

Bilingual Education in the Media: Addressing the Controversy in Madrid

La educación bilingüe en los medios de comunicación: Abordando la controversia en Madrid

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Abstract

This article provides an up-to-date account of the evolution of Content and Language Integrated Learning under the so-called Madrid Bilingual Program (MBP), which serves as an illustrative case of the large-scale implementation of this approach in the compulsory school system. Since its initial introduction in 2004, the gradual expansion of this program across the network of public schools in the region has shifted from a predominantly celebratory tone to harsh critique, as portrayed in different media articles. Clickbait headlines have stirred public opinion, portraying a complex educational scenario where views appear to be polarized across different political and educational sectors. This paper addresses the areas of contention in the MBP to date through the selection of 10 media articles that include viewpoints by different organizations, including trade unions, platforms of collective action and stakeholders (local authorities, school administrators, teachers, parents, researchers), which were documented on four levels: (1) linguistic - i.e., the choice of English as a medium of instruction and expectations of language proficiency; (2) social - i.e., equity/inequity issues affecting schools and students; (3) pedagogical - i.e., subject learning and academic performance; and (4) professional - i.e., teacher training and language assistants' qualifications. This information is then juxtaposed with the

investigations in the region which have addressed these same issues. This leads to a discussion of the possibilities and challenges - present and future - faced by this program in the region, as well as the outline of some considerations for the sustainability of CLIL implementation.

Keywords: CLIL, bilingual education, media, controversies, headlines.

Resumen

El presente artículo proporciona una visión actualizada de la evolución del Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (AICLE; del inglés Content and Language Integrated Learning) bajo el llamado Programa Bilingüe de Madrid, que sirve como caso ilustrativo de la implementación a gran escala de este enfoque en la enseñanza obligatoria. Desde su implantación inicial en 2004, la gradual expansión del Programa Bilingüe de Madrid en la red de centros públicos de la región ha evolucionado desde un tono predominantemente celebratorio a ser objeto de duras críticas, las cuales han sido reflejadas en diferentes artículos de prensa. Titulares de clickbait han agitado a la opinión pública, retratando un escenario educativo complejo en el cual los puntos de vista parecen polarizados en diferentes sectores políticos y educativos. Este trabajo aborda las áreas de controversia del Programa Bilingüe de Madrid hasta la fecha mediante la selección de 10 artículos de prensa que incluyen los puntos de vista de diferentes organizaciones, incluyendo sindicatos, plataformas de acción colectiva y partes interesadas (autoridades locales, administraciones escolares, profesores, padres, investigadores), documentados en cuatro niveles: (1) lingüístico - elección del inglés como vehículo de enseñanza y expectativas de competencia lingüística; (2) social - cuestiones de equidad/inequidad que afectan a centros y estudiantes; (3) pedagógico - aprendizaje de contenido y rendimiento académico; y (4) profesional - formación del profesorado y cualificación de los auxiliares de conversación. Esta información se yuxtapone con investigaciones llevadas a cabo sobre estas mismas cuestiones. Esto conduce a un análisis sobre las posibilidades y los desafíos - presentes y futuros - a los que se enfrenta este programa en la región, así como una mirada sobre algunas consideraciones para la sostenibilidad en la implementación de AICLE.

Palabras clave: AICLE, educación bilingüe, medios de comunicación, controversias, titulares.

Introduction

The turn of the 21st century brought a heightened interest - and investment - in language teaching and learning. Adding to the establishment of multilingualism as an iconic sign (Gal, 2012, p. 34), national

and supranational institutions (e.g. European Union) embraced the consolidation of the knowledge-based economy, which brought with it the understanding that multilingualism - or, in the European context, plurilingualism - necessarily “requires mastery of academic registers and genres” (Codó, 2023, p. 5) essential for EU citizens to compete in the global job market. It is in this scenario that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has spread quickly across Europe’s nation states, becoming “normalized as a mainstream part of European school curricula” (Hüttner & Smit, 2023, p. 125). A particular case in point is the so-called Madrid Bilingual Program (MBP) of the Autonomous Community of Madrid (CAM). CLIL was chosen as the educational approach for teaching non-language subjects *through* a foreign language - English - alongside Spanish. This approach was soon conceptualized as a move forward/beyond the displeasure with the results of traditional foreign language classrooms in order to align with bi/multilingual European policies that seek “not only to promote language learning but also to secure and strengthen language rights, deepen mutual understanding, consolidate democratic citizenship and contribute to social cohesion” (Council of Europe, n.d.).

The introduction of the MBP in 2004 at the primary school level and, some years later, in 2010, in secondary schools, soon received attention from the research community, which was quick to point out the affective gains of all stakeholders involved, and the improvements in foreign language competence (Llinares & Dafouz, 2010). An initial craze for this program was heightened by the local authorities through the use of slogans such as “Madrid, a bilingual community”, and by means of presenting it as the “hallmark” of Madrid’s public schools, the reasons being twofold: on the one hand, the MBP has been said to “raise the overall calibre of education”; on the other, it has been endorsed as a guarantee of equity and equal opportunity in public schooling (Comunidad de Madrid, 2017, p. 46).

In the span of almost twenty years, the number of public schools adhering to the MBP has increased from 26 primary schools in 2004 and 30 secondary schools in 2010 to 404 primary and 196 secondary schools in 2023 (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.e.). This “bilingual boom” (Relaño Pastor, 2015, p. 132) has been received with enthusiasm by some and with skepticism by others, sparking a heated debate on the precepts guiding the conceptualization and implementation of this program, as well as the effectiveness of CLIL, its signature feature. Different trade unions, platforms of collective action and organizations have manifested

disconformity with the program's trajectory, leading to the publication of a number of reports critical of the MBP, as well as campaigns. One example is the demonstration held at the entrance of the Ministry of Education organized by the trade union CC OO, the workers association CGT, STEM International, the state platform Escuela Pública de todas y todos, and different associations (e.g. Acción Educativa and Confapa) with the motto "Paremos el bilingüismo" [Let's stop bilingualism] in November 2021.

These biting critiques have been echoed in the media. Attention-grabbing headlines such as "Bilingüismo 'Fake'" [Fake bilingualism], "Ni Bilingüismo ni Enseñanza" [Neither bilingualism nor teaching], "El timo de la enseñanza bilingüe" [The scam of bilingual education], "Las sombras del bilingüismo" [The shadows of bilingualism], "Bilingüismo: ni se aprende inglés ni se aprende Science" [Bilingualism: neither English nor Science is learned] have generated clickbait content, agitating public beliefs within and beyond the educational sphere. In addition, the fact that the MBP has not been evaluated¹ by experts in the field of education since its inception has been pointed out as an important caveat, raising suspicion as to the potential deficits being concealed by the administration. Different press articles have included opinions on the shortcomings of the MBP as well as views that point to a relentless promotion and exaggeration (to some, even bragging) of its results.

The attention drawn to digital media in the present paper - mainly online regional and state newspapers - is informed by our awareness of the wide influence that online news has on public opinion. For this reason, a selection of 10 newspaper articles was carried out, which correspond to 6 state newspapers across the political spectrum: *La Razón* (1), *El Mundo* (1), *El País* (4), *El Salto Diario* (2), *Cuartopoder* (1) and *El Diario.es* (1). This selection was carried out by searching for key words in Spanish, including "bilingüismo", "bilingüe", "programa bilingüe", "colegios bilingües". We included articles on Spanish/English bilingual education at the national level, especially articles which included Madrid, as well as those which focused specifically on this

¹ One exception is the Shepherd and Ainsworth's (2017) English Impact report, carried out by the British Council in collaboration with Madrid's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, and in consultation with experts from the Australian Council for Research in Education and the University of Bath. This study compared students' motivation and English levels between bilingual and non-bilingual schools. Another study is that of Anghel, Cabrales and Carro (2016) for the Fundación de Estudios de Economía Aplicada (FEDEA), which compared the so-called "Essential Knowledge and Skills" (in Spanish *Conocimientos y Destrezas Indispensables*) at the end of primary, although this study was carried out by economists.

region. By analyzing the viewpoints portrayed in digital media of different organizations and stakeholders - including policy makers, school administrators, teachers, parents and researchers -, we intend to shed light on four dimensions of discord that affect the implementation of the MBP: linguistic, social, pedagogical and professional, in line with those identified by Pérez Cañado (2016). This information is juxtaposed with research carried out on CLIL in the Madrid region, ranging from in-depth studies of stakeholders' perspectives and investigations of classroom practices to more 'critical' examinations of CLIL that draw on linguistic policy and wider social, political and ideological processes. The ultimate aim is to document the controversies affecting the MBP to date in terms of public opinion and research findings on the same issues.

The Linguistic Controversy: The Choice of English and Expectations of Language Proficiency

One major controversy associated with the MBP is the choice of English as a medium of instruction of CLIL subjects. Presently, this is the case for all schools, with the exception of 23 secondary schools that offer bilingual education in French (17) and in German (6). Xavier Gisbert, spokesperson of Enseñanza Bilingüe, an association of educational professionals that advocates for bilingual education in Spain, supports the use of English as the language of instruction in the MBP. This opinion appears in an article written by Ferrero and Peinado for *El País* in 2021. Gisbert, who helped design this program during his former role as managing director of educational improvement for the Popular Party (PP)² in Madrid, argues that we live in a globalized world where English is basic for everything (Ferrero & Peinado, 2021). Additionally, Shepherd and Ainsworth (2017) maintain that the region is a “long-standing” and “well-known example” of how government policies have prioritized “the improvement of English proficiency”, which nowadays is indispensable for “economic prosperity” (p. 8).

² The implementation of the MBP in 2004 was carried out by the local administration, at the time governed by the so-called Popular Party, a conservative political party.

On the critical end, educational sectors and left-wing political movements as well as associations that bring together professionals in education have disagreed with the MBP's oversight of other languages - foreign, regional and minority - in favor of English. One example is a report carried out by the United Left political party (in Spanish, *Izquierda Unida*). The main points of the report were summarized by columnists Díez, García Martín and Moreno in 2017 for *Cuartopoder*, a digital communication medium dedicated mainly to opinion and analysis. One of the points in the report states that the term "bilingualism" is misleading because it refers to the languages of the north, mainly English. A different type of education is advocated for, one that moves away from a so-called "colonial mentality" which presents English as a super language to be acquired by all societies. Along these lines, José Carlos Tobalina, a member of the platform Acción Educativa, an association that brings together professionals from different education sectors, maintains that the European Union warns against the hegemony of English, adding that it should not be forgotten that in Madrid many people are coming from different places and with their own languages. These opinions are gathered in an article by Babiker for *El Salto*, a current affairs newspaper, in 2021.

Also critical of the dominant role of English in Madrid's bilingual schools is the research team MIRCo, based at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. For over two decades, MIRCo has been conducting sociolinguistic and ethnographic research on language education programs in different school areas of the region. One noteworthy study is that of Relaño Pastor (2015), whose investigation on language choice at a bilingual secondary school located in a multicultural area of Madrid provides a sociopolitical and historical context of bilingual education in the CAM. The author maintains that the reason to establish English as the main foreign language to learn is to provide social prestige to bilingual schools, given its status as a *lingua franca*. She adds that among the tensions surrounding the local administration's institutional and economic support to bilingual schools is the fact that it shifts attention away from linguistic diversity in Madrid schools as Spanish/English bilingual education continues "to gain social prestige and admiration among the school community" (Relaño Pastor, 2015, p. 133). Similarly, Martín Rojo's (2013) study of the role played by linguistic practices in the implementation of language education programmes brings forward the argument that the "bilingual evolution" of the region "has not benefited the languages of immigrants, or the other languages used in Spain, but rather has strengthened the

position of English, a language from another EU nation-state, and one that is already highly valued” (p. 122). According to the data published by the Regional Government, in the academic year 2021-22, 145.457 students of foreign origin enrolled in general education in the region, where the highest percentage corresponded to students from Romania (18.2%) and Morocco (13.4%), followed by countries such as Venezuela (6.9%) and China (6.7%), among others (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.e.).

Adding to the dispute regarding the choice of English as a medium of instruction is a perceived lack of clarity regarding expectations of foreign language proficiency for students attending the MBP. Presently, students attending this program are expected to reach an A2/B1 level of proficiency, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), upon completing primary education (11-12 years), and a B1/B2 level at the end of secondary education (15-16 years) (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.d.). On the critical side are views that question the extent to which students gain proficiency in the target language. For instance, Javier Marías, an acclaimed Spanish writer, states in a column for the *El País* weekly newsletter in 2015 titled “Ni bilingüe ni enseñanza” [Neither bilingualism nor teaching] that, because teachers are non-native speakers of English, they ignore the correct pronunciation of numerous words and their syntax and grammar tend to be a mere copy of Spanish. The result, adds Marías, is a “total disaster”. However, supporters of the program argue that Madrid is at the forefront of English language learning thanks to the MBP, considered to be one of the most successful projects of the Madrid Education system, as detailed by Ruiz in 2023 for *La Razón*. In an article for *El Mundo*, de Vega (n.d.) presents a more balanced picture, contending that children know more English than previous generations, although the columnist argues that some parents - particularly those from affluent backgrounds - are dissatisfied with their pronunciation.

To shed some light on this issue, *El País* published an article by Torres Menárguez in 2021 that includes the views of different stakeholders - administrators and teachers - in order to “discuss the pros and cons of a system that many feel has failed to provide the desired skills”. In addition, the opinions of David Marsh and María Luisa Pérez Cañado, two renowned CLIL experts, are included. For Marsh, parents tend to hold the opinion that if their children attend a bilingual school they will acquire the other language in the short term. These expectations, according to Marsh, lead families to believe that their children will master both languages on an equal basis. As he puts it, “the word bilingual is dangerous

and it creates false expectations”. Pérez Cañado adds to this line of reasoning by stating that “it’s a mistake to think that children will end up speaking English just like they speak Spanish”, whilst emphasizing that “the purity of the accent is a thing of the past”. Instead, the goal is for students to “achieve a functional level that will let them communicate and work in the future”. By way of example, reference is made to a different program, the joint initiative of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Professional Training and the British Council³, which was Spain’s first English-Spanish bilingual program. The goal of this program, as explained in the article, was for students to become competent speakers of English by way of “fluency”, considering the decisive role played by this language in favoring “employment prospects and professional ambitions”.

Throughout the article, Torres Menárguez states that, whilst there are many teachers who believe that under the current system students are not learning English properly, this view is not widely shared. For instance, administrators interviewed report being pleased with the bilingual model as well as its results, highlighting that accent plays a secondary role. The article also mentions that studies carried out in other regions in Spain show that students’ level of English has actually improved. Specifically, the 2018 Mon-CLIL report is referred to. This report found that students’ level of English had improved and their marks in other subjects had not suffered in the bilingual programs of Andalusia, Extremadura and the Canary Islands. These findings are echoed in Shepherd and Ainsworth’s (2017) assessment of students’ English capabilities in grade 10 (15-16 years), which showed a higher level of proficiency in Madrid bilingual schools compared to non-bilingual schools.

The Social Controversy: Equity/inequity Issues Affecting Schools and Students

A second major controversy has to do with the social implications linked to the on-the-ground implementation of the MBP. As stated earlier, the MBP was endorsed as a means to raise the overall quality of the region’s public schools under the premises of equity and equal opportunity. According to Shepherd and Ainsworth (2017, p. 85), attending a

³The Spanish Education Ministry and the British Council Bilingual Education Program was launched in 1996 in different public schools across Spain.

bilingual school “brings gains in both proficiency and positive underlying motivations” regardless of students’ socioeconomic status (SES). Halbach & Iwaniec (2020) follow up on these findings by investigating several factors that could account for a leveling effect of CLIL, in a study involving questionnaires and interviews with teachers at bilingual and non-bilingual schools. Results show that participants perceived differences in CLIL and non-CLIL students’ motivation and parental support which may reduce the impact of SES on students’ performance at bilingual schools. However, reports published by trade unions and collective action organizations, such as FETE-UGT (2014) and Acción Educativa (2017), denounce MBP policies for perpetuating social inequalities because the different itineraries offered tend to be taken up by different social groups, criticisms which have been echoed in the media. Among the policies that have raised strong opposition are school choice and streaming policies. School choice policies establish that Madrid is a single district, allowing families to choose a school for their children within a wider area beyond their neighborhood boundaries. Streaming policies require that students attending the MBP in secondary schools are placed into one of two strands that differ in intensity or exposure to CLIL: High-exposure (HE, *Sección*) and Low-exposure (LE, *Programa*). Placement in these strands is determined by students’ English proficiency level. This division is consistent throughout the whole of compulsory secondary education (grade 7, 11-12 years to grade 10, 15-16 years), and the possibility of changing strands is reduced to exceptional situations.

According to the authorities, school choice policies respond to the fundamental rights of the families with regard to their children’s education (Royal Decree 29/2013, 11 de abril). The administration’s official website draws on a study by Mayor (2017, as cited in Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.c) to show how this policy has promoted equal opportunities and diminished segregation in the educational system. Nonetheless, different media articles have reported opinions that criticize competition generated among schools to attract “good students” as a result of single district policies, which are said to equate public schools with charter schools. These critical views overlap with research studies carried out in the region, which suggest that the interplay between school choice and bilingual educational policies has potential implications for inequality. For instance, Hidalgo McCabe and Fernández-González (2020) draw on linguistic policy and political economy perspectives in their study of how school choice policies shape educational goals in terms of profit,

competition and consumption. This process conceals the educational segregation of children of different SES (see Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2021; Mediavilla et al., 2019) and produces an unequal distribution of resources that are detrimental to non-bilingual schools (Hidalgo McCabe & Fernández-González, 2020).

Regarding streaming, the two pathways - HE and LE - are said to guarantee that students' linguistic level allows them to follow the content that each strand provides (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.a). Nonetheless, different opinions voiced in the media have argued that this organizational aspect of the MBP is segregationist for generating unequal academic and social experiences. For instance, summarizing the aforementioned report by the United Left, columnists for *Cuartopoder* argued in a 2017 piece that the students with the most difficulties, often from less privileged backgrounds, are concentrated in LE strands, and students with university-educated parents are overrepresented in HE strands. The potential inequalities of streaming have also drawn the attention of the research community. Llinares & Evnitskaya's (2021) study of classroom practices in HE and LE Science classrooms found that, despite similar pedagogical goals across strands, HE students were involved in a more dialogical approach to content learning. As regards affect, Somers and Llinares (2021) found that LE students displayed lower levels of motivation to "do CLIL" compared to their HE counterparts. Similar findings were reported by Fernández-Agüero and Hidalgo-McCabe (2020) in their study of CLIL students' affectivity in secondary education. Concerning SES, in Tompkins' (2022) case study of grade 10 (15-16 years) student profiles in a lower SES area, results showed that students with the most and fewest cultural/economic resources were allocated in HE and LE tracks, respectively. For example, the percentage of parents with education levels above the sample median was 15 points higher in HE than LE, and the percentage below the median was 10 points higher in LE than HE.

The Pedagogical Controversy: Subject Learning and Academic Performance

A third major controversy has to do with the teaching and learning of subject matter in the MBP. As mentioned earlier, CLIL was originally endorsed by the educational authorities and the educational community at large as a step forward from traditional methodologies because the

language becomes a working language of frequent use in the school, and so the students learn English naturally by means of continuous exposure to the language (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.a). However, throughout the years, the adequacy of CLIL implementation in this program has been called into question, with stakeholders debating the effectiveness of the teaching strategies employed and the resulting learning outcomes.

Regarding the teaching strategies, multiple articles in the press describe them as relying too heavily on memorization – as exemplified in language assistants’ comments in Ferrero and Peinado’s 2021 article for *El País*, one of whom states that the students have boring material, boring teachers, [and] they are expected to memorize large quantities of materials without properly understanding what they’re saying, – but individual voices diverge in their opinions about the reasons underlying this phenomenon. Some stakeholders believe that learning is rote precisely because of the communication problems which emerge when it occurs through an additional language. Others contend that rote learning is rather a symptom of studying in the Spanish education system, which has always been “traditional”. In this group we find *El País* columnist Martín-Arroyo, who asserts in a 2017 article that pedagogies relying on students’ short-term memory are replicated in bilingual classrooms, where students now memorize lists of words in two languages instead of one.

However, for Pérez Cañado and other CLIL experts, moving language education beyond teacher-centered, noninteractive methods is the primary goal of the approach, giving way to a more “social-constructivist, interactive, and student-led learning where teachers pull back from being donors of knowledge to become facilitators” (Pérez Cañado, 2013, p. 15). Still, she admits that there can be difficulties putting such innovation into practice: CLIL entails considerable investment in innovative pedagogical practices with which teachers may well not be familiar with, “not having experienced them first-hand as students” (Pérez Cañado, 2013, p. 19). A similar concession is made by other supporters of bilingualism in Torres Menárguez’s 2021 article, where Professor Enrique de Lafuente argues that concrete methodological changes - such as greater activation of students’ prior knowledge and more comprehensive linguistic scaffolding in content subjects - are needed to implement CLIL successfully in Spanish schools.

Perhaps even more salient in the media than the debate on teaching strategies is that surrounding the outcomes of these strategies, namely, whether students’ content knowledge and academic performance have

been affected positively by their participation in the MBP. As summarized by columnists Ferrero and Peinado, writing for *El País* in 2021, supporters of the program do not think that bilingual teaching affects the academic performance of their students, and critics not only think that it does, but that the program benefits the most advanced students and leaves behind those who have learning difficulties and those who don't have economic resources. Both conclusions draw on research evidence, and this evidence also appears in the press coverage. Advocates of bilingual education, whose views are rescued by Torres Menárguez in *El País*, cite the 2018 Mon-CLIL report described above. In contrast, the program's detractors ubiquitously refer to a study carried out by economists at the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid (Anghel et al., 2016) that identified a negative effect on sixth-graders' standardized test results for subjects taught through English, which was particularly strong for those of lower SES. The lack of consensus on this matter is felt deeply by the educational community, who continues to call for a comprehensive evaluation of the program, according to Babiker (2021), columnist for *El Salto* (see also the article by Sánchez Caballero for *El Diario.es*).

Academic researchers are also responding to the need for more information on the conceptual bases, methodological premises and on-the-ground implementation of CLIL in the MBP. One noteworthy example is the UAM-CLIL Research Group (<https://uam-clil.org>). The group has been carrying out research on CLIL at different levels of education in Madrid since 2005, and their most recent studies have explored both the teaching strategies employed and students' learning outcomes by investigating aspects of methodology, disciplinary literacies, classroom discourse and interaction, and affective factors, among other foci. Particularly relevant to the present discussion are two which demonstrated that primary and secondary students attending the MBP were able to transfer academic linguistic resources between languages, according to the similarities found in their Spanish and English definitions of discipline-specific concepts learnt through the latter language (Nashaat-Sobhy & Llinares, 2020; Llinares & Nashaat-Sobhy, 2021). Additionally, the group's research on interactional practices has found that, in Technology and Science classes, HE students are engaged in a "dialogic/evaluative approach to content, as well as in the use of evaluative language", both of which are associated with higher order thinking skills (Llinares & Evnitskaya, 2021, p. 393). The implications of these findings are two-fold: on the one hand, programs with greater exposure to English may involve more active and

critical learning than those with less exposure and, on the other, students' academic linguistic abilities do not seem to be harmed by teaching/learning through an additional language.

A second group of researchers at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, directed by Ana Halbach, followed the evolving perspectives of MBP teachers towards the program's development during the first five years of implementation. The first of these studies showed that the promise of more communicative, motivating and student-centered methods was one of the main reasons that the participating CLIL teachers initially applied for positions in the MBP: they were enthusiastic to "revitalize" English language teaching (Fernández Fernández et al., 2005). Subsequent studies addressed the difficulties reported as teachers adjusted to a bilingual teaching mode, such as lack of materials and a need for clearer methodological principles at the primary level (Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo, 2008; Fernández & Halbach, 2011).

The professional controversy: Teacher training and language assistants' qualifications

A fourth major controversy has to do with the professional experiences and qualifications of educators in relation to the MBP. In order to teach through English in the program, content teachers must hold a linguistic qualification [*habilitación lingüística*] which demonstrates their C1, C2 or native proficiency in this language, while English teachers must also become certified to teach the Advanced English Curriculum (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.a., n.d.b). Their participation is incentivized by a financial bonus for bilingual teachers and coordinators as well as a reduction in teaching hours for coordinators. Since entry into the MBP must be supported by a majority of the staff and board at each school, the educational authorities affirm that the entire educational community expresses its commitment and gets involved in the implementation of the program (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.a). However, concerns have been raised regarding the effects of the program on teachers' professional trajectory and the role of the language assistants hired to support them.

As regards the teachers' experiences, voices in the media call attention to job insecurity for non-bilingual teachers and an increasing workload for bilingual ones, coupled with insufficient training. The regulations on the hiring of bilingual teachers have been criticized by columnists such

as Elorduy, writing for *El Salto* in 2017, who argues that they prioritize teachers with the aforementioned linguistic qualification and limit the job opportunities of those without it, even if they have earned higher scores on the official teaching examinations [*oposición oficial*]. For teachers with the linguistic qualification, labor conditions may also be worsening: according to Martín-Arroyo's 2017 article in *El País*, budget cuts have affected the program in all regions, with bilingual teachers in Andalusia reporting reductions in the time and resources available for planning, coordination, and training. Training opportunities include a number of courses in CLIL methodology available on the CAM's "Innovación y formación" platform, for which educators can earn credits. However, the adequacy of these efforts has been questioned by advocates and detractors of the program who, in their respective interviews with *El País* for "Defenders of bilingual education" by Torres Menárguez in 2018 and "Las sombras del bilingüismo" by Martín-Arroyo in 2017, report teaching 100% in English without prior methodological training and demand greater regulation and coordination at the regional level.

A number of research studies in Madrid document teachers' perspectives on the training received at different points in the MBP's implementation, indicating a prioritization of language competence over methodology in teacher preparation from the outset (Fernández & Halbach, 2011; Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo, 2008). Furthermore, by 2012/2013, obligatory training requirements for prospective MBP teachers had decreased to include only the C1 linguistic qualification. This came at a time when CLIL methodology was gaining importance for teachers, who expressed a need for further methodological training in the schools where they worked, deeming insufficient the voluntary pre-service training received by some and denouncing the fact any in-service training opportunities were organized in their spare time (Cabezuelo Gutiérrez & Fernández Fernández, 2014). In a more recent study (Alonso-Belmonte & Fernández-Agüero, 2021), MBP teachers continued to identify shortcomings in their methodological preparation and linguistic expertise, leading the authors to call for a greater prioritization of continuing education by the administration.

A second group involved in the implementation of the MBP are the language assistants (LAs) tasked with providing linguistic and cultural support to students and teachers. Most are young people from English-speaking countries who are either about to complete or have recently completed an undergraduate degree. They receive a monthly stipend for

helping teachers with their daily tasks, sharing the culture and history of their countries of origin, and organizing speaking and listening activities for students. The CAM states that they need not be trained in teaching, but rather should contribute to the school community with enthusiasm and an open mind (Comunidad de Madrid, n.d.a, n.d.b). The role of these participants has been questioned in the press with some language assistants being accused of taking a frivolous approach to the program and being underqualified (see, for example, Ferrero and Peinado's 2021 piece for *El País*). In the research literature, different studies show that teachers and LAs share similar expectations about the LAs' role at the beginning of the year, but these expectations do not always coincide with the classroom experiences reported later on, nor with the functions stipulated in the CAM's official guidelines for LAs (López-Medina & Otto, 2020). These findings may reflect a lack of training for both parties (Buckingham, 2018; Polo Recuero & Ordoñez Dios, 2020). On the positive side, these researchers claim that teachers and LAs may be willing to participate in such efforts based on the enthusiasm the latter express towards their roles (Buckingham, 2018) and the more positive collaborations reported by teachers more familiar with LAs and their functions (Polo Recuero & Ordoñez Dios, 2020).

Discussion/Ways forward

The four dimensions documented in the media's portrayals of the MBP seem to highlight points of conflict linked to the mainstreaming of bilingual education in the region. Harsh criticisms have found a niche in different press articles, articulating a positioning against this program. At the same time, more conciliatory opinions have made their way into different media articles as a means to acknowledge the caveats of the program, clarify misconceptions and propose alternatives for improvement. It has become clear that much of the debate has a political undertone, where sectors that traditionally champion a public education system question the real intentions behind the local administration - governed by the conservative Popular Party - as regards the conceptualization, implementation and promotion of the MBP. In addition, the lack of any comprehensive evaluation of the programme's outcomes in content subjects has also allowed for disaffected opinions to circulate beyond the school community, and garner significant news coverage.

On the linguistic level, the choice of English as the language of instruction in most schools taking part in the MBP has led to opposing views. On the one hand, there is the view that mastery of the English language is indispensable in today's globalized, interconnected society; on the other, there is the belief that this system does not address the needs of the linguistically diverse body of students attending Madrid's bilingual public schools. This discussion overlaps a conversation in the area of CLIL research, which has led to an acknowledgement of the need to attend to languages other than English. This becomes even more pressing as CLIL *is* considered a plurilingual approach (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019, p. 9). Drawing on Nikula et. al. (2013), Codó (2023) argues that 95% of CLIL teaching is done in English (p. 8), which collides with a pluralistic view of the approach as fostering not only foreign languages but also second, minoritized and heritage languages. In this direction, it is worth noting that recently developed legislative documents at the state level emphasize foreign language learning as developing students' plurilingual competence, including communication and interculturality based on understanding and respect towards cultural and social diversity (Royal Decree 157/2022, 1 March). Still, the question remains whether this aim can be fully achieved with English being practically the only language represented in the MBP curriculum.

Furthermore, failed expectations of English language proficiency as a result of attending this program seems to be a recurring topic in different opinion articles. In the article by Torres Menárguez published in *El País* in 2021, both Marsh and Pérez Cañado were clear that the idea of achieving equal spoken abilities in English and in Spanish leads to erroneous expectations, when the actual goals of bilingual education are linked to a more pragmatic aim of achieving communicative competence, as measured by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is possible that a combination of factors (social, political) have contributed to a somewhat confusing picture of the language goals associated with this program. Conversely, such criticisms may indicate that, in some contexts, schools limiting themselves to "the minimum exposure time guaranteed by law fail to reach the threshold level of competence needed for effective communication in an L2" (Escobar Urmeneta, 2019, p. 8), thus restricting students' contact with the target language. Where each situation is unique, there is a dire need for a better understanding of CLIL's potential for boosting foreign language learning in compulsory education. Here, it would be worth highlighting that

studies comparing CLIL and EFL students suggest that the former have more positive attitudes towards English as a foreign language than the latter, as CLIL provides “much richer communicative situations and ‘can do’ opportunities which engage students and foster the development of language awareness” (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009, p.13). Moreover, recent attention has been given to deeper understanding of the functions of language in different subjects (subject literacies and genres) and “the way language and content interact in a variety of classroom interactional activities” (Llinares, 2015, p. 58; see Dalton-Puffer et al., 2022, for the ways in which content-language interface, including subject-specific genres, is being addressed in current CLIL research).

On the social level, the MBP has been accused of fostering inequalities mainly through the implementation of two policies - school choice and streaming - that offer different levels of access and exposure to English. This view contrasts with the precepts guiding the implementation of the program, based on ensuring equal opportunities for all. As suggested in recent studies, CLIL can act as a leveler of opportunities because the “language across the curriculum approach” supports the academic literacy of all students (Lorenzo et. al., 2021). The introduction of this approach in compulsory school curricula can avoid the self-selection that tends to occur in voluntary CLIL programs, and which may favor higher achieving students from more advantaged social backgrounds. Greater attention to the effects of streaming and early tracking on inequality is needed (Condron, 2007; Oakes, 2005; see Rumlich (2017) for a detailed examination of the role of selection, preparation, and class composition regarding the implementation in CLIL programs), as well as paths to provide more inclusive contexts. For instance, Fernández-Agüero and Hidalgo-McCabe (2020) consider regrouping as an option - e.g. bringing together HE and LE students during non-CLIL content classes. At the wider regional level, we advocate for a more equal distribution of resources among bilingual and non-bilingual schools and among districts of different income levels. All in all, there is still large-scale research needed in order to tackle the social consequences of parental choice and streaming policies for equity/inequity in the region.

In terms of the methodology employed, CLIL researchers call for greater consistency between pedagogical and assessment practices and further integration of content and language. They find that teachers have implemented a number of methodological changes to compensate for linguistic barriers, such as more oral activities, scaffolding and visual aids, but such

classroom pedagogies do not always line up with the assessment practices in content subjects, which continue to require a high degree of written output (Otto & Estrada, 2019). Furthermore, students' linguistic accuracy bears some weight on these assessments, but it is not often explicitly taught in class, partly because many content teachers do not feel competent dealing with linguistic issues (*ibid.*). In the MBP, then, "some content teachers find it difficult to come to terms with their dual role in CLIL" (Alonso-Belmonte & Fernández-Agüero, 2021, p. 63) and consider that the foreign language interferes with their daily practice. Looking forward, there is a need to develop clearer theoretical principles regarding the integration of content and language, which must then be translated into discipline-specific methodological options and materials for teachers, and disseminated via sustained in-service training and Master's level programmes (Fernández Barrera, 2018; see Halbach, 2016, whose case study makes the case for the integration of theory and practice alongside the development of a reflective mindset in trainee teachers).

As for the professional dimension, the MBP seems to have affected all teachers in the region. Bilingual teachers express enthusiasm about implementing CLIL but may find themselves at risk of burnout as a result, and thus call for more planning time and integrated teaching materials, as well as training opportunities organized inside working hours (e.g. Fernández & Halbach, 2011). For their part, non-bilingual teachers have constructed narratives of resistance against the MBP because newer teachers face difficulties accessing a position and more experienced ones fear displacement (Alonso-Belmonte & Fernández-Agüero, 2021). In order to improve working conditions for both groups, who are ultimately responsible for the on-the-ground implementation of this program, the administration may wish to revisit (1) teacher allocation policies, so as to ensure their equitable distribution among schools, and (2) the provision of continuing education, so as to ensure that it is available to all teachers regardless of their commitments outside of work.

In spite of the limited number of press articles referenced in our analysis, the issues raised and their link to research findings contribute to the understanding of the debates affecting CLIL today and the search for pathways forward (see Pérez Cañado, 2016, for a detailed description of the controversies which currently affect CLIL characterization, implementation and research). We believe that collaboration with other fields and disciplines is a necessary step in order to tackle CLIL's possibilities and challenges - present and future. In addition to strengthening

applied linguistic research in this area, we argue that there is room for an interdisciplinary agenda in CLIL research, one that draws on bi/multilingualism, sociology, sociolinguistics, education, political economy and language policy, in order to identify how CLIL implementation relates to broader issues and processes. At the same time, collaboration with key stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, educational communities, platforms of collective action) is a necessary step for seeking specific measures that ensure its sustainability in terms of equitable access and learning outcomes.

The aforementioned lines of inquiry are intended to provide new avenues given that, as Pérez Cañado (2016) notes, “CLIL is still a thriving area of research” (p. 22). Concerning dissemination, it is possible that the speed of today’s news production may at times involve a lack of “scrutinised information and considered reflection” (Le Masurier, 2015; in Dempster et al, 2022, p. 3), and the pressure to generate clickbait content might, in fact, reflect a preference for “newsworthiness ahead of scientific objectivity” (Dempster et al, 2022, p. 18). Whilst this may be a reality in today’s way of consuming online news, the media can - and should - serve as conduit via which well-informed analyses of different lines of empirical research on CLIL and bilingual education, including relevant data findings and opinions on behalf of key stakeholders, make their way to a wide public. As long as the intention is not to oversimplify or exaggerate, press releases have the ability to provide readers with enough information that enables them to gain understanding of CLIL-related issues – as well as the debates – and judge for themselves.

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