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CLIL and Critical Thinking Through Literature: Activities on Poems about Argentina's Military Dictatorship

AICLE y pensamiento crítico a través de la literatura: actividades con poemas sobre la dictadura militar argentina

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ABSTRACT. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a relatively novel approach to L2 learning. Designed under this approach, this paper proposes a set of three activities that seek to foster secondary level students' critical thinking, creativity, and intrapersonal skills. English language learning is integrated with the specific subjects of Literature, by analyzing and creating poetry, and History, discussing poems by Marcelo Gelman, Osvaldo Balbi, and Joaquín Enrique Areta, who were victims of the final Argentina's military dictatorship (1976–1983).

Keywords: Argentina's military dictatorship; CLIL; critical thinking; literature; poems.

RESUMEN. El Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (AICLE) es un enfoque relativamente novedoso para el aprendizaje de L2. Diseñado bajo este enfoque, este artículo propone un conjunto de tres actividades que buscan fomentar el pensamiento crítico, la creatividad y las habilidades intrapersonales de estudiantes de nivel secundario. El aprendizaje del idioma inglés se integra con las materias específicas de Literatura, analizando y creando poesía, así como de Historia, discutiendo poemas de diferentes autores víctimas de la última dictadura militar argentina (1976–1983).

Palabras clave: Dictadura militar en Argentina; AICLE; pensamiento crítico; literatura; poemas.

Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an approach that offers learners the possibility to use their cognitive skills in a meaningful way and for communicative purposes by learning school content and an additional language at the same time. CLIL is often underpinned by the 4Cs Framework: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (Coyle, 2007).

Literature is a powerful subject that can contribute to CLIL's success, as it can reconcile each parameter of the 4Cs Framework. By teaching learners to analyze and evaluate literary works appropriate to their age and interests, teachers can help them to develop their critical thinking in such a way that they can enhance their language proficiency. Through literary texts, students are exposed to authentic contexts in a meaningful way. According to Saleh and Tausiff (2015), the ability of literature to engage a learner affectively, cognitively, linguistically and socially can make it the most appropriate didactic resource for language learning and critical thinking.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a set of activities around a literary work related to Argentina's final military dictatorship (1976–1983) and to promote critical thinking among teenage school students with a B1/B2 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference. The language skills linked to this topic will be reading and writing poems, as well as the modal verb “would” to express imaginary events.

This article will be organized as follows: In the first part, we will summarize the benefits of developing critical thinking through the integration of subjects such as Literature and History at secondary school; in the second section, we will describe activities to promote students' critical thinking around the context of the human rights violation during the last dictatorship in Argentina.

Conceptual Framework

Several approaches in recent decades sought to combine competence in both subject content and L2 teaching. These approaches follow constructivist theories of meaningful input, which in turn help with cognition. Among cognitive abilities, critical thinking is considered one of the most important skills for the 21st Century. Esplugas and Landwehr (1996) state that “critical thinking involves not only discovering meaning in a work but also substantiating an interpretation by carefully reading and weighing all the ‘evidence’ in the text, by logically analysing that evidence, and by drawing well-reasoned conclusions from the material” (p. 449). Furthermore, they highlight that these skills can be applied in other areas of life, such as evaluating multiple viewpoints, flexible reasoning, and developing tolerance towards other perspectives.

One such approach is CLIL, often viewed as “a general ‘umbrella’ term to refer to diverse methodologies which lead to dual focused education where attention is given to both topic and language of instruction” (Kovács, 2015, pp. 48–49). This two-fold approach promotes learning, along with students’ engagement in the academic subject. According to Wolff (2003),

the content the CLIL classroom provides for the learner is more significant than the content of the traditional classroom, it is more motivating and more involving, and they process it more attentively... comprehension processes become more active; deep instead of shallow processing takes place. Thus, content and language learning become more intensive and successful than in ordinary classrooms. (p. 11)

Different cognitive skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating, also referred to as “HOTS” (higher-order thinking skills), are essential to work on the events that occurred during Argentina’s military dictatorship (1976–1983), where people were victims of violation of human rights. As stated by Huitt (1998), by applying those cognitive skills, learners will improve in areas such as assessing, justifying, and developing their beliefs. On the other hand, a stimulating learning environment by integrating other subjects such as Literature within the CLIL context is indispensable. Thus, we will be enabling an emotional

state of learners by reading real experiences expressed in poems, interpreting them, and writing their own.

The benefits of developing critical thinking through literature

Literature involves a wide range of critical thinking skills. Students have to recall, retrieve information, and reflect to construct meaning. We intend to develop a set of activities around poems written by people who were victims of human rights violations during the 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina. Students will express themselves and share their opinions while interpreting and writing poems. The unconventional language or unusual treatment of a topic in poems makes them interesting, and surprise is a catalyst to understand deep meanings, as stated by Halonen (1995, p. 112). Moreover, in discussing poems, students train their problem-solving skills, which are essential for critical thinking. McGovern and Hogshead (1990) postulate that this promotes learning, fostering analytic and creative thinking.

On this basis, we address a difficult period in Argentina’s history — the civic-military-ecclesiastical-business dictatorship, an issue mostly studied in Social Studies lessons. By developing materials and activities that encompass this topic as well as literature analysis and creative writing in L2, we pursue a comprehensive and contextualized approach to English learning.

Activities

Activity 1: Jamboard – Poems written during Argentina’s military dictatorship

In this activity, students will read some poems written by people who suffered violations of human rights during Argentina’s military dictatorship. Students will develop their critical thinking skills through Literature by expressing emotions and perceptions after reading the poems.

Aim(s): To develop critical thinking by reflecting and discussing poems written during Argentina’s military dictatorship and foster collaborative work.

Target learners: B1–B2 students, aged 15–17.

Language focus: Adjectives related to emotions.

Skills in focus: Reading and writing.

Materials needed: Copies of the poems and a computer with internet access.

Estimated time: 20 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Put students into groups of 4–5 students.
2. Give each group a copy of one of the following poems: “Farewell,” by Marcelo Gelman, “Those customs,” by Osvaldo Balbi, and “I would like to be remembered,” by Joaquín Enrique Areta, all of which have been translated from their original Spanish version.

Farewell

Marcelo Gelman (1956–1976)

*I say goodbye to this country.
I say goodbye to my friends,
To my enemies.
Friends.
I just want to remind you
don't stop being
my friends.
I just want to remind you
don't forget me
to the march of time,
to the train ride
in which I go
that erase the traces of
distant friendship.*

Those Customs

Osvaldo Balbi (1943–1978)

*Untwist the kites from the cables
walk the uneven sidewalks
screw the cat's meow to the silence of the
night*

live a sunrise as many times as sunrises enter
in one story
bare hate and love
hate the dark colour of churches
and stick out your tongue at God
for being the first gullible
that swallowed up the paradise story.

I Would Like to Be Remembered

Joaquín Enrique Areta (1955–1978)

I would like to be remembered
without crying or lamenting.
I would like to be remembered
for having made paths
for having set a course
because I touched your soul
because you felt loved
protected and helped
because I never left you alone
because I interpreted your cravings
Because I channelled your love.
I would like to be remembered
along with the laughter of the happy
the safety of the righteous
the suffering of the humble.
I would like to be remembered
with mercy for my mistakes
with understanding for my weaknesses
with love for my virtues.
If not, I prefer oblivion
which will be the harshest punishment
for not fulfilling my duty as a man.

3. Ask students to focus on the emotions that the poem transmits and ask them to imagine the moment when the author wrote the poem and why the author wrote it.
4. Create an account on Jamboard and invite students to join in.

5. Have each group write a list of their perceptions related to the emotions the poem transmits. Then, ask them to write another list of possible reasons why the author wrote the poem. Next, have each group post their contribution on Jamboard.

Feedback: Students read their perceptions and their classmates share their opinions and perceptions.

Anticipated problems: Connectivity issues.

Alternatives: In case of connectivity issues, students can display their list of perceptions on a poster.

Activity 2: Creative writing

In this activity, students will learn to extend the ideas they read in the poem in their own creative ways. Students have the possibility to develop their critical thinking by interpreting the writings by themselves and, therefore, they can be active participants in the learning process.

Aim(s): To develop students' critical thinking by analyzing the three poems and giving their own opinions and foster their creative skill by writing a new part for the poems with students' own ideas and beliefs.

Target learners: Students aged 15–17, with a B1–B2 level.

Language focus: Vocabulary related to emotions – Modal verb *would*.

Skill focus: Writing.

Materials needed: Copies of poems written by victims of the 1976–1983 dictatorship. Computer with internet access.

Estimated time: 30 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Students work in groups of 4–5 members. Give them a copy of the poems: “Farewell,” “Those Customs,” and “I Would Like to Be Remembered.” Each group chooses one poem to work with.
2. Students read the poems and discuss what would happen after the event or events described in the chosen poem.
3. Students write a new ending for the poem chosen by using vocabulary related to emotions and the modal *would*.

4. Teacher suggests modifications, if needed. The group re-drafts the poem to share with their partners.
5. Students write their final version on Padlet.

Feedback: The teacher evaluates students according to their pre-disposition towards the activity, the interaction between peers, and how they express themselves individually.

Anticipated problems: Connectivity issues.

Alternatives: The group can make a presentation to the whole class, and then this poster can be displayed in the classroom as decoration. The teacher can also write a list of possible new vocabulary/ words to use in the writing.

Activity 3: Remember

This task engages learners on a deep emotional and cognitive level while promoting motivation through authentic use of the target language. Thus, production involves complex mental activities, and a more profound self-awareness.

Aim(s): To develop intrapersonal skills by reflecting on their personal emotions and objectives. To enjoy literature and practice creative writing.

Target learners: Students aged 15–17, with a B1–B2 level.

Language focus: Modal verb “would.”

Skills in focus: Reading and writing.

Materials needed: Copies of the poem “I would like to be remembered” by Joaquín Enrique Areta.

Estimated time: 30 minutes.

Procedure:

1. Ask students what personal characteristics they cherish most on others. Write their suggestions on the board.
2. Give each student a copy of the poem and tell them the author was kidnapped and killed during the 1976–1983 dictatorship in Argentina.
3. Ask them to sit at a comfortable spot to read the poem and reflect on its content. Ask them questions such as “What personal trait is the author most proud of? When did he feel

accomplished? What deeds or nice gestures did he perform? What were the weak aspects he perceived in himself?”

4. Once they finish, tell them to think about their own characteristics, and what memories others would have of them. Using the poem “I would like to be remembered” by Joaquín Enrique Areta as a model, ask them to write a poem expressing how they would like to be remembered.

Feedback: Students can read their poems, and their peers can give them feedback. If students feel too exposed, they can give them to their teacher for assessment.

Anticipated problems: If students are unable to concentrate in a crowded classroom, they can find a quiet place outside, such as a playground.

Alternatives:

- Students can write their poems on posters and share them with the rest of the school.
- Poems can also be posted online on the school’s social media page.
- Students can continue working on their poems in other subjects. For instance, illustrating it in Art, or finding and playing a song which complements the poems in Music.
- Students can put away their poems, to be opened in 10 years’ time (or another date), as a “time capsule.”

Conclusion

The objective of this article was to promote critical thinking among teenage students while engaging them emotionally in a meaningful setting. Therefore, we proposed activities consisting of reading poems related to Argentina’s last military dictatorship (1976–1983), combining CLIL and critical thinking through literature. Through this integration of subjects, teachers may foster their learners’ cognitive skills by revising an event that strongly influenced history and, in this specific case, Argentina's history. Moreover, students can reflect on their own experiences, revising or incorporating new lexis in order to express their ideas creatively.

To conclude, this can be a meaningful set of activities for teachers in Argentina and perhaps elsewhere to implement in their classrooms. The integration of English and literature around compelling topics and poems can provide learners with authentic materials to improve L2, while reflecting critically on emotional, linguistic and political dimensions.

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