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Towards the improvement of bilingual education in Andalusia: The Language Assistant perspective

La mejora la educación bilingüe en Andalucía según los Auxiliares de Conversación

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Abstract

Bilingual education is present through a wide network of Andalusian centers in which foreign Language Assistants (LAs) perform their duties. The study investigates LAs´ representations of the teaching/learning processes that take place in bilingual classrooms, documenting their suggestions for improvement. A questionnaire with 81 items was designed and sent to all bilingual centers, with a total of 279 responses. The analysis of the quantitative data was undertaken through SPSS and the qualitative information was codified using ATLAS.ti. Among the results, three emerging categories stand out for the improvement of bilingual teaching, ideas linked to a) Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, b) classroom methodology, and c) the role of languages. The CLIL approach is positively evaluated, although LAs consider the need for an adjustment on the use of the foreign language according to the difficulty of the subject content. Regarding classroom methodology, teaching practices are described as teacher-centered, together with a considerable dependence on the textbook. Pertaining to the use of languages, the prominent role of the Spanish language is attested, intensified in cases in which teachers' and students´ foreign language competence is lower. The conclusions point to the relevance of reinforcing the methodological and linguistic dimensions, thus requiring renewed efforts in terms of initial and ongoing teacher training.

Resumen

La enseñanza bilingüe se extiende por una amplia red de centros andaluces en las que desempeñan sus funciones auxiliares de conversación extranjeros. El estudio se acerca a los procesos de enseñanza/ aprendizaje que acontecen en las aulas bilingües y cómo se podrían mejorar según los auxiliares. Para la obtención de información se elaboró un cuestionario con 81 ítems que se envió a la totalidad de los centros bilingües andaluces, obteniendo 279 respuestas. El análisis de los datos cuantitativos se realizó a través de SPSS y los cualitativos fueron codificados con ATLAS.ti. Entre los resultados destacan tres categorías emergentes para la mejora de la enseñanza bilingüe vinculadas con el enfoque AICLE, la metodología y el uso de los idiomas en el aula. Los auxiliares validan el enfoque AICLE aunque reclaman una mejor adaptación del uso de la lengua extranjera para la enseñanza del contenido, especialmente cuando aumenta su complejidad. Con respecto a la metodología de aula se describen prácticas docentes expositivas, al primar la actividad del docente frente a la del alumnado, así como el uso generalizado del libro de texto. Con respecto al uso de los idiomas se atestigua el prominente papel del español, intensificado en aquellos casos en los que la competencia en L2 de docentes y alumnado es menor. Las conclusiones apuntan a la pertinencia de reforzar las dimensiones metodológicas y lingüísticas, siendo por tanto necesarios esfuerzos renovados en cuanto a la formación inicial y permanente.

Palabras clave / Keywords

bilingual education, teaching methods, learning processes, language of instruction, curriculum development, syllabus, second language instruction, language policy.
educación bilingüe, proceso de enseñanza, proceso de aprendizaje, idioma de enseñanza, investigación sobre el currículo, contenido del curso, enseñanza de una segunda lengua, política lingüística.

1. Background

Bilingual education in Spain has been a frequent source of public debate, transcending the frequently ostracized realms of the academic sphere to becoming the subject of heated discussions albeit lacking the necessary scientific foundations (Pavón, 2018). The most frequent argument against bilingual education has been the apparent devaluation of content learning found by some studies (Brindusa et al., 2016; Fernández-Sanjurjo et al., 2017). However, contradicting results from other studies have not found bilingual education detrimental to content learning (Hughes & Madrid, 2020; Montalbán, 2016). Perez-Cañado (2018) in a study with 2024 students from 12 monolingual provinces in Spain concluded that content learning is not weakened in favor of the foreign language in both Primary and Secondary Education. In a more recent study Pires & Gallejo (2022) focused on students´ outcomes in bilingual subjects in the Madrid Bilingual Program, they identified only a minor decrease in competencies in the subjects taught in the foreign language in primary education, which eventually leveled up upon finishing compulsory education. Furthermore, many studies have highlighted the benefits of bilingual programs regarding students´ motivation, academic achievement, and communication skills (Fernandez-Sanjurjo et al., 2017; Martínez-Agudo, 2019).

Bilingual teaching has been contextualized at the classroom level through the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, which allows, given the necessary conditions, to use the foreign language as a medium of instruction in non-linguistic subjects, hence allowing learning both the language and the content (Coyle et al., 2010). CLIL implementation might be wrongly perceived as commonsensical from the outsiders´ perspective. Indeed, the complexity of delivering content through a foreign language with multiple levels of students´ language and academic competence requires adapting CLIL to context-specific realities (Pérez-Cañado, 2020).The research on CLIL implementation in Spain has seen important growth, providing insights into how the approach has been contextualized at the classroom level as well as highlighting the need to train teachers in the theoretical underpinnings and methodology of CLIL together with the advancement of their foreign language competence (Pérez-Cañado, 2014, 2016). The conclusions of the study on the quality of CLIL programs in Spain found that teachers highly rated their foreign language skills for CLIL teaching and their pedagogical expertise. However, they considered it necessary to enhance partnerships with other universities and organizations as well as participation in international projects (Rodriguez-Sabiote et al., 2018).

The latest report on bilingual education in Andalucía (Lorenzo, 2019) found that the enhancement of foreign language skills was a priority for bilingual teachers. With regard to methodology, they stated that CLIL had allowed them to teach their subjects with a higher focus on communication as well as to embrace Project Based Learning (PBL), in a move towards more active-based instruction. Studies in other Spanish regions such as the one by Campillo et al. (2019) in Murcia revealed that the most frequent methodological guidelines implemented in class were those related to the enhancement of interculturality, activation of pupils' prior knowledge, and the use of ICT. Teachers also demanded more resources, CLIL training, and coordination with other teachers. Comparable results were obtained by Porcedda & González-Martínez (2020) in their systematic literature review analyzing previous research on CLIL. Among the conclusions the most pressing needs were, in order of relevance: a) Prior CLIL training, experience or knowledge, b) Pedagogical/educational preparation, as in integration, c) Instructional/planning problems d) Foreign language competence, and e) Support/cooperation from educational authorities or among colleagues.

Teachers´ foreign language skills have been a major concern for the development of CLIL programs. The current minimum level is B2 for teachers in Andalucía. Pavón et al. (2019) found that teachers with stronger language skills expressed more positive views than those with lower levels about CLIL programs. Moreover, they considered that CLIL was worth the extra work and that it exerted a positive influence on their students´ motivation to learn the foreign language. Senra-Silva (2021) in a study with 86 Spanish secondary school teachers revealed that more than half had no previous training in bilingual teaching and around 46,90% did not feel comfortable teaching in a language that was not their first. Despite having certified B2 and C1 levels in English, teachers reported a lack of linguistic resources, fluency, and proper command of the language. Sanz-Trigueros & Guillén-Díaz (2021) identified a low tendency toward excellence around professional development in bilingual teachers.

Language Assistants´ (LAs) representations of bilingual teaching and learning practices have also been considered as part of the research. Sánchez-Torres (2014) in a study in Andalusia revealed several issues that arose in CLIL implementation stemming from teachers' and students´ low foreign language skills as well as the difficulties in coordinating and negotiating LAs' participation in the sessions. The study recalled many accounts of teachers and LAs having separate activities in the classroom, with little to no interaction between

each other. In a study with forty native English-speaking language assistants in the Madrid region, Litzler (2020) revealed that the assistants considered teachers to follow a traditional methodology, questioning the effectiveness of CLIL as it was implemented. Concerns were also raised about the lack of measures to attend to students with special needs.

As noted above, the accounts of what happens within bilingual classrooms have been researched at various levels, both looking at students´ academic results as well as inquiring teachers about their teaching practices. However, LAs' representations have not received enough attention from empirical research despite their insights being key to understanding what LAs identify as areas of improvement regarding (1) CLIL, (2) classroom methodology, and (3) the use of languages. The following research was designed to study LAs' representations of how bilingual teaching should be improved in accordance with the actuality of classroom practice.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The data offered by the Ministry of Education and Sports of the Andalusian community indicates that during the 2020/21 academic year a total of 919 language assistants were incorporated. The sample has been made up of a total of 279 assistants, which warrants a confidence level of 95% assuming a margin of error of 0.5%. For its selection, we have used a probabilistic sampling of a simple random type with a representation of the eight Andalusian provinces. The population is relatively young (mean =27.74 years) and fundamentally female (78.5% women). Most of the assistants come from the USA and the United Kingdom (60.7%), although assistants from other countries have also been present, such as the Philippines (8.7%), India (5.8%), France (5%), and Australia (2%). Some have up to 4 years of experience in assisting (med. = 1.65 years) and 87% said they would repeat the experience. Only 15% are currently pursuing university studies, while the rest have completed them. Some have completed master's or graduate degrees (23.2%). Most of the sample indicate that they have little experience in education (average = 1.47 years), although 84.5% indicate that they "agree" or "strongly agree" in feeling prepared to perform their duties. Similarly, a majority (75.6%) consider it necessary to offer initial training to improve their functions.

2.2 Instruments

To gather information, a Likert scale questionnaire was designed with five response options (from 1 totally disagree, to 5 totally agree) and open-ended items (see Annex). The questionnaire had a total of 81 elements distributed in the following blocks of content: 1) Sociodemographic and formative characterization of the assistants (15 items), 2) The Language Assistant program (19 items), 3) The Language Assistant (19 items), 4) Teachers´ performance in the bilingual session (22 items), and 5) Students´ performance in the bilingual session (6 items). After the development of the questionnaire, the instrument was subjected to an initial validation by ten language assistants in order to verify the relevance and the adequate understanding of all the elements. After the proposed modifications, a second version was subjected to a similar process with a new set of assistants selected based on the following criteria: a) assistants that have previously participated in the program, b) assistants that have completed university degrees, c.) assistants that have experience in teaching. In this second phase, there was no proposal for substantive modification. To calculate the rate of confidence, the Spearman-Brown coefficient was used resulting in a score of .861. A second calculation using Guttman's scale, which also analyzes the internal consistency by the procedure of two halves, obtained a score of .852. The confidence index oscillates between 0 and 1 and coefficients greater than .85 are considered highly reliable.

2.3 Data analysis

The study uses qualitative data analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to examine the open-ended question introduced in the questionnaire: "*In your opinion, what could improve the bilingual program*?" (Item 33). The wide scope of the question resulted in LAs providing feedback on multiple dimensions for improvement.
After a general review of the answers, the authors conducted a simultaneous and independent codification process of the data using ATLAS.ti 22.2, agreeing on a definitive total of 8 codes and 155 quotations classified

into three emerging categories. The first category, "Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)" integrated the following codes and references: "CLIL ineffectiveness to Foreign Language (FL) learning" (28 references) and "Limitations of teaching subject content lessons" (15 references). The second category: "Classroom Methodology", integrated the following codes: "Update methodology" (32 references), "Communicative approach" (16 references) and "Focus on form (11 references). Finally, the third category: "The role of languages in the bilingual sessions" integrated the following codes: "Use of Spanish in class" (19 references), "Teachers' low Foreign Language level" (18 references) and "Students' low Foreign Language level" (16 references).

Furthermore, once the categories had emerged, 15 quantitative items from the questionnaire were selected to illustrate the extent to which the views expressed by the LAs were representative in the context of the sample (Tables 2, 3 & 4). Further quantitative data analysis was undertaken through SPSS V25 to obtain the descriptive statistics. Subsequently, a cluster analysis was carried out as a multivariate technique to classify individuals into homogeneous groups, obtained with a hierarchical methodology using the SPAD V3.5 statistical program (Lebart et al., 1984).

3. Results

In this article, the focus is fundamentally on the presentation of the qualitative data obtained. However, it was considered relevant to present, albeit briefly, the results of the multiple correspondence and cluster analyses (Travé et al., 2023) that were carried out based on the quantitative data.

In relation to the multiple correspondence analysis, three main factors were selected, explaining 66.67% of the variance. The first factor was made up of a negative pole that represented a moderately favorable assessment of the bilingual program and the LAs' contribution, as opposed to a positive pole that reflected absolute indecision. The second component was of an attitudinal type, highly negative assessments were identified in one of the poles compared to highly positive in the other. Finally, the third factor was related to the analysis of the specific incidence of assistants in class, opposing moderately favorable statements to their presence in the negative pole against extremely favorable statements in the positive pole.

In relation to the cluster analysis, we opted for a partition of four.

The first group consisted of 23.98% of the sample. The assistants in this group are attributed with disaffection towards the program and the related processes taking place within the classroom. The second cluster, comprising 46.34% of the sample, was characterized by their favorable evaluations of the bilingual program. The third group composed of 21.54% of the sample considered the program to be very effective, praising its different dimensions and expressing extremely positive evaluations. The last and smallest cohort, containing only 8.13% of the sample, was characterized by permanent doubts and uncertainty regarding the program and its characteristics.

3.1. Representations of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

The first category analyzes LAs´ views on the Content and Language Integrated Learning Approach used in the classrooms (Table 1).

Table 1
Category 1. Content and Language Integrated Learning

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	RESPONSE PERCENTAGE				
-I20 Using the foreign language as a medium of instruction in subjects is effective for content learning.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	4.5	24.4	0.4	50.8	19.9
-I21 I would rather assist with language lessons than content ones.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	3.7	30.5	1.2	39.4	25.2
-I22 I think the program is effective.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA

	7.3	16.7	0	51.6	24.4
-I24 Rate the effectiveness of your presence in the following subjects:	Math: 34.6%; Physical Education (P.E.): 33.8% History: 69.5%; Social Sciences: 76.5%; Natural Sciences: 67.5%; Music and Art: 51.9%				

Note: TD: totally disagree; D: disagree; NAND: neither agree nor disagree; A: agree; TA: totally agree

Although seven out of ten LAs regard the foreign language as an effective medium of instruction for content learning in non-linguistic subjects (I20), six out of ten LAs would rather assist with language lessons than content ones (I21). Quantitative data analysis resulted in identifying 28 comments alluding to CLIL ineffectiveness to FL learning and 15 mentioning limitations related to teaching subject content lessons.

The underlying points expressed by the LAs about CLIL implementation refer to the need for teachers to deepen the development of the approach, pointing out that it should go beyond the mere use of the second language to teach content: "Content integrated language learning is not simply teaching the class content in the second language. Language learning objectives and vocabulary learning need to be integrated into the lesson not taught in an ad-hoc manner as a by-product of content learning". 4:271 (367:367). According to LAs, teachers should also reconsider what is known as the "reinforcement approach", which is based on presenting the content first in Spanish to later address it again in the foreign language: "The teaching ends up being mostly vocabulary because they do not understand enough English for me to actually explain anything. This means that no student is learning any new content since English input is already being grafted onto what they already know in Spanish" 4:164 (224:224). In fact, the use of Spanish in bilingual classrooms is also aimed at facilitating comprehension: "The main issue is that the students mostly have a very low level of English, so teaching other content in English seems like a waste of time because they need it all repeated in Spanish" 4:189 (255:255).

LAs express their concerns regarding the complexity and difficulty of content material: "I think sometimes the vocabulary for the Social Science class can be too hard if their English levels are lower" 1:40 (50:50) "Sometimes it was difficult to help when the vocabulary was very subject-specific" 1:45 (58:58).

LAs stress the need for the linguistic area to support the learning of certain linguistic contents that will be used in a contextualized way in the areas of knowledge: "All content classes should be required to use the grammar learned in the English Language curriculum at the time that it's being taught. For example, if the simple past tense is being taught, then the exercises and problems in Math or PE should mirror that grammar during that unit". 4:97 (134:134).

Considering the quantitative data obtained in the questionnaire, bilingual subjects were ranked on how well they encompassed LA's participation and contribution: Social Sciences (76.5%), History (69.5%), Natural Sciences (67.5%), Art and Music (51.9%), Mathematics (34.6%) and Physical Education (33.8%). The analysis of the ranking illustrates the negative representations regarding the two content areas considered less effective for LA participation. Regarding Mathematics, it was pointed out that the complexity of the subject is the main limiting factor, both for the students and for the assistants themselves: "Almost half of my classes are in Mathematics, and it is hard for the students because their English level is low, and I am not adept at explaining the formulas or Math processes either. So, in the end, they will probably fall behind". 4:10 (16:16).

Physical Education is also a subject where LAs find themselves unable to effectively fulfill their role due to the scarce linguistic treatment: "The only subject that I found myself not being able to take much part in was PE. And I strongly think that language assistant should not be given one full hour on this subject because of the minuscule amount of time for classroom (spoken) instruction. Most of the time, students are out to perform their exercises, and this is where it becomes tricky. Some teachers have the tendency to just get on with the Spanish instruction and let their language assistant sit on the side and watch the students the entire time". 4:216 (288:288).

Furthermore, some LAs highlight low motivation and participation of students in classroom sessions, questioning the effectiveness of the approach: "Students don't want to learn content subjects through English. They don't pay attention, don't listen, and don't participate" 4:293 (391:391), "The children do not learn English effectively in any other course but English. All other course content is not relevant and often leaves the children upset and uncooperative, especially if they are having difficulty learning the subject content in Spanish" 4:125 (172:172). These insights reveal CLIL's high complexity as an endeavor, demanding high-level pedagogical skills in order to encompass LAs´ participation and students´ engagement under the scope of teaching and learning content through a foreign language.

3.2. LAs´ representations on classroom methodology

The second category delves into LAs´ representations on classroom methodology (see Table 2).

Table 2
Category 2. Methodology

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	RESPONSE PERCENTAGE				
-I60 Teaching through oral explanations is the preferred method that teachers use.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	1.2	11.8	5.3	62.6	19.1
-I61 Teamwork is used as a teaching strategy in lessons.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	11.4	26.8/	4.9	43.5	13.4
-I62 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is regularly introduced in activities.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	12.2	28.5	4.5	39.8	15
-I63 Textbooks are used as main sources of information	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	2.8	17.9	4.1	41.9	33.3
-I64 Teachers complement lessons with photocopies of different curricular materials	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	7.7	20.3	4.5	47.6	19.9
-I65 Teachers use assessment tools in the bilingual sessions.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	6.1	34.1	4.1	45.5	10.2
-I66 Bilingual lessons incorporate hands-on activities ie. Experiments, projects, workshops...	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	16.7	29.7	5.3	37.8	10.6
-I67 Special needs students are provided adapted materials for bilingual sessions.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	16.7	31.7	10.2	32.1	9.3

Teaching methodology in bilingual classrooms was characterized as leaning more towards traditional techniques and teacher-centeredness. According to 81.7% of LAs teaching through oral explanations is the preferred method that teachers use (I60), while 75.2% claim that textbooks are used as the main sources of information (I63). Only 46.4% of LAs state that hands-on activities such as experiments, projects, and workshops are developed in the classrooms (I66). The analyses of the qualitative data show three main domains in which LAs focus their feedback: the need to update the methodology used in class (32 comments), rendering lessons more communicative (16 comments), and reinforcing focus on form (11 comments) (Table 1). Among the suggestions for the improvement of classroom methodology, LAs argue for active and student-centered approaches as alternatives: "Students need more authentic content and project-based learning where the foreign language becomes more relevant to the students" 4:64 (70:70), as well as the imperative to reduce the use of textbooks: "More flexibility in the curriculum and the ability to deviate from the textbook to do special projects" 4:40 (44:44). Additionally, LAs advocate for more practical dynamics in the classroom: "More hands-on activities that do not rely on traditional methods" 4:122 (168:168), "experiments in science classes and project-based learning in humanities" 4:192 (261:261).
The LAs also suggest ideas for enhancing classroom dynamics, and the use of ICT resources in the classroom. Among them are the (1) organization of conversational focus groups: "conversation practice on relevant topics with the students have been beneficial and are a fun way to get them to practice speaking and listening" 4:47

(53:53), (2) immersive sessions to support the development of various projects: "An English `profundización´ (sic) class that can be used for more projects, speaking, presentations, practice, cultural exchange, etc" 4:48 (44:44), (3) more personalized attention: "I would like to work with smaller groups of kids from time to time" 4:136 (193:193), (4) increase the number of resources in the classroom: "I believe there should be more resources to use to aid LA's. I think there should be more interactive materials to use too". 4:156 (216:216), "Greater access to technology (like smartboards in the classroom)" 4:39 (44:44), "For the students to have more access to electronics (Laptops or computers)" 4:179 (238:238).

LAs are also in favor of reinforcing the focus on form, rather than learning niche vocabulary, evidencing lexical dimensions being given hegemonic priority: "Focus more on the language learning - my kids can't form full sentences in English, but they know how to say extraneous things like *exoskeleton, omnivorous*, and other science words that are not relevant to their English level" 4:7 (7:7), "Ensure understanding before moving to the next unit, especially key sounds and sight words of the English language" 4:123 (168:168), "Sentence structure is a MUST, especially when they are learning new vocabulary. And having daily pronunciation lessons if possible or having homework involving pronunciation is needed" 4:201 (271:272).

The respondents raise several points on improving attention to diversity, as only 41.4% of LAs manifest that special needs students are provided adapted materials for bilingual sessions (I67). LAs identify the need in supporting those students with lower language levels: "The kids that were behind in English often misbehaved and drowned out both me and the Spanish teacher, so no one could get much substance out from those courses" 1:134 (136:136), "There should be more support for kids who struggle" 4:297 (24:24).

Overall, LAs stress the need for more functional and communicative use of the foreign language in the classroom: "Focus on communication in English rather than deliver School subjects in English - the students need a base level for this to be productive". 4:161 (218:218). Views on the current methodology evidence the need for teachers to accentuate communication skills in bilingual classrooms, as focus on content might take over form to the detriment of students' foreign language learning.

3.3. LA's views on the role of languages in bilingual classrooms

The third category studies LA's views on how languages are used in bilingual classrooms (see Table 3).

Table 3
Category 3. Role of languages

QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS	RESPONSE PERCENTAGE				
I59 Teachers use Spanish more than the foreign language in the bilingual sessions.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	4.9	37.8	2	31.7	23.6
I58 Teachers' language skills in the foreign language are good enough to conduct the lessons.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	8.5	26.4	2.4	43.9	17.7
I79 Since starting, I have observed improvements in students' overall performance in the foreign language.	TD	D	NAND	A	TA
	5.7	20.3	3.7	49.6	20.7

According to 55% of LAs, Spanish is the most frequently used language in class (I59), with 19 comments questioning the practice (Tables 1 & 3). For some LAs this fact limits students' engagement in trying to learn the foreign language: "Bilingual Spanish teachers spend way too much time teaching in Spanish even with the auxiliar present, students know they don't need to listen to the auxiliar in English because the Spanish teacher will translate all of the information into Spanish immediately" 4:103 (143:143). The ubiquitous use of Spanish also limits LA's use of their native language: "Most of the time, I have to make use of Spanish for us to communicate (even in 4°ESO)" 1:7 (10:10). Interestingly, the perceived low level of teachers' foreign language skills is a compelling factor for some LAs to consider the knowledge of Spanish to be a requirement of the LA selection process: "They really should require a level of Spanish for the LAs. My level is quite low but since

there were no requirements, I thought maybe the teachers were going to have very high levels of English, which is not true. Many of them spoke almost no English and it made communication very difficult" 1:91 (118:118).

LAs identify the need to increase the use of the foreign language in the classrooms: "One of the ways to combat these limitations is to raise the amount of English input that students receive daily to better match natural language learning input quantities" 4:195 (265:265). LA's presence in the classroom is thought to be a factor that compels teachers to use the foreign language: "I also feel like many teachers had to teach in English because of our presence" 1:19 (16:16).

Although 62.6% of LAs consider that teachers´ language skills are good enough to conduct the lessons (I58), 18 LAs specifically highlight the low level of foreign language competence among teachers: "I was the only one in my bilingual school to speak English, even the two English teachers had poor language skills, and I felt that I couldn't really help the students at all" 1:9 (14:14). Moreover, the low level of students' competence in the foreign language is thought to limit the extent that lessons can be successfully conducted using the target language: "There is a bilingual section in my high school, but it is impossible for the kids to communicate with me in French, even for the most basic things (Can you read? Can you repeat? etc.)" 1:7 (10:10).

16 LAs argue that the low level of the students' foreign language competence represents an obstacle for them to take advantage of the lessons: "The basic English level is so low that any teaching of subject content in English is nearly pointless" 4:19 (26:26). Additionally, they reflect on the variability in student competence levels in the foreign language: "Some students have very high levels, and some cannot understand me at all. This makes it hard for lessons that are not English classes to take full advantage of my presence" 4:32 (38:38). The need to guarantee that students have reached a certain level of linguistic competence in the foreign language before addressing the content in non-linguistic areas is also mentioned: "We should focus on teaching grammar and vocabulary first and getting the children to a good level before introducing them to content learning with a foreign language. They are currently struggling with the content AND (sic) the language, so that's a double barrier to their education" 4:106 (149:149). In this sense, LAs propose the gradual introduction of the CLIL approach to students: "It is impossible for kids in 1°ESO who just started French this year to study 50% of the content in French" 4:9 (13:13).

LAs' views on the use of languages in bilingual classrooms point to multiple hurdles in the learning process, as well as the complexity of creating favorable conditions for content learning in the foreign language amid minimizing interference from the mother tongue.

4. Discussion

The focus of the study was to determine areas for improvement in bilingual education according to insights provided by Language Assistants in the areas of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), classroom methodology, and the role of languages.

The analyses of LAs representations reveal that bilingual classroom dynamics are positively evaluated; however communicative, interactive, and meaningful teaching and learning processes are not as generalized as previous studies have already documented (Durán-Martínez & Beltrán-Llavador, 2020; Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016; Llaneza-Villanueva, 2016; San-Isidro & Lasagabaster, 2020).

Whereas LAs consider the use of the foreign language in subjects as effective for content learning, a more in-depth analysis of the qualitative data shows that the implementation of CLIL at the classroom level is far from the recommended interactive, social-constructivist, and student-led approach in which teachers withdraw from being donors of knowledge and become facilitators of learning (Pérez Cañado, 2016). Instead, LAs characterize the bilingual sessions as teacher-centered and administered excessively through oral explanations using traditional resources such as textbooks, deviating from the regional programme guidelines which state that classroom methodology should be based on the design of communicative tasks to enhance students´ language competence (Consejería de educación de Andalucía, 2011).

Another concern raised in the study was the role of the foreign language in the context of CLIL sessions. LAs perceived language teaching as limited and lacking in proper planning, reminiscent of other studies on CLIL implementation in other regions (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016). LAs mention the need to dismantle the recurrent trend of first teaching content in Spanish before being taught in the foreign language as a strategy to structure the sessions. This language division corresponds to practices of developing bilingualism through parallel monolingualisms rather than synchronous exposure (Laupenmühlen, 2012). Instead of this reinforcement approach, L1 usage in the classroom could be directed at making the content comprehensible as this allows it to build from the known concepts, translate difficult grammar and lexicon, and utilize cross-linguistic

comparisons (Swain et al., 2011). LAs understanding of the language dynamics in the classroom is aligned with the current consensus on the need to systematically plan the use of L1 and L2 to fulfill the different pedagogical functions inherent to the changing stages and phases of a lesson (Lin, 2015).

Furthermore, an overuse of Spanish has been identified in bilingual classrooms, a pattern already recognized in previous studies (Litzler, 2020). This finding contrasts with LAs overall positive opinions of teachers' foreign language levels. According to LAs, instances in which teachers' levels are lower than average present an added difficulty, since it affects not only the delivery of the lessons in the foreign language, but also limits effective collaboration between LAs and teachers, a conclusion already highlighted by other studies of the bilingual program (Szczesniak & Muñoz-Luna, 2022).

LAs also alluded to the difficulties that students with lower levels encounter in following lessons and learning specific subject content. Even in cases in which students might know the vocabulary, they lack strategies to make use of the learned language in functional ways or follow the further explanations conducted in the second language. This scenario demands concrete actions from teachers in order to adapt to the varying levels of students´ linguistic competence, diverse learning styles and levels of attainment, catering to diversity instead of using a 'one-size fits all' teaching approach (Madrid & Pérez Cañado, 2018).

The remaining findings highlight several areas in which bilingual sessions could be holistically improved. Among those mentioned were a lack of or disregard for focus on form, as foreign language learning is assumed to be an incidental by-product of CLIL methodology rather than an intentional objective. Studies advocating for the focus on form in language learning show that by integrating a set of techniques deployed in a communicative context to draw attention to linguistic forms, either explicitly or implicitly, have a substantial impact in language learning. These strategies can come in the form of pre-planned tasks or task repetitions in which the LA can actively participate in (Ellis, 2016).

LAs' effective contribution in the classroom has also been regarded with varying degrees of success, according to the subject content. Mathematics and Physical Education received the lowest ratings in terms of effectiveness, the former for its complexity and the latter for its limited linguistic dimension. CLIL teachers in these particular subject areas should be encouraged to undergo further training in lesson planning in order to render their subjects more compatible with LA participation.

While LAs play an essential role as facilitators of language development in the CLIL classroom, their knowledge and understanding of bilingual teaching and learning processes pose limitations as they are not required formal training either in general or bilingual education to gain access to the position. Notwithstanding this factor, Language assistants' representations are still valid sources of information, as they are participating observers of CLIL implementation. The shift to the LAs' perspective was due to the need to advance further research in understanding the bilingual classroom and CLIL methodology, considering their representations as key insights. Further research, such as the one that is currently in design by the authors, should also include teachers, students, and families' representations about the areas for improvement regarding bilingual education, thus reinforcing and strengthening the triangulation of information.

5. Conclusions

The study highlights certain areas of the bilingual project through the lens of native language assistants. CLIL as an approach demands a set of skills that must be enacted to effectively lead to content and language learning. However, LAs representations show the fragility of this equilibrium, already taking into account the preexisting imbalance between Spanish and the foreign language not only in terms of use and contextual prominence but also in teachers' and students´ proficiency. Therefore, teachers and LAs share the challenge of creating meaningful opportunities for students to use and advance their knowledge of the FL in class.

Spanish is reported to be the main language in the bilingual classrooms, limiting students' exposure to the foreign language. Overuse of the native language in presenting content has been shown to affect student engagement and disincentivize efforts at using the target language. Additionally, the study has shown CLIL's high complexity as an endeavor, demanding high-level pedagogical skills and effective classroom management techniques in order to encompass LAs´ participation and students´ engagement under the scope of teaching and learning content through a foreign language in different subjects.

Finally, a few recommendations stem from the study, such as the need for specialized training for teachers on how to collaborate with LAs, as also proposed by Sánchez-Torres (2020). Teaching practices in bilingual classrooms must advance towards more innovative, interactive, and inclusive approaches. In order to achieve this, teachers' professional development in CLIL continues to be relevant and necessary, together with the further improvement of teachers' foreign language skills, since previous studies have also concluded that

teachers with stronger foreign language skills have been found to be more aligned with the different dimensions of CLIL (Pavon et al. 2019).

Teachers in the bilingual sections need added support, not only from an extended LA presence in the lessons but also through easing their much-saturated workload (Travé y Soto, 2014). Similarly, it is worth considering the possibility of enacting on-the-job training situations in which teachers and LAs might be observed and modeled by experts. Partnerships between Teacher Training Centers in Andalusia, regional Educational Administrations, and Universities might be catalysts for research projects based on Lesson Study and Action Research to effectively study bilingual education from the perspective of the practitioners,LAs, students, and families to improve the teaching and learning processes implemented in the bilingual classrooms.

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Annex

THE ROLE OF THE LANGUAGE ASSISTANT IN THE BILINGUAL SCHOOL

This questionnaire will help us understand the role of language assistants in Bilingual Schools in Spain. This study aims to reflect on the program, and the assistant´s experience, in order to eventually suggest future improvements.
The information provided will be treated with utmost confidence and be given complete anonymity.

Thank you & Muchas gracias!

Age

Sex
- ○ Female
- ○ Male

School (s):

City/ Town:

Province:

Country of origin:

Main language of the program:
- ○ English
- ○ French
- ○ German

1

Other (please specify below)

Language:

Previous Language assistant experience:
- First year
- Second year
- Third year
- More than three years

Would you repeat?
- Yes
- No

Academic background:
- No university studies
- University/college degree in progress
- University/college degree completed
- Master's degree
- Doctorate
- Other

Do you have any kind of previous training in Education?
- Yes
- No

If you do, please provide details:

Which was your main reason for joining the program?

1. The Language Assistant Program

Please tick the answer closer to your views:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Nor Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree

2

I was aware of the general characteristics of the program upon applying.	○	○	○	○	○
I received necessary information from my school before starting the program.	○	○	○	○	○
My grant from the school allows me to sustain my needs in my city and region in particular.	○	○	○	○	○
I have been paid regularly and on time.	○	○	○	○	○
I have some form of part-time work apart from the program.	○	○	○	○	○
Using the foreign language as a medium of instruction in subjects is effective for content learning.	○	○	○	○	○
I would rather assist language lessons than content ones.	○	○	○	○	○
I think the program is effective.	○	○	○	○	○
There is a vast difference between what I expected before joining the program and the real experience in my school.	○	○	○	○	○

If you agree or strongly agree with that last item please provide details:

Rate the effectivenes of your presence in the following subjects: (rate only those in which you have assisted in)

	Not effective	Less effective	Effective	Very effective
Maths	○	○	○	○
P.E.	○	○	○	○
History	○	○	○	○
Social Sciences	○	○	○	○
Natural Sciences	○	○	○	○
Music and Art	○	○	○	○
Other: (please specify below)	○	○	○	○

Name of the subject not listed:

3

In your opinion, what could improve the bilingual program?

2. The Language Assistant (LA)

Please tick the answer closer to your views:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Nor Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel integrated in the school.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I am prepared for my duties as a LA.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I feel some form of training should be provided to perform better as a LA.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I think teachers with whom I collaborate with benefit from my presence in their classrooms.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I feel that students benefit from my assistance during lessons.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
My role in class is more similar to a teacher rather than of an assistant.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I am often left with nothing to do in class.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
My work in class is based on translating subject content from Spanish.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I struggle with assisting course content in some subjects.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I am able to create meaningful interactions with the students in class.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I received constructive feedback from teachers regarding my role as an assistant.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I feel fulfilled with my role as a LA.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎
I usually prolong my stay at the school beyond the signed weekly hours.	◎	◎	◎	◎	◎

Tick the frequency of tasks you have been assigned in the school:

	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
Conversation and oral activities.	◎	◎	◎	◎
Presentations about different topics.	◎	◎	◎	◎

4

Speaking about the culture of my country.	○	○	○	○
Recordings.	○	○	○	○
Training teachers in my school.	○	○	○	○
Extracurricular activities.	○	○	○	○

3. Teacher's performance in the bilingual session

Please tick the answer closer to your views:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Nor Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I participate in meetings with teachers to coordinate lesson plans.	○	○	○	○	○
Most teachers send their lessons plans well in advance.	○	○	○	○	○
I know what it is expected of me before each class.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers encourage me to have initiatives in their lessons.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers are prepared for teaching bilingual lessons.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers' language skills in the foreign language are good enough to conduct the lessons.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers use Spanish more than the foreign language in the bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Teaching through oral explanations is the preferred method that teachers use.	○	○	○	○	○
Teamwork is used as a teaching strategy in lessons.	○	○	○	○	○
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is regularly introduced in activities.	○	○	○	○	○
Textbooks are used as main sources of information.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers complement lessons with photocopies of different curricular materials.	○	○	○	○	○

5

Teachers use assessment tools in the bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Bilingual lessons incorporate hands-on activities ie. Experiments, projects, workshops...	○	○	○	○	○
Special needs students are provided adapted materials for bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Teachers find it difficult to integrate my presence in a way that promotes communicative interactions in class.	○	○	○	○	○
I have been often asked not to come to class.	○	○	○	○	○

The kind of activities that are promoted in class are mainly based on:

	Never	Seldom	Often	Always
Listening	○	○	○	○
Speaking	○	○	○	○
Writing	○	○	○	○
Reading	○	○	○	○
Interaction	○	○	○	○

4. Students' performance in the bilingual session

Please tick the answer closer to your views:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Nor Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Students actively participate in bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Students use the target language to interact with each other.	○	○	○	○	○
Students like bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Students disconnect in class during bilingual sessions.	○	○	○	○	○
Since starting, I have observed improvements in students' overall performance in the foreing language.	○	○	○	○	○

| Students speak to me in the target language. | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ | ◎ |

Thank you very much!

Contact

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