

Article

Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Madrid's Regional Bilingual Programme: Exploring the Correlation between English Proficiency Level and Pre-Service Teachers' Beliefs

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the opinions of prospective pre-primary and primary teachers about Madrid's regional Bilingual Programme in Spain, assessing the correlations between their self-perceived level of English and their positioning concerning the effectiveness of the regional programme. Although there is a growing body of research in the field of education on how CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) provisions impact in-service teachers' attitudes concerning bilingual education, there is a dearth of literature on the way student teachers depict the teaching reality. Thus, this paper explores pre-service teachers' beliefs towards the Bilingual Programme via an ad hoc questionnaire, administered to a non-probabilistic sample of 170 undergraduate students at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. The data collected were explored using *Chi-square* and *Somers' D* tests. The results show that the self-perceived English level, greatly determined by prior bilingual schooling, has a strong influence on their perceptions about the Bilingual Programme. The findings also indicate that, although the learning experience at the pre-primary stage is valued positively by students, the acquisition of curricular contents in primary education is seen as negatively affected due to English medium instruction.

Keywords: bilingual education; CLIL; English level; pre-service teachers



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1. Introduction

The Region of Madrid Bilingual Programme (henceforth, BP) or “Programa Bilingüe de la Comunidad de Madrid” is a large education plan working in state schools that began in 2004 in primary education, which has progressively been extended to the secondary level. Although BP training is not mandatory, teachers need to be accredited in foreign language proficiency to work in bilingual schools in this region. This compulsory requirement can be met through a test that evaluates the knowledge to teach the Advanced English curriculum, comprising the assessment of the candidate's methodological skills, or by holding a university degree or an official language certification equivalent to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) level C1 or above [1]. Until the publication of Order 1672/2009, the accreditation process was solely focused on the criterion of linguistic competence in English; however, due to the growth of the BP in the region, it now includes a methodological training evaluation. Although it is not a requirement as such, bilingual schools value positively that teachers are specialised in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), as this provides them with deeper knowledge and learning skills related to this area.

The BP implemented in the region rests on a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, whereby certain content subjects are taught in a foreign language—principally English. CLIL may be then regarded as “a dual-focused education approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” [2] (p. 1). Currently, 50.4% of primary schools and 63.6% of secondary schools

in Madrid are bilingual in their entirety [3]. In the case of pre-primary education, the BP started in the academic year 2016–2017, and nowadays, 126 state schools participate in the programme from 3 to 6 years old [4].

CLIL provisions are ample in Spain, and empirical research findings indisputably report the superiority of CLIL instruction as opposed to language-driven tuition, particularly over the long run. CLIL is supported by well-grounded research in Europe, which affirms that CLIL students generally outperform their non-CLIL counterparts concerning English proficiency [5–7] and that this teaching approach also offers cognitive advantages to students [8]. The literature has provided findings that the implementation of CLIL helps develop among students a positive attitude towards multilingual instruction and the CLIL approach itself, alongside higher motivation towards foreign language learning and the promotion of intercultural competence [9–12]. Hence, CLIL has proven to be effective in the overall learning experience of students, comprising “content (i.e., subject knowledge), linguistic and intercultural competence” [13] (p. 245). The learning experience in CLIL settings is cross-curricular or transversal, in the sense that this approach allows the acquisition of inter-related content exposing learners to real-life communicative situations in which prior knowledge scaffolds the attainment of new information and the reinforcement of target language proficiency. According to Castejón and Paz-Albo [14], exposition to two languages from early childhood (0–6 years), i.e., during the critical period, is beneficial for learners’ cognitive development since this is the optimal period in which the brain is configured and the neural networks are shaped. It is at this moment when mirror neurons are at work to link words (input) to their implicit relational experience (world). Hence, those infants who are exposed to bilingual language input often show higher cognitive flexibility and the enhanced performance of executive functions, resulting in later success in problem-solving abilities [15].

Despite a considerable number of investigations centred on the benefits of CLIL in both pre-primary and primary education [7,8,16–18], its pedagogical implementation in Spain is a matter of controversy. Teachers frequently point to structural difficulties in implementing this approach and the need for further methodological training, enhanced coordination, and more resources to improve the quality of education under this curricular paradigm [19]. Moreover, in a study by Alonso-Belmonte and Fernández-Agüero [20], it was found that in-service teachers working in Madrid’s BP consider that they lack linguistic expertise and/or content knowledge, which makes them feel insufficiently prepared to master the various challenges that CLIL entails. The limited linguistic performance of certain teachers and/or their own perception of the students’ limited linguistic proficiency may lead to content simplification [21], that is, focusing on conceptual comprehension rather than the practical application of those notions, thus lowering learners’ cognitive development. Students tend to learn a new concept by receiving an insufficiently detailed explanation or by just seeing its correspondence with their mother tongue, without deeply reasoning about its implications and/or knowing in depth its application to a real-life situation.

Although this approach has been implemented in Spain since 1996, an English First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) report published in 2021 [22], which evaluated data from non-English speakers over the world, placed Spain in the 33rd position in the global ranking and concluded that, unlike in other parts of Europe, the improvement in English is stagnated in this country. Among the four strategic objectives that are mentioned within the framework of ET (Education and Training) Monitor elaborated by the European Commission in 2020 [23], enhancing “the quality and efficiency of education and training” is mentioned. To that end, a number of national priorities are set for each Member State; one of them is spending some time studying or training abroad in the case of higher education graduates and professionals with an initial vocational qualification. Concerning Spain, learning mobility figures provided by ET Monitor show that the country is below the EU (European Union) average, which may have a negative effect on students’ development of foreign language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence.

The debate on the effectiveness of the BP goes beyond the academic field and is present in Spanish society at all levels, thus affecting family schooling decisions. Those parents against CLIL complain that students in BP courses learn neither the language nor the subject matter adequately and that this approach is also intensifying school segregation [24,25]. According to Ferrer and Gortazar's [26] report, based on PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) measurements, Spain is the EU country that displays the highest level of school segregation at the primary school level, with Madrid being the region with the highest rate. In this region, there are high proportions of similar students segregated by socioeconomic status. However, there is no clear evidence that this fact is directly linked to the BP. This subject is not only questioned among stakeholders, but the debate over the effectiveness of BPs is also registered in the Spanish national press. News that bilingual schools are dropping out of the BP is reaching the media, contributing to increases in the resistance of public opinion towards the implementation of this dual-focused programme.

To date, a considerable number of studies have been published on in-service teachers' understanding, knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes concerning BPs and CLIL education in Spain; see [9,20,27,28] and elsewhere [29–32]. However, there is scarce knowledge on prospective pre-primary and primary teachers' opinions in this regard. Hence, exploring student teachers' perceptions is critical as their professional career in Madrid will connect with CLIL in one way or another. Only a deep understanding of student teachers' beliefs and opinions can inform teacher education programmes to improve training and practice. The concept of 'belief' in the field of education entails an examination of the teaching–learning process from a particular angle [33]. Beliefs are difficult to analyse because they are experiential, mediated, and sometimes paradoxical [34]. They have also a strong affective–evaluative component [35], which, in the case of CLIL effectiveness, is likely to be influenced by the existing polarised social debate in Spain around this issue.

At this point, the questions that guide our study are: what do future pre-primary and primary teachers think about BPs? Particularly, are their perspectives influenced by their linguistic background? Two research objectives are proposed in this paper. First, (1) we aim to describe the opinions of prospective pre-primary and primary teachers in Spain in relation to bilingual education considering their self-perceived level of English and education background. Secondly, (2) the purpose is to show the correlations between their self-perceived level of English and different factors related to bilingual education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Experimental Design

A descriptive, cross-sectional, and correlational study of the profile and beliefs of students enrolled in education degrees in Spain regarding the BP was designed. To this end, a descriptive statistical study was carried out using the frequency distributions and percentages of the nominal and ordinal variables evaluated. For the correlational analyses, contingency tables via a *Chi-square* non-parametric test were employed, including *Somers' D* to determine the orientation of the relationship between the variables analysed and the effect size.

Results were considered significant when the significance level exceeded 95% ($\alpha \geq 0.05$ in dichotomous variables), and Bonferroni correction was applied when there were more than two levels in the variable.

2.2. Participants

This study collected and analysed the opinions of 170 students from different degrees in education (pre-primary education, primary education, and the joint degree in pre-primary and primary) enrolled in the subjects "English as a Foreign Language I and II" at a university in Madrid (Spain) in the 2020–2021 academic year. The study participants in this research were viewed as key elements that may contribute to fostering educational effectiveness [36]. In addition, they were seen as representative of the whole trainee teaching

population since, as Skinnari and Bovellan claim, “although teacher’s attitudes, assumptions and expectations [. . .] vary individually, they are situationally constructed and reflect the values of the communities they belong to” [37] (p. 148). The sampling method was based on clusters. Table 1 below presents the sample according to the attributive variables selected in this study.

Table 1. Sample description.

University Degree	Frequency	%
Pre-primary education	63	37.1
Primary education	56	32.9
Joint degree in pre-primary and primary education	51	30.0
Academic year	Frequency	%
1st	5	2.9
2nd	58	34.1
3rd	106	62.4
4th	1	0.6
Age category	Frequency	%
18–20 years	79	46.5
21–23 years	75	44.1
24–26 years	12	7.1
27–29 years	3	1.8
30 years or more	1	0.6
Gender	Frequency	%
Male	23	13.5
Female	147	86.5
Official certificate of English (C1 or above)	Frequency	%
No	157	92.4
Yes	13	7.6
Total Sample	170	100.0

Table 1 clearly shows that the distribution of students according to the different university degrees in the sample obtained was balanced. The large majority of learners were in their third year (62.4%), aged under 24 years (90.6%), and were mostly female (86.5%). In addition, the vast majority of research participants did not hold a certificate of English level equivalent to C1 or higher (92.4%).

2.3. Study Variables and Evaluation Instrument

An ad hoc questionnaire was designed to gather information for the purposes of this research. This instrument was implemented in order to obtain the specifics of the attributive variables evaluated and the reflections of the study participants concerning the items set. It was a short questionnaire with 17 closed-ended questions, distributed into three sections. The first 6 questions (Section 1) addressed the attributive variables of the study: *sex, age, university degree, academic year, and undergraduate specialisation*, together with *self-perceived proficiency in English*. Section 2, comprising items 7 to 14, enquired about the trainees’ level of English, their background as EFL learners, and their general understanding of the regional BP. Finally, Section 3 intended to map the variety of positions

adopted by the trainees regarding the regional BP (items 15 and 16), as well as the impact of the programme on the pre-service teachers' professional careers (item 17). The evaluation instrument was previously validated by a group of three qualified university experts in the field of education in April 2021. The reviewers determined that items were adequate, sufficient, and relevant and did not contain biased content or common errors such as leading, confusing, or double-barrelled questions. Later, the authors piloted and validated the questionnaire on a small sample of 15 respondents. The questionnaire was administered in Spanish to encourage the student teachers' participation.

Regarding the intervening variables, this study collected information on 15 different variables, of which 3 were nominal (*university degree, gender of participants, and school type in primary and secondary education*), 5 were dichotomous with Yes/No answers (*English as favourite subject, English as the first choice of undergraduate specialisation, C1 certificate in English, stay in an English-speaking country, and bilingual schooling in primary and secondary education*), and 7 were ordinal with three or more response options (*age, academic year, self-perceived proficiency in English, do you consider your level of English is adequate to develop your future teaching career as a teacher in a bilingual school? Do you think that the curricular contents in Primary Education are learned worse, better, or in the same way in English than in Spanish? Does the English BP improve or worsen the overall learning experience (i.e., cognitive, affective, linguistic, and subject knowledge skills) in pre-primary Education? Do you think that the existence of the BP can help you obtain a permanent teaching position more quickly?*).

It should be noted that those variables in which the participant was asked about two different education stages (pre-primary or primary education, primary or secondary education) included two items to define each variable. These are the cases that follow: *school type in primary and secondary school, and bilingual schooling in primary and secondary education*.

3. Results

This study departed from the assumption that the self-perceived level of English and education background of participants may have an influence on their position concerning the regional BP. Thus, having described the profile of the students of the official degrees in education in Spain in the Methods section, the first research objective is tackled. To that end, the frequency of distribution of the sample in the different self-assessment items related to bilingual education is shown in Table 2 below.

From the analysis of Table 2, it was possible to confirm that English was the favourite subject for only 21.2% of the sample, showing very similar percentages as the participants' interest in pursuing an English undergraduate specialisation (17.1%). A total of 41.8% of the students considered their English level to be intermediate, a level that according to less than half of the total respondents is insufficient to work as a teacher in a BP (44.7%). Very few of the participants had been on an international stay in a country with English as the official language (7.6%), and the schools where they studied in primary and secondary education are mostly state (52.4% and 55.3%, respectively) and non-bilingual (70% and 68.2%, respectively) schools. Regarding their specific opinion of bilingual education depending on the educational stage, it was possible to state that there were opposite results. Students were mostly of the opinion that it improves the learning experience in pre-primary education (70%); however, in line with Coonan's [21] and Alonso-Belmonte and Fernández-Agüero's [20] findings, they considered it to worsen the acquisition of content in primary education (64.7%). Finally, 45.3% of the selected sample thought that the existence of the BP could help them obtain a permanent teaching position more quickly.

In response to the second research objective, assessing the possible connection between the participants' self-perceived level of English and their position towards the regional BP, Table 3 below shows the correlations of all the variables evaluated with respect to the self-perceived English level using *Chi-square* and *Somers' D* significance.

Table 2. Self-assessment responses on different aspects related to bilingual education.

University Degree	Frequency	%
No	134	78.8
Yes	36	21.2
Interest in English as the first choice for the undergraduate specialisation	Frequency	%
No	141	82.9
Yes	29	17.1
In your opinion, what is your current English level?	Frequency	%
Elementary (A1-A2)	30	17.6
Intermediate (B1)	71	41.8
Upper intermediate (B2)	56	32.9
Advanced (C1-C2)	13	7.6
International stay in an English-speaking country	Frequency	%
No	157	92.4
Yes	13	7.6
School type (primary education)	Frequency	%
Private	6	3.5
Subsidised	75	44.1
State	89	52.4
School type (secondary education)	Frequency	%
Private	14	8.2
Subsidised	62	36.5
State	94	55.3
Bilingual schooling (primary education)	Frequency	%
No	119	70.0
Yes	51	30.0
Bilingual schooling (secondary education)	Frequency	%
No	116	68.2
Yes	54	31.8
Do you consider that your level of English is sufficient to develop your future career as a teacher in a bilingual school?	Frequency	%
No	76	44.7
Not sure	29	17.1
Yes	65	38.2
Does the English BP improve or worsen the overall learning experience (i.e., cognitive, affective, linguistic, and subject knowledge skills) in pre-primary education?	Frequency	%
Worsens	42	24.7
Does not affect	9	5.3
Improves	119	70.0
Do you think that the curricular contents in primary education are learned worse, better, or in the same way in English than in Spanish?	Frequency	%
Worse	110	64.7
Does not affect	60	35.3
Better	0	0
Do you think that the existence of the BP can help you obtain a permanent teaching position more quickly?	Frequency	%
No	40	23.5
Maybe	53	31.2
Yes	77	45.3
Total Sample	170	100.0

Table 3. Contingency table of self-perceived English level and the rest of the variables evaluated.

Variable	Chi-Square	Somers' D
University degree	21.87 **	0.269 **
Academic year	20.361 *	0.26 **
Age range	4.901	−0.106
Gender of participants	2.363	0.024
English as a favourite subject	36.237 **	0.353 **
Interest in English as an undergraduate specialisation (first choice)	39.787 **	0.305 **
Official certificate of English (C1 or above)	14.248 **	0.175 **
International stay in an English-speaking country	7.154	0.169 **
School type (primary education)	8.525 *	−0.022
School type (secondary education)	3.615	0.018
Bilingual schooling (primary education)	19.426 **	0.288 **
Bilingual schooling (secondary education)	13.083 **	0.25 **
Do you consider that your level of English is sufficient to develop your future career as a teacher in a bilingual school?	3.981	0.006
Does the BP in English improve or worsen the overall learning experience (i.e., cognitive, affective, linguistic, and subject knowledge skills) in pre-primary education?	9.973	−0.151 *
Do you think that the curricular contents in primary education are learned worse, better, or in the same way in English than in Spanish?	4.898	−0.006
Do you think that the existence of the BP can help you obtain a permanent teaching position more quickly?	12.866 *	0.126

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level/** correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Table 3 clearly reveals how the self-perceived English level correlated directly and significantly with the university degree; in particular, there was a higher self-perceived level in the joint degree students than in the rest of the student groups, and the lowest self-perceived level was found in pre-primary education students. As regards the academic year, it was found that the higher the course, the higher the self-perceived English level. There were other variables, such as English as a favourite subject, interest in an English undergraduate specialisation, holding a certificate in advanced English (C1), or bilingual schooling, either in primary or secondary education, which also showed significant correlation with the self-perceived level of English. On the other hand, *Chi-square* showed significant results in the school type in primary education and the variable *do you think that the existence of the BP can help you obtain a permanent teaching position more quickly?* However, it did not occur using *Somers' D* test. This fact means that both variables covaried in a non-random way with the self-perceived English level and that their relationship was not linear, but curvilinear, which means that *Somers' D* did not show significance.

Finally, it should be noted that, unlike *Chi-square* testing, *Somers' D* is significant for the variables of *international stay in an English-speaking country* and *does the BP in English improve or worsen the overall learning experience in pre-primary education?* This finding may lead us to interpret that the relationship between the two variables was not significant, but there was a clear indication of a trend. In the case of the latter variable, our study sample shows that the lower the level of English, the higher the pre-service teachers rank the regional BP as concerns the overall learning experience. In the case of *international stay in an English-speaking country*, this fact may be explained due to the disproportionality of the sample, but in the case of the variable *does the BP in English improve or worsen the overall*

learning experience in pre-primary education?, we can deduce that the inverse orientation is not strong enough to be significant.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

This paper analysed the beliefs of 170 pre-service teachers concerning the effectiveness of the regional BP. Regarding the first research objective, the description of the opinions of prospective pre-primary and primary teachers in Spain in relation to bilingual education considering their self-perceived level of English and education background, it can be stated that, according to the percentages observed in the study, the self-perceived English level has a strong influence on participants' perception of the BP. Holding a certificate of English level equivalent to C1 or higher (7.6%), which is a compulsory requirement to teach the Advanced English curriculum, correlates significantly with other variables, such as having an interest in pursuing the English undergraduate specialisation (17.1%), valued very positively for working in bilingual courses, or having been on an international stay in an English-speaking country (7.6%), which usually help students develop foreign language proficiency and intercultural communicative competence [23].

Further, the pre-service teachers' perception of their self-perceived proficiency in the target language is strongly determined by previous bilingual schooling at pre-primary and/or primary stages (70% and 68.2%, respectively), that is, those participants who have been enrolled in BPs prior to their university studies tend to give a better assessment of their own English level, supporting its effectiveness. In line with the previous research findings [9–12], the implementation of CLIL helps develop a positive attitude towards multilingual instruction, alongside higher motivation towards foreign language learning and the promotion of intercultural competence. Dual immersion programmes therefore have a direct impact on a student's performance in English. As a consequence of the sample population profile obtained, not many participants (38.2) saw themselves as prepared to meet the level required to work in a bilingual school. This finding complies with the EF EPI report [22], which concluded that Spain falls behind other countries in the global ranking as regards English proficiency.

It is interesting to note that although the learning experience at the pre-primary stage was valued positively by students (70%), the acquisition of the curricular contents in primary education was seen as negatively affected due to English-medium instruction (64.7%). According to Coonan's [21] study, content simplification is a result of the limited linguistic performance of certain teachers and/or their learners. There is a tendency to emphasise conceptual understanding over the practical application of the learning tasks, leading to a decrease in the students' own cognitive development. Alonso-Belmonte and Fernández-Agüero [20] also found that due to a lack of linguistic expertise, teachers tend to apply curricular adaptations that oversimplify the learning contents. Despite this, early exposition to English is generally seen as beneficial for learners' learning experience, understood as the development of cognitive, affective, linguistic, and subject knowledge skills [13]. The study participants did not question the relevance of exposing learners to two different languages during their critical period, which has not just been proven to be beneficial for the acquisition of the target language, but also for the development of cognitive flexibility and the performance of executive functions.

As concerns the second research objective, assessing the correlations between their self-perceived level of English and different factors related to bilingual education, the findings indicate that according to *Chi-square* and *Somers' D* tests, the self-perceived proficiency correlated directly and significantly with most of the variables analysed. It particularly had a strong connection with the following factors analysed in this research: interest in an English undergraduate specialisation, advanced certificate, and bilingual schooling. It is reasonable to think that students' perception of their own level of English directly connects with their education background, as well as their interest in their own subject specialisation during their undergraduate studies. Moreover, a curvilinear relationship was found between this variable and the fact of getting a permanent position more quickly due

to the existence of the BP. This finding may be explained considering that the higher the level of English, the more possibilities students consider themselves to have in acquiring a vacancy due to the foreign language requirements for entry into a CLIL centre. Finally, there was a clear indication of a trend between self-perceived English level and the assessment of the way the BP affects the overall learning experience in pre-primary education. As already indicated, participants with a low level of English tended to rank the learning experience derived from the regional BP more highly than the rest of the research groups. From this finding, we may conclude that pre-service teachers with high language proficiency appeared to be more critical of the BP, despite acknowledging they will probably have more job opportunities due to their high command of English.

In conclusion, the results obtained are satisfactory as they helped to complete the vision about the BP by analysing pre-service teachers' perspectives, which are highly significantly correlated with their self-perceived proficiency in English. As already mentioned, exploring student teachers' perceptions is critical as their professional career in Madrid will closely connect with the BP. The research findings underline the ongoing need to improve the methodological training of teachers working in CLIL in order to reverse the trend of stagnation in Spain as regards English proficiency levels. The accreditation procedure established in the region to work in bilingual sections should also incorporate passing a training course before the teacher joins the BP, providing educators with the required standards to cater to CLIL demands. As seen above, navigating lessons about curricular content via a foreign language usually poses a challenge for those teachers with a lower level of English. Some educators tend to opt for code-switching and/or content simplification as unique teaching strategies, to the detriment of CLIL learners. However, if they were given clear directions on how to scaffold students to become more independent and active learners and on the best way to show them the practical connection between what is taught in class and their real-life experience, learners would profit maximally from CLIL instruction. The results also reveal that there is still a long way to go to establish the necessary conditions for the real and effective implementation of bilingual education that might result in more motivated and communicatively competent L2 speakers. To that end, school administrators should create more meaningful opportunities for cross-curricular coordination between content-knowledge teachers and language specialists for the full integration of CLIL components. The introduction of financial incentives related to the completion of short-term retraining courses to upskill teachers' English proficiency and/or their methodological skills, with an emphasis on CLIL instruction, could also benefit the regional BP. To conclude, this research purports to have broadened the scope of study in this domain, emphasising the continuing need to improve teaching training in bilingual education.

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