

Short paper: What kind of culture should teaching assistants be familiar with? Implications for bilingual schools in Spain

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Abstract

Language assistants have become an important resource for teachers in bilingual schools in Spain, especially in the Madrid region. Most language assistants come from English-speaking countries, especially from the United States. In their role as language assistants, they are expected to bring and share their knowledge about cultural aspects and content subjects and, at the same time, they need to share their beliefs and perspectives towards Spain and Spanish schools. Nevertheless, there is sometimes controversy around this topic as there are obvious differences and similarities between both cultures: one of them being the misconception regarding the type of culture that needs to be taught to students.

Keywords: Language assistants, culture, English teaching, beliefs.

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1. Context

Spain has increasingly paid attention to multilingual education in recent years (Breton & Ruiz, 2008; Cenoz, 2008; Fortanet-Gomez, 2012; Gorter & Cenoz, 2017; Moore, 2016; Perez-Milans & Patino-Santos, 2014). In the region of Madrid, the Ministry of Education and the *Consejería de Educación* (Regional Ministry of Education of Madrid) have implemented the bilingual programme in public bilingual schools in 2004. One of the main requirements for public bilingual schools is to have native English speakers as language assistants (Order 162/2011, January 31). Moreover, in 2008, this requirement was extended to the charter and private schools (Order 9,932/2012, August 30).

As stated in the yearly report published by the local government of Madrid in June 2018, the number of bilingual or semi-bilingual schools has increased dramatically since 1995. During the academic year of 2018–2019, the total number of students enrolled in bilingual schools in Madrid was around 120,000 students (Figure 1). Since the academic year 2004–5 the bilingual programme has increased the number of participant schools from 26 schools to over 379 schools and 166 high schools as shown in Figure 1. Additionally, a total number of 218 charter schools have joined the bilingual programme in the region of Madrid during the last years.

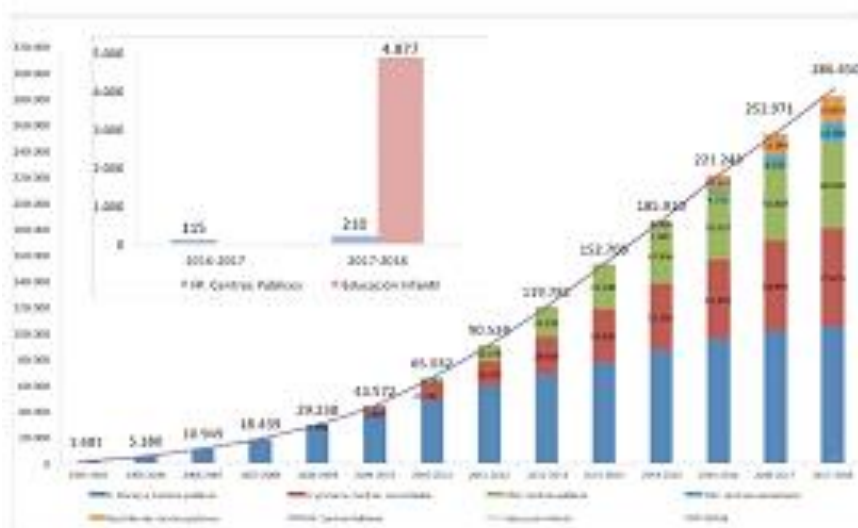


Figure 1. source https://www.comunidad.madrid/sites/default/files/doc/educacion/sgea_eval_informe_programabilingue.pdf

As stated on the Ministry of Education’s website and in agreement with the European policies and regulations (EU Council), the main goals of the bilingual programme are, on the one side, to improve the communicative skills of students in schools and, on the other side, to provide cultural references related to English-speaking countries through contact with English language native speakers by implementing mobility programmes for teachers and students (Vitalaru & Vecan, 2017).

As described on the Ministry of Education’s website, language assistants represent a fundamental element within the bilingual programme. They are usually young graduates from English-speaking countries who bestow their cultural and linguistic values and complement the lead teacher’s work in the classroom. Likewise, the number of language assistants had steadily increased (Figure 2) to around 1,400 in 2014.

2. Teaching culture

According to the *Guide of the Language Assistant 2018–19* published by the Ministry of Education, the functions of the language assistant include to reinforce the oral skills of the students in the foreign

language and to foster students’ interest in the language, culture and civilisation of their country of origin. It is also specifically mentioned that the language assistant can be assigned the following tasks under the coordination and supervision of the teacher: specific conversation activities and teaching of the culture and civilisation of their country.

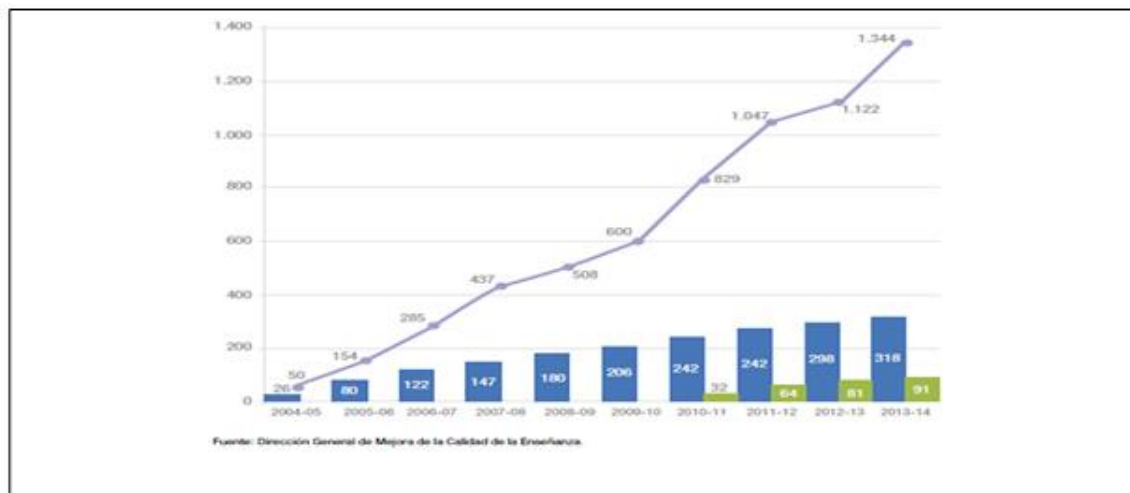


Figure 2. Evolution of the amount of language assistants in public bilingual schools from the public bilingual schools, course year: 2004–2005 and 2013–2014. https://comunidadbilingue.educa2.madrid.org/aux.conversacion/-/visor/auxiliares-de-conversacion?p_p_col_pos=1

The regional Ministry of Education of Madrid includes, among the functions of the language assistant, the ‘fostering of students’ interest in the language, culture and civilisation of the assistant’s country of origin, as well as the cultural exchange’ (Guide of the Language Assistant, 2018–19: <https://sede.educacion.gob.es/publiventa/language-assistants-guide-language-assistants-in-spain-2018-19/ensenanza-lengua-espanola/22527>). The role of the assistant as a ‘cultural ambassador’ has been mentioned in various editions of the Language Assistant Handbook throughout the years. Studies have shown that Spanish lead teachers generally disregard the assistants’ potential ability to help students acquire the necessary skills to deal with intercultural situations (Sercu et al., 2004). However, the presence of a language assistant in the classroom pursues a cultural objective and can bring students and teachers closer to the culture of the target language country. As a matter of fact, the regional Ministry of Education assures that having a native assistant in the foreign language classroom constitutes ‘an extraordinary opportunity for the students and the educational community in general’ (Language Assistants in Spain)

3. What culture are they expected to teach?

One of the main aims of incorporating culture in the foreign language classroom is for students to be able to reflect on their own culture in relation to others while they acquire knowledge about the target language (Brdaric, 2016). Language assistants thus not only promote the acquisition of language skills, but also of intercultural competence. As mentioned by Brdaric (2016) ‘Teaching culture should be an essential part of teaching English as a foreign language because one of its main aims is intercultural communicative competence, which refers to knowledge of social groups and their practices and customs’.

Having a language assistant in the classroom provides the opportunity to get a closer perspective of cultural practices and customs from English-speaking countries. The idea being native language assistants not only provide extra help in the classroom, but also provide culture and their experiences in their country of origin to show to teachers and students. Their role as ‘language ambassadors’ is

highlighted by the Ministry of Education in their job description. Brdaric (2016) also states that a deeper understanding of people's beliefs and way of living should also be included in ESL classrooms rather than just focusing on important writers, artists, cities, etc. She reinforces this idea by using Claire Kramsch's classification of cultural content as highbrow and lowbrow information. According to Kramsch's classification, when concentrating on highbrow culture, language assistants would be focusing more on expanding student's knowledge about literature, arts and similar aspects, while when concentrating on lowbrow culture, language assistants would be focusing on customs of everyday life, habits and folklore (Kramsch, 1993). She also states that when focusing on highbrow culture, learners would be memorising information and facts rather than understanding cultural traits. The emphasis on lowbrow culture aspects would provide learners the opportunity to connect their own culture with the target culture.

A study carried out by Sercu et al. (2004) examined the most common cultural topics addressed in the foreign language classroom: '[d]aily life and routines, living conditions, food and drink, etc.', '[y]outh culture' and '[t]raditions, folklore, tourist attractions' led the ranking list. There are, however, a number of other topics which could engage students in an interactive discussion highlighting the differences and similarities of both cultures (their own and the target culture). Since cultures vary in the way they view and deal with certain issues, some of these topics can be controversial. It is, therefore, essential to create a 'culture-friendly' atmosphere that allows the language assistant to be 'sensitive to the fragility of students' and promotes cultural understanding (Brdaric, 2016).

Regarding the type of tasks or activities that they perform in the bilingual classroom, language assistants tend to perform more engaging and interactive activities than what students are used to in the foreign language classroom. Teachers generally work with textbooks and grammar, while language assistants dedicate more time to activities such as role-plays, comics or songs (Scobling, 2011). In that way, students discover the target culture through these activities. However, it is important to examine the aspects of the target culture that are frequently addressed by language assistants and that increase students' motivation to participate and keep studying the foreign language and culture in the future (Scobling, 2011).

Despite their previous knowledge of the country, each assistant brings different beliefs of the reality they will find in and out of the school. Their beliefs clearly modify their role and participation in the schools (Amaki, 2008). Amaki also states that, in his study in Japan, many language assistants considered that the language competence of their Japanese colleagues was too low, and thus, they used Japanese in many occasions even in more than necessary. A few years later, Macaro, Nakatani, Hayashi and Khabbazbashi (2014) did a small-scale exploratory study on the use of bilingual EFL monolingual and bilingual language assistants. Obviously, monolingual assistants only performed in English, while bilingual used mostly English and also used Japanese for clarifying purposes. The results indicated that groups with bilingual assistants had greater gains over a period of 3 months. More recent studies have addressed different issues in 2017, Uzum describes the case of an Uzbek assistant in the US who used a language socialisation theoretical framework. Uzum found out that 'biographical factors (e.g., the teacher's personal history, experience as a learner), contextual factors (e.g., interactions with students and institutional resources) and dialogic factors (e.g., the teacher's knowledge of theories of teaching and learning) guided the process of socialisation' (Uzum, 2017, p. 241).

The importance of training to modify or create the language assistants' beliefs and especially their attitudes can, in no few occasions, be due to training. For example, Soler and Tecedor (2018) studied three main issues in teacher training towards their incorporation as language assistants in foreign schools and universities: language, culture and technology. They stated that 'training is based on immediate teaching needs and lacks long-term goals of professionalisation and that there are substantial differences in opinion between TAs and faculty in charge of the training regarding its effectiveness' (Soler & Tecedor, 2018: 38). This is especially significant in the Spanish context since many assistants usually have never been in Spain before and therefore lack the personal experience of living and working abroad.

4. Conclusion

The importance of culture interchange between the Spanish educational stakeholders and the language assistants is significant in bilingual education in Spain. Language assistants are to deliver topic knowledge, but especially with regard to their way of living, thinking and understanding life. Culture is a must in a multicultural classroom and the Government of Madrid so considers. This little piece of writing just presented a brief approach to the topic. However, a revision of this topic is necessary to observe the implications in the students' understanding of the foreign culture and to see whether enough information is transferred (Buckingham, 2018).

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