



SPEAKING UP

Announcing a multilingual revolution

A transformational program is sweeping across the world's schools, and Qatar has been very quick on the uptake. Matthias Krug reports from Spain.

“Yes, we want!” shouted a group of young children with contagious enthusiasm. They shouted it from metro billboards, television adverts, newspapers, you name it. What sounded rather like President Barack Obama’s latest electoral slogan in fact caused a considerable controversy here in Spain, both in the education community and beyond. The reason? This grammatically incorrect advertising slogan for bilingual education in Madrid caused many embarrassed head-shakes in a country which is touchingly self-conscious about speaking English correctly.

“How to announce bilingual schools with bad English,” mocked leading Spanish daily newspaper *El País*, whilst others called the almost 2 million Euros invested in the campaign money spent at the wrong end. That may be true, for there is little need for more publicity for the education trend of the moment. Still, that little controversy seems to do no harm

whatsoever to an education phenomenon that is catching on globally at an astonishingly rapid rate. In fact, it may even have done it a world of good.

“A lot of people talk about this as a huge change in education. I think this is a revolution,” Dr. Emma Dafouz Milne, a leading education expert and Professor at the Complutense University of Madrid, told *ABODE Magazine*. “There is certainly an enormous amount of excitement. Of course revolutions can also be dangerous: there is always resistance. We have to look at it as a long-term project. We have to look ahead and be rigorous, and make sure this is well-planned and well-researched.”

The numbers of Content Language Integrated Learning – or CLIL as the more user-friendly acronym is known – are already quite astonishing in Spain. In just six years, 30 percent of Madrid schools have implemented the CLIL project, which stems from a Europe-wide commitment to

multi-lingual societies. And there can be no doubt that children have the right to speak English incorrectly in their learning stages – something which the advertisers who made the slogan say they were trying to imply. Enhancing communicative confidence and competence are indeed two of the main concepts of this bilingual education model, which sees children in Spain being taught up to 50 percent of their school curriculum in a foreign language – mostly English.

Students and teachers report that both student motivation and language skills in the foreign language have rocketed skywards. Learning subjects like science, mathematics or physical education in English is simply “cool,” to stay with student speak. And researchers have pointed out that CLIL education has even led to increased cognitive abilities in learners.

“This is a social demand. There is a bottom-up force from parents and students: They demand better education. But at the

same time there is a top-down approach, with governments actually taking up this change very enthusiastically,” Dafouz said. “It’s a combination of the two drives. It’s taken off in many places, not only on the European continent. Spain is one of the leading countries, in terms of number of students and instates, in terms of dimension and pace. The rhythm is very rapid. But it’s taking off everywhere,” she added.

Qatar is one of those countries very quick on the uptake. To find out more about this interesting development, we travelled to the North of Spain, where we met another expert on the subject, Phil Ball, author of numerous books and CLIL learning materials. Ball spent six months in Qatar last year working with the Supreme Education Council on the implementation of the CLIL project in Qatar, which began in 2006. The Qatar Ministry’s CLIL project begins in primary school and then extends to preparatory and secondary. Teachers of mathematics and science at both independent and state schools are teaching in English.

“This is an ambitious project for several reasons,” Ball notes. “In the early days of CLIL-based philosophy, many were sceptical as to its application in the areas of the ‘prestige’ subjects, such as maths and science. Qatar has made a bold move in this respect, arguing that these two areas are crucial for the country’s future, a future that cannot be constructed through monolingualism.

Since Arabic is still central to the curriculum, Ball says it is not seen as being threatened by the introduction of English into these subject areas at these scholastic levels. With its large expatriate population, English operates in Qatar as a “lingua franca,” he notes, making its extended use and application in the learning context a natural one.

Ball says he found teachers in Qatar very willing to take on this new form of teaching through a foreign language, and made out some key differences to the Spanish CLIL project.

“I found the teachers [many of whom are expatriates from other Arab countries] very motivated, hard-working and responsible. They were being offered training from every conceivable angle, and in most cases were taking it up. The contrast with Spain, for example, was illuminating. The Qataris are investing in education, and pinning much of the future shape of their country on a version of functional multilingualism. Qataris use English for everyday transactions anyway, so why not fine-tune their ability to use it in the academic and professional context? This is a perfectly feasible ambition, and is not dissimilar to the thinking behind the application of CLIL to countries such as Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Austria – where English is also spoken widely but



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where it nevertheless needs to be refined in the academic sphere. In Spain, CLIL is more focused on increasing contact with the foreign language, and as such its curricular presence is conditioned by this factor.”

Since Qatar took up the CLIL project in 2006, it has been implemented with a great deal of care and is very much in line with the country’s innovative Education City university project, which aims to make Qatar a hub of educational excellence of

the future. But what does the future hold for CLIL in Qatar?

“Well, I would say that the future is now,” says Ball. “Other countries in the Middle East are looking at the Qatari project with plenty of interest. If it is seen to be working, then the others will follow suit – I mean in terms of scale. Other Gulf States are not unaware of CLIL, of course, but none of them has invested in the paradigm to the same extent as the Qataris. If the project succeeds – and I see no reason why it shouldn’t – then the previous taboo of mathematics in the L2 will have been broken and the Qatar project will have made a significant contribution to the propagation of CLIL as a workable paradigm.”

But all experts in the field agree that quick results should not be expected with regards to CLIL contexts. Ball stresses a word of caution that Qatar should not expect an immediate upturn in academic performance. He refers to successful examples like the Basque Country in Spain, where the rewards of its well-planned CLIL program stem from a long-term approach that included a rigorous, externally evaluated system that was modified to iron out early problems and growing pains. Qatar’s model seems to be on the right track.

“The developments at Education City, again an extraordinarily innovative project, seem to me to be working in parallel with the increase in CLIL-based school programmes,” he says. “By the time the graduates of the CLIL-based curriculum get to Education City, working in English will be second nature. Education City will both attract these people and then be further developed by them. It’s a coherent long-term policy.”

Back in Madrid, Dafouz has just finished another academic year in which she has taught and formed a group of CLIL teachers at the UCM in Madrid. Those future professionals come from countries as diverse as Spain, Brazil, Greece, Latvia or Syria, helping to send CLIL expertise around the world. In 10 years of CLIL-related work, one of the most profound personal experiences that Dafouz remembers is the actual contact with students, who take up CLIL with an incredible amount of enthusiasm: “Visiting CLIL schools across Spain and Europe and actually seeing what learners were accomplishing is highly memorable. Students are the living proof that CLIL works. There is the enormous enthusiasm with which CLIL is approached in the classrooms by everyone. This willingness to change. Students are delighted about it.”

Come to think of it, that slogan might just be spot on: “Yes, we want!” shout the youth. Even in the CLIL context, they are still learners of English after all.