

Comprehensive sexual education and English language teaching: an endeavour from southern Argentina

Abstract

Since the enforcement of Law 26,150 (Congreso de la Nación Argentina 2006) through which a national programme on comprehensive sexual education (CSE) was created, the Argentinian educational system must include perspectives, contents, and discursive practices around CSE across the curriculum in kindergarten, primary, secondary, and initial teacher education. English language teaching is not the exception. In this context, CSE is envisaged as a space for encounters among learners, adults, areas of knowledge, public policies, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions in a framework where human rights, gender diversity, respect, and the right to information from early education is central. In this account of classroom inquiry I describe how CSE has brought together educators and authorities to act accordingly to develop innovative teaching practices that respond to Law 26,150. I draw on notions of language-driven content and language integrated learning (CLIL) to describe the practices and initiatives implemented in one Argentinian province to support teachers' professional development and classroom practices. Implications from this experience could trigger similar practices in contexts where teachers may wish to include topics around gender in foreign language teaching.

Keywords: comprehensive sexual education; gender perspective; ELT; EFL; language education; CLIL

Introduction

The inclusion of comprehensive sexual education (CSE) in English language teaching is at an embryonic stage, and Argentina is not an exception. A cursory review of the literature shows examples how language teaching and comprehensive sexual education intersect (e.g., Evripidou 2018; Gray, 2013; Mojica and Castañeda-Peña 2017; Pakuła, Pawelczyk and Sunderland 2015). These publications concentrate on examining teaching materials and teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of sexuality and gender as relevant topics in English language teaching. Notwithstanding, there is a paucity of informed accounts which describe how such topics are delivered by language teachers in different settings.

As a response to this niche, the aim of this account sitting at the intersection of practice and inquiry (Dikilitaş and Bostancıoğlu 2019) is to describe two initiatives developed by the Ministry of Education in Chubut, a province in Argentina, to help teachers include CSE in English language teaching through language-driven CLIL (Content and language integrated learning). In the context of this article, English as a foreign language (EFL) is a mandatory subject taught in state schools in years 4-6 in primary education (80 minutes a week) and

throughout the six years of secondary education (120 minutes a week). Although this experience may be circumscribed to one specific secondary school, it may encourage teachers to explore gender-related issues through EFL.

Below I first detail how comprehensive sexual education is envisaged in Argentina. Second, I describe the language teaching approach implemented, which conflated critical pedagogy and language-driven CLIL. Last, I describe and reflect on two initiatives implemented with the Ministry of Education. Finally, implications for future research and practice are outlined.

Guiding framework

Comprehensive sexual education

By Law 26,150 (Congreso de la Nación Argentina 2006), the Argentinian educational system must include a comprehensive sexual education national programme based on a gender perspective across the curriculum. The programme aims are: (a) include CSE across the curriculum to promote the balanced, harmonious and ongoing development of people, (b) ensure the construction of pertinent, accurate and credible knowledge on the different aspects (e.g., gender identity, violence) of sexual education, (c) promote responsible attitudes towards sexuality, (d) prevent issues pertaining to health in general and sexual and reproductive health in particular, and (e) ensure equal treatment and opportunities for both women and men (Congreso de la Nación 2006).

Thus, the national Ministry of Education produced curriculum guidelines (Consejo Federal de Educación 2009) aligning comprehensive sexual education with a gender perspective. Inspired by the demand of human rights and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) movements, this perspective seeks to deconstruct the social relations on which human bodies are immersed. According to the curriculum guidelines, comprehensive sexual education is envisaged as a space for encounters among learners, adults, areas of knowledge, public policies, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions in a framework where human rights, respect, and the right to information from early education is central. In view of this, it is added that CSE is a systematic space to promote knowledge and skills to make critical and conscious decisions related to the care of one's own body, interpersonal relationships, good sexual practices, and human rights following the stages of infancy, adolescence, and adulthood. While the law and guidelines are more than ten years old, and there are specific modules in initial teacher education programmes, free online courses for teachers, or isolated accounts (e.g. Premat and Tortone 2018), its implementation has been unsystematic given these factors: (1) limited teacher preparation, (2) resistance from teachers, parents, and stakeholders who uphold religious principles, (3) ignorance of the law and official documents, and (4) disregard of the law at administrative and policy levels in formal education (Morgade and Fainsod 2015).

Language teaching

The Ministry of Education in Chubut and the EFL teachers agreed that they would teach comprehensive sexual education content in the EFL lesson following a language-oriented version of CLIL (described below) as this approach could articulate the presence of critical pedagogy to foster critical thinking skills and meaningful learning through transformative context-responsive topics. Akbari (2008) defines critical pedagogy as ‘an attitude to language teaching which relates the classroom context to the wider social context and aims at social transformation through education’ (278). Through critical pedagogy, language educators can (1) enact appropriate pedagogies (Kumaravadivelu 2001) and (2) promote the development of critical thinking skills in learners by including topics such as gender and identity that seek to promote social justice and empowerment. Along these lines, Pinter (2016) underlines that to support the development of advanced thinking skills in secondary school learners they can work with controversial topics while expressing their identity under construction.

CLIL may be defined as ‘an educational approach in which various language-supportive methodologies are used which lead to a dual-focused form of instruction where attention is given both to the language and the content.’ (Coyle, Hood and Marsh 2010: 3). For comprehensive CLIL implementation, Coyle et al. (2010) suggest understanding CLIL as a continuum of language- or subject-oriented practices, and describe the 4Cs Framework: content (subject matter), communication (language use), cognition (thinking skills), and culture (interculturality and global citizenship). The framework highlights the context-responsive symbiosis that exists between these elements in CLIL. Furthermore, the communication element could be explored through the language triptych, an image that captures the language *of* learning (e.g. subject-specific vocabulary), language *for* learning (e.g. language needed to carry out a task), and language *through* learning (unplanned new language as a result of learning).

In practice, CLIL has developed along a continuum which has to be context-embedded – in some cases being more language-oriented (led by language teachers) and in others more subject-oriented (led by subject teachers or both subject and language teachers) (Ball et al. 2015; Coyle et al. 2010). Aspects such as language skills integration, general academic and subject-specific lexis and grammar, cognitive skills development, authentic materials, and motivation are central to CLIL lesson planning and implementation (Coyle et al. 2010; Genesee and Hamayan, 2016; Díaz Pérez, Fields and Marsh 2018, Lasagabaster 2011; Morton 2016, Pinner 2013). In Argentina, language-driven CLIL is understood as a language teaching approach through which school curriculum topics such as comprehensive sexual education are learnt through English during English lessons. Hence, in this context it is referred to as language-driven CLIL since English language teachers pay attention to both the content and the language whilst prioritising English language progression. In the context described, CSE becomes a topic that is situated in teenagers’ lives and wider world and which could be approached through authentic materials such as videos or multimodal resources.

In the sections below, I describe the implementation of two initiatives to ensure CSE inclusion in secondary ELT in Chubut, Argentina. The first initiative is about EFL teachers’ lessons around CSE. The second action is about the creation of a bank which contains materials to promote CSE-based EFL lessons and teacher reflection.

Initiative 1: Lessons around CSE

Between 2017 and 2018 the ELT Office offered EFL secondary school teachers a professional development course with the aim of exploring CSE. The twelve teachers interested attended two workshops with me, in my capacity as a teacher educator and curriculum developer. The workshops focused on aspects of language-driven CLIL, CSE, lesson planning and materials development and became spaces for exploring teachers' beliefs and experiences with teenage learners.

The participating teachers had between five and 15 years of experience but only four of them had an ELT degree. The rest were either student-teachers from a local English language teacher education programme or had no formal training in either English or language education. The teachers expressed that in general teenage learners were demotivated in class because, despite efforts to follow a communicative language teaching approach as requested in the local curriculum. This had been written with no reference to gender perspectives. The teachers noted that their lessons tended to be form-focused, coursebook-driven and based on topics outside their context. Following the workshops, I worked with each teacher to develop language-driven CLIL lesson plans underpinned by the 4Cs Framework and the language triptych to be implemented through two phases: (1) peer teaching, and (2) each teacher individually. Each teacher was asked to keep a journal to record personal impressions and learners' voiced comments as the lessons unfolded.

To illustrate the overall experience, I describe the journey of Cristina, one of EFL teachers who participated in the course. Her experience may be understood as an account of classroom inquiry as a specific issue, the inclusion of CSE in EFL, was explored and reflected upon. Cristina holds an ELT degree from an Argentinian university and has taught in secondary schools for 15 years. As part of the initiative, she taught lessons in 2017 and 2018 with groups of learners between 15 and 16 years of age and with an A2 level according to CEFR language proficiency bands.

In 2017, Cristina developed four lessons around sex, gender and identity which she and I delivered through peer-teaching. I describe the lessons establishing links with the 4Cs Framework and the language triptych (Coyle et al. 2010). The lessons aimed to develop learners' higher order thinking skills (cognition) such as evaluating, and communicative skills, particularly through reading, speaking and listening. While teaching key concepts around sex, gender and identity (content and culture), Cristina also introduced subject-specific terminology (language of learning), use of modals (should/shouldn't), present perfect, and the function of expressing opinions (language for learning) in line with the EFL curriculum. The lessons were implemented for a month with one group of learners and then replicated with seven other groups with similar characteristics in an initial drive to legitimise CLIL as a means of addressing CSE in an additional language.

In lessons 1 and 2, Cristina introduced sex, gender and identity by placing learners in pairs to ask each other about where and when they were born and whether they remembered pictures of them and what they would wear as children according to the photographs. Drawing

on learners' prior experiences, we introduced the difference between gender and sex, aided by a PowerPoint presentation, graphic organisers, and a YouTube video¹. Then, a text was provided to add content input. The video and the text were accompanied and followed up by activities which helped learners understand and discuss social issues (content and culture), raise awareness of subject-specific terminology (language of learning) and specific language structures (e.g., modals) to complete the activities (language for learning) and develop speaking, listening, and reading skills together with higher-order thinking skills (Figure 1).

8. Read these sentences. Which ones do you agree with? Write A.

- a. Men shouldn't clean a house. They don't know anything about a house.
- b. Women should marry and have kids.
- c. Girls should study whatever they like.
- d. Only men should vote.
- e. Men and women should have the same salary and opportunities.
- f. Men should work more to keep a family.
- g. Boys shouldn't be interested in ballet dancing.

9. Look at the sentences above.

- a. What follows *should/shouldn't*?
- b. What's the negative form of *should*?
- c. When do we use *should*?
- d. When do we use *shouldn't*?

10. Think about gender equality. Complete these sentences.

- a. People should respect...
- b. We shouldn't judge...
- c. Boys shouldn't...
- d. Girls should...

Figure 1. Exercises on gender stereotypes.

In lessons 3 and 4, Cristina discussed identity from a gender perspective. Following a find-someone-who activity, the learners reflected that no matter gender or sex, everyone is entitled to construct their own identities without the need to receive others' approval as long as they respect others' rights (culture for global citizenship). The lessons included the use of graphic organisers, substitution tables (e.g. Figure 2), activities based on guided discovery, and sample biographies for learners to write local athletes' biographies whose lives challenge heteronormative identities. The lessons also contained discussion-based activities to encourage content learning through participation and communication using Spanish and English. These activities triggered language through learning as the learners asked for words and expressions to refer to social inequalities (e.g. 'paradox') or dominant views (e.g. 'This is so patriarchal').

| PERSON | AUX | VERB (past participle) | ... |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|---|--|
| I You We My friends | have haven't | seen laughed at defended protected felt | ...happy with my identity. ...people's gender rights. ...people being discriminated. ...emotional boys. ...my friends's values. ...people's interests. |
| Jonas Paula The government | has hasn't | | |

Figure 2. Substitution table on present perfect and identity.

At the end of this experience of classroom inquiry, Cristina and I reflected with the learners on the outcomes of the experience. Drawing on the teacher reflective journals, Table 1 summarises our reflections and Cristina's journal in which she had recorded the learners' and her own perceptions and assessment.

| | Benefits | Challenges |
|-----------------|--|---|
| Learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning more about sex, gender, and identity. • Opportunities for developing listening and speaking skills. • Using grammar meaningfully. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of vocabulary. • Talk about personal issues in class. |
| Teachers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching topics meaningful to learners and connected to wider social issues. • Professional development and reflective practice through the implementation of language-driven CLIL for CSE. • A chance to be systematic with language awareness, and language and cognitive skills development. • An opportunity to reinvigorate teaching and explore new territories in terms of topics and teaching strategies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching without a coursebook. • Selecting suitable materials to match the learners' level of English and maturity. • Ensuring that there were opportunities for both learning new language and revising prior knowledge. |

Table 1. Reflections based on the experience.

Cristina felt motivated by the outcomes of the 2017 experience, and therefore she planned to explore CLIL and CSE with a new group of A2-level learners. Cristina included a gender perspective throughout the syllabus in 2018. In the months of September and October, her aim was to help learners develop reading and listening skills before asking them to deliver presentations on gender-related issues they could choose. Once again we worked together

and my role was to help her collect input material such as videos or articles for the learners to work on. The learners formed groups and each group chose one of these topics:

- What is heteronormativity?
- LGBT rights in Argentina.
- Colours and gender
- What is “Ni Una Menos”?
- Abortion.
- Same-sex parenting around the world.
- What is the #metoo campaign?
- Women must be mothers, do you agree?

In each class we concentrated on one or two learning strategies (e.g. note taking) which each group practised with the material provided according to their selected topic. The topics had not been addressed before in the learners’ school trajectories and the original content provided a meaningful context through which they could also develop their English. At the end of the month, each group made a presentation in class and the posters they designed were shared on the school corridors to raise awareness on these topics with the whole school community. After the presentations, the learners expressed benefits and challenges as mentioned in Table 1, but this group highlighted their satisfaction to work with authentic materials and thought-provoking topics which boosted their motivation to learn English. For example, one learner commented (as recorded in my diary):

It was hard because the texts were real, but it was so cool to work with reality in the English class! I can’t believe we managed to give a presentation on violence against women in English. (Extract 1)

Similarly, Cristina explained that she felt invigorated as the processes and products which emerged from the undertaking showed her that learners’ voices need to be heard more and that CSE topics must a stronger presence across the curriculum and that includes ELT. In her journal, Cristina wrote:

When we explained the idea, most of them spontaneously said this was probably the first time they were going to use English with a real and relevant purpose. Some celebrated that English as a subject was not about the lives of the rich and famous but about burning social issues in the country. I was happy to see how enthusiastic they were about topics that they said didn’t know much about. (Extract 2)

Nevertheless, she admitted that these lessons were a challenge to her religious beliefs and time management.

Initiative 2: Bank of CSE materials

At the request of the Ministry of Education in Chubut, in 2018 the ELT Office started to develop an online bank of materials for teachers for the inclusion of CSE-based lessons. The bank contains:

- Activities
- Language-driven CLIL lesson plans
- Readings and companion reading guides.

The activities included in the bank are targeted at teenage learners with A1, A2, and B1 levels (CEFR) and offer support to develop specific grammatical (e.g. passive voice), functional (e.g. describing), lexis (e.g. clothes, adjectives and adverbs), and language skills aspects as illustrated in Cristina's lessons while learning about CSE. The activities have been adapted (e.g. simplification or expansion by adding examples or definitions) in terms of content and linguistic demand according to learners' English language level. The activities may include hyperlinks to online resources such as photographs, blogs, newspaper articles, or YouTube videos. While the procedures do not differ from activities in mainstream coursebooks (e.g. matching, gap filling, answering questions, true/false statements, rearranging paragraphs), their originality in our context lies in the fact that input material and activities help learners construct new knowledge about CSE and develop their English simultaneously.

With regard to the language-driven CLIL lesson plans, they are authored by teachers, teacher educators, and student-teachers in Chubut. The lessons respond to the 4Cs framework and language triptych (Coyle et al. 2010). They include activities which promote language of/for/through learning, thinking skills, and the learning of CSE for raising intercultural and global citizenship awareness linked to diversity, inclusion, and social justice. For example, one lesson plan submitted by a group of student-teachers is about gender violence and is based on input from a newspaper article online on recent cases of gender violence in Argentina and government plans to reduce femicides. The aim of the lesson plan is to foster understanding of gender violence (content), and this topic serves to present specific terminology (e.g. femicide) and revise modal verbs and opinion adjectives (communication) to develop informed opinions (cognition) to reflect on social issues related to diversity and global and inclusive citizenship (culture).

With the aim of promoting autonomous professional development, the bank includes books (e.g. Bargalló and Lavari 2015; Pakuła, Pawelczyk and Sunderland 2015) and articles (e.g. Ariyanto 2018; Benavides 2017; Evripidou 2018) which examine the intersection between comprehensive sexual education and (language) education in countries such as Indonesia or Colombia and share with Argentina the need to train teachers in CSE. The companion reading guides have been developed in Spanish and aim at helping teachers develop awareness of CSE and transfer reflections, activities, experiences and findings from other contexts to their own settings. For example, the guide on Pakuła et al. (2015), a book set in Poland, invites teachers

to compare teaching practices in that country with the reality in Chubut. In addition, teachers are invited to think about how they would design activities aimed at raising learners' awareness on gender issues. Through the use of graphic organisers, teachers are invited to record new terms, beliefs, and ideas that may transform their professional practices.

Based on emails and informal contact with colleagues, the lesson plans are considered helpful by other teachers. They provide doable and situated units of work which teachers can use and adapt for developing their own lessons. A fewer number of teachers have reported reading the books and companion guides included in the bank. They found that the guides support reflection, comparisons with Argentina, and creativity to engage in transformative teaching practices. Those who have not used the bank explain that lack of time and workload are obstacles for teachers' self-directed professional development.

Conclusion

The need to incorporate topics related to gender in the EFL curriculum may be pertinent to Argentina in order to comply with a specific law. However, the opportunity of addressing topics which are rarely featured in general English coursebooks may also find fertile ground in other educational contexts (Pakuła et al. 2015) to promote social justice, respect, inclusion, diversity and citizenship education cemented on critical thinking skills. Other EFL settings may explore a similar line through the implementation of a language-driven CLIL approach and context-responsive pedagogies to include comprehensive sexual education in English.

Drawing on wider experiences on gender and sexuality in language education (Ariyanto 2018; Evripidou 2018; Pakuła et al. 2015) and this account of classroom inquiry, implications could be raised at practical and theoretical levels. At a practical level, teacher education and institutional support (Author et al. 2019) are vital given the sensitivity and ethical issues (e.g. respecting learners' privacy or religious beliefs) that the topics may generate among teachers, learners, and parents. In contexts where CLIL pedagogy is not discussed in teacher education, teachers need preparation in CLIL conceptualisations, lesson planning, and materials development in relation to comprehensive sexual education. In particular, language teachers may need to pay attention to lessons and task design so that CSE concepts are analysed in terms of content, CSE discourse, and cognitive discourse functions to promote learners' higher-order thinking. In so doing, CLIL principles may become stronger, and teachers may feel confident to navigate the CLIL continuum.

At a theoretical level, understanding of English language teaching and learning and sexual education may be strengthened through empirical studies and conceptual articles that explore affective factors, English language proficiency, identity, and language teaching pedagogies (Author et al 2019; Evripidou 2018). Furthermore, future research may explore how CSE and general pedagogical theories and practices trigger the deconstruction of social subjects and their educational beliefs, norms, and practices across levels of education.

We need more accounts of classroom inquiry led by practitioners who promote innovative practices to understand how comprehensive sexual education and language

education interact across a range of different contexts. Although there is an understanding of how CSE is incorporated through CLIL in specific contexts, contributions from more settings are needed to expand our knowledge of praxis for teacher education.

Note

1. Teaching materials, including the YouTube video, can be found at https://drive.google.com/open?id=1OMOEftMKqt0xTLmRzb29jrG8_uVIEA8F

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