Spanish L2 classes is pragmatics, and Barón (2009) emphasises the importance of this aspect for language learning. Similarly, learner autonomy is a 'hot topic', as most current language teaching approaches encourage a shift from the teacher to the learner in terms of responsibility for the learning process. The theses by Mongelos (2008) and Pinyana (2009) throw light on this issue. The level of interest in new technologies among teachers/learners is also a reflection of the times, as well as current doctoral research (which in this review is exemplified by Zenotz's thesis). The interest in CLIL and language learning by immigrant populations also reflects a shift in language policy (as increasing numbers of CLIL programmes are being implemented in Spain) and demographics (with the arrival of new populations who speak languages other than Spain's official languages). There has long been a common belief that learning an FL

in the classroom is not as effective as spending time abroad, and there is now more research in our country that examines this learning context and compares it to classroom learning (Llanes 2010).

Motivation has been one of the most widely researched individual variables because of its observable determining role in L2 learning. Similarly, classroom teaching attracts a lot of research. Various aspects related to classroom dynamics, such as the use of the L1 and the sequencing of contents, are still under discussion.

In terms of methodology, most theses on which we report here combine quantitative with qualitative designs, and as well as presenting learners' scores, provide information on their background, attitudes, awareness of the learning process, and/or motivation. Indeed, there are some theses that, apart from presenting extensive quantitative data from a large sample, also offer a more in-depth, qualitative analysis of a subsample (e.g. Fernández-Agüero 2009; Pinyana 2009). In the studies that include experiments, however, intervening variables should be subject to better control when planning research designs. We are aware that quasi-experimental studies are difficult to implement, especially in terms of controlling the variety of factors that intervene in L2 learning. Nevertheless, such control is crucial if the results are to be interpreted accurately. Quasi-experimental studies should nevertheless be encouraged, as they are more explanatory than descriptions (even though descriptive work is of great value in assessing different practices/programmes).

All the studies reviewed include adult participants, except for four that focus on children (Fernández-Fontecha 2008; Oller 2008; Fernández-Agüero 2009; Del Moral 2010) and two that focus on both age groups (Barón 2009; Llanes 2010). One of the reasons for this focus on adults is that, particularly in university settings, they are more easily accessible than children or teenagers. However, research performed on younger participants is crucial, and more studies should be performed which include this age group, especially in a context (such as Spain) in which it is usual for children to start learning a FL early in life.

Although this does not apply to all the dissertations reviewed, it is a common trend in Spain for doctoral theses to include long reviews of the literature, which in some cases is not directly related to the topic of research. This is certainly a feature of older doctoral work and still prevails in more recent dissertations (and does not apply to countries that require shorter doctoral theses).

To conclude, we would like to stress that more research is necessary on the issues that have been presented in this review. In terms of CLIL, an approach that is expanding very quickly in Spain, more evaluation is necessary (Norris, Davis, Sinicrope & Watanabe 2009). Programme evaluation should be performed not just in college settings but also in primary and secondary education, and not just in CLIL but in other programmes too (e.g. those that involve the use of new technologies, or specific curricula for immigrants). Additionally, the importance of longitudinal research should be emphasised, especially when investigating L2 programme outcomes or instruction effectiveness (Ortega & Iberri-Shea 2005).

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