Trilingualism at school: the place of English in Basque education

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1. Introduction

The development of the Basque school system from 1983, when the present language models were established, until today has attracted the attention of many researchers interested in bilingual education and language acquisition. This is hardly surprising given the huge transformation that has taken place, of which those of us who work within the Basque school system are often not fully conscious.

Between the end of Franco's dictatorship [in 1975] and 1983 the Basque language, or Euskara, had merely a token presence in Basque schools as a medium or a subject of instruction; yet its rise since then is reflected in the constant increase in the proportion of pre-university pupils choosing one of the two bilingual models. The three language models available are, briefly, as follows:

- The A Model: in this programme all subjects are taught in Spanish except for Basque Language and Literature, representing approximately one hour of class a day. Pupils' L1 is Spanish. In 1983 72.8% of pre-university level pupils were studying in this model. This figure has steadily declined since, until in the 2005-06 school year fewer than a quarter of all pupils (24%, to be exact) were enrolled in Model A.
- The B Model: this is an early partial immersion programme in which approximately half of the subjects are taught in Euskara and the other half in Spanish. It should be noted that this language model is more mixed than the others and therefore undergoes greater variation from one school to another. The majority of pupils have Spanish as their L1. The proportion of pupils enrolled in this model has stabilised in recent years at about 22%-24%, in comparison to the initial figure of 10.5% in 1983 when the system was established.
- The D Model: this is a programme in which all the subjects are taught in Euskara except for Spanish Language and Literature, which represent approximately one class hour per day. Pupils' L1 may be either Basque (in which case this amounts to a language maintenance programme) or Spanish (in which case it is in effect an early total immersion programme). In the 1983-84 school year only 16.5% of pupils opted for this model, whereas it has now become the most popular of all models, with over 53% of the total present student enrolment.

In this context, the early introduction of English as a further school language has become a current issue of debate, about which opinions may be divided into two opposing positions. A considerable majority consider early learning the best route if the goal we wish to attain is greater English fluency among pupils than that
achieved until now. This group includes parents, many of whom are unable to speak English and do not wish for their children to face the same linguistic obstacles as themselves. On the other hand, a minority consider that early introduction to English is not the right way, arguing that the results do not support this approach and that the high economic cost of the project cannot be justified. Those opposed to the move also (Etxeberria, 2002) express concern about the possible negative impact of early exposure to English on pupil’s development of the official languages (Euskara and Spanish), particularly in the case of the former as a minority language. Another issue about which doubts have been raised is the possibly unfavourable influence that this could have on future attitudes of pupils towards Basque, the language that is in the most vulnerable position. For example, Etxeberria (2004: 197) is highly critical of early English teaching:

There is no solid basis for justifying the introduction of such programmes at the nursery stage. None of the studies examined provide the slightest theoretical justification that these kinds of programmes can be carried out with a minimum guarantee of efficacy or success. I believe that there has been a kind of unjustified logical jump in assuming that all that is valid for bilingual education must also hold good for trilingual learning.

Therefore, in this article I shall address the following three questions on the basis of studies carried out in the Basque Autonomous Community (henceforth BAC):

- Does early learning of English have a negative effect on normal development of the two official languages?
- Does such early learning negatively influence pupils' attitudes to Euskara, the minority language?
- Is early teaching of English a panacea for improving pupils English language fluency, or are there other options, such as using English to teach content?

The three sections that follow will seek answers to each of these three questions in turn. Naturally, given the wish to provide as broad as possible a picture of the effects of early foreign language learning, a detailed analysis of the different studies discussed in this article will fall outside its scope. Interested readers may use the bibliographical reference section to consult the original works in question.

2. The effect of early learning of English on Basque and Spanish language competence

In order to answer the first of these questions, we shall refer to two analyses of the issue. The first of these is a study by the Federation of Ikastolak in order to evaluate their early multilingualism project, begun in 1992 (Garagorri, 2002). We may take this opportunity to recall that the Ikastolak were among the first schools to opt for early introduction of the English language. Given the wide recognition for the commitment of the Ikastolak to the development and promotion of Basque language and culture, these schools became pioneers in the move towards trilingualism in the BAC.

To achieve the study’s objectives, participating pupils underwent tests in Euskara, Spanish and cognitive development. The experimental group was made up of 195 pupils who had begun learning English at age four, while the control group, consisting of 154 pupils, began taking English at age eight, i.e. four years later. All the participants were in the second year of Obligatory Secondary Education (ESO) at the time when they took the Basque, Spanish and cognitive development tests, but the experimental group had by then been learning English for ten years, and the control group for six.
The results showed no substantial differences between the two groups with respect to cognitive development and competence in the two official languages. Considering the above points, the researchers responsible for the study considered it proved that teaching English from an early age produced no negative effects either for Basque and Spanish or in terms of pupils general cognitive development. At the beginning of the experiment, in the 1992-1993 school year, tests given to these two groups revealed no differences on these items, and as we have just seen, that has remained constant over the following ten years. Furthermore, it was also demonstrated by a questionnaire designed for the purpose that there were no differences between the two groups in terms of their attitudes to Euskara and their degree of identification with the minority language.

The second study we shall look at briefly in this section is a recent doctoral dissertation by Egiguren (2006), in which the author based her work on 121 pupils in the fourth year of Primary Education (9-10 year olds), whom she divided into two groups. The first group consisted of pupils who had begun to take English at four, while the second group had begun four years later, at eight. The study considers a number of issues, but in this section we shall focus on the influence of early foreign language learning on competence in the BAC’s two official languages.

As in the study already examined, it was found that pupils beginning English at a younger age did not obtain poorer results in language tests; on the contrary, the only statistically significant differences observed, in the writing test, were favourable to these pupils in both cases. Thus the results of this study show that beginning to learn English at four years old, far from being bad for language competence in Euskara and Spanish, may even favour the development of written competence in the other two languages on the curriculum.

3. The influence of early learning of English on attitudes towards the minority language

In order to answer our second question, I shall present a study of my own of 222 university students doing teaching degrees whose average age was twenty at the time of the study. Reflecting the usual male-to-female ratio in teacher training centres, 68.5% of the sample population were women.

In the questionnaire that they were asked to complete, there were ten items referring to each of the three languages on the curriculum, each question being attached to a five-point Likert scale offering the following options:

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neither agree nor disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly disagree

Each option was re-coded on a points scale from 100 to 0, as has become the practice in various other bilingualism studies (Lasagabaster y Huguet, 2007), assigning 100 points to option 1, 75 to 2, 50 to 3, 25 to 4 and 0 to 5. Once this re-coding of scores has been performed, we calculate the average score for the items relating to Basque (for example). This provides us with a quantitative variable that can also function qualitatively by allowing us to divide the attitudes expressed into three categories:

- Negative attitudes: this category encompasses subjects with scores between 0.000 y el 33.333.
- Neutral attitudes: subjects whose scores fall between 33.334 and 66.666.
- Positive attitudes: subjects with scores within the range 66.667 to 100.000.

This possibility of reconversion from a quantitative to a qualitative variable is useful for visual presentations of the results. Having explained the re-coding of language attitude questions, let us examine the Basque language results, since this is the language about which, as we have already seen, most concern has been expressed with respect to pupils' attitudes.

In order to analyse the effect of the early introduction of English on attitudes towards Basque, the subjects of the survey were divided into two groups on the basis of the age at which they had begun English. Thus Diagram 1 shows one group made up of students who had started learning English before the age of eight (most of whom began at four), and another group consisting of those who had begun to study English after eight (80% of whom had started at age eleven).

**Diagram 1. Attitudes to Basque.**

The results clearly show basic similarity between the two groups under comparison. In both cases, seven out of ten students indicated positive attitudes to Basque, and fewer than 4% had negative attitudes, while about a quarter expressed neutral attitudes. Furthermore, t tests confirmed the lack of any statistically significant difference between the two groups (p=0.332). We may therefore conclude that the two groups are clearly parallel, notwithstanding the different ages for starting English, and thus that early starting does not have a negative effect on attitudes to Basque. These results lend no support to the assumption made by those who claim the practice has undesirable consequences for the minority language. In fact, early starting had a positive effect on pupils' perception of their English language competence, those who had begun English before eight considering that their competence was greater than those who had begun later (F1, 220=4.439; p<0.001), while no differences were observed, surprisingly, with regard to their attitudes towards English. These findings lead us to the next section of this article in which we examine the effect of early learning on English language competence.
4. Early learning versus using English for content learning

Given the limited space in an article like this one, the present section will contain a quick overview of some studies that look at the effect of early learning of English and the use of English to teach subject content. Studies performed in formal learning contexts such as schools persistently suggest that older pupils are better and faster learners than younger ones in most of the aspects analysed (see García Mayo and García Lecumberri, 2003, for studies in the BAC, and Muñoz, 2006 or Navés, 2006 for Catalonia). In all these studies, the comparison was between younger and older pupils who have had the same number of hours of exposure to English.

We may take the study carried out by Lasagabaster and Doiz (2003) to illustrate. The subjects belonged to three different age groups: sixth-year primary school pupils (aged 11-12) who had had English classes since they were 4-5 years old; fourth-year secondary school pupils (age 15-16) who had started English classes at 8-9; and finally, second-year bachillerato pupils (age 17-18) who had their first contact with English at age 11-12. All three groups have had approximately 700 classroom hours of English as a foreign language, and the object of this research was to study the effect of the age factor on the writing ability of groups who have been studying for comparable periods of times. The following diagram compares the means for the three age groups:

Diagram 2. Written test results, measured on five scales.

On all five scales used here to measure English writing skills, a single pattern emerged: the second-year bachillerato pupils had the best scores on all the scales while the first-year primary pupils scored lowest. The same tendency was obviously seen in cumulative scores based on addition of their points for the five scales. Thus it is clear that the age factor's influence is such that the older the pupils, the higher their skill levels as far as writing is concerned, so much so that the differences were statistically significant on all five scales - content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and "mechanics" (i.e. language structures) - as well as in the total scores. We can therefore conclude that being at a higher stage of cognitive development makes it easier to take advantage of school experience in general,
and in writing in particular, to produce written texts in a foreign language. Similar results were obtained regarding pronunciation (García Lecumberri and Gallardo, 2003), acquisition of morphosyntactic features (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2002) and judgments on grammaticality (García Mayo, 2003); in all these, the older pupils did better than younger ones who had been studying the foreign language for the same length of time.

However, the results are not the same when we compare early learners and others who started later and have reached a similar age. Here, we should note that two variables need to be considered: for not only has one of the groups begun English at an earlier age, but these have also been learning for longer and so have accumulated a greater total number of classroom hours in English. For this part of the discussion I shall briefly summarise the results of three studies.

For the competence ultimately acquired, the Federation of Ikastolak, which has been monitoring the progress of pupils who began English at the age of four, has published positive findings. Garagorri (2002) refers to a study we have already cited in which all the pupils tested were in the second year of secondary school at the time, and had therefore been learning English for ten years in one of the groups and six years in the other. Table 1 shows the differences observed between the experimental group (which began at age four) and the control group (which began at age eight):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Experimental group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Desv. est.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>8.93</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading comprehension</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening comprehension</td>
<td>15.76</td>
<td>5.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First grammar test</td>
<td>9.47</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second grammar test</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>3.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>13.10</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these English language tests the pupils in the experimental group did about 25% better than the pupils who had begun English at age eight (the control group), but this is most notable in the tests traditionally considered most challenging for L2 students as a whole, namely speaking and writing.

The authors of the second study (Doiz y Lasagabaster, 2004) focused exclusively on writing, on the assumption that, at least theoretically, this ought to be the language skill to benefit least from the early introduction of English. This assumption rested on the argument that since, in the initial stages of learning, most attention was paid to the development of the oral skills of speaking and listening, writing should not benefit from this methodological approach to the same extent.

Both groups participating in this survey were in the fourth year of secondary school (age 15-16), so in this case both the experimental and the control groups were the same age but the former had started English classes at the age of eight (18 pupils who had had 792 class hours of English) and the latter at eleven (20 pupils who had had 660 hours). Thus, as in the preceding case, differences between the groups could not be attributed to one group being at a more advanced cognitive
stage, but only to the specific effect of early introduction to English on the level of language competence acquired, for the former group had had 132 more hours of English classes (or 16.6% more exposure). The reason for the small number of pupils in these samples was that the study looked at pupils who had only been exposed to foreign language classes at school, so it was necessary to exclude all those who had had private classes outside of school. Given that attending classes outside of school is becoming an increasingly common practice in the BAC, it is not easy to find large samples of pupils meeting this condition. Table 2 presents the results obtained with these groups:

Table 2. Written test results (Doiz y Lasagabaster, 2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fourth year of ESO (English from 8)</th>
<th>Fourth year of ESO (English from 11)</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean 81.13</td>
<td>Mean 73.67</td>
<td>Desv. est. 8.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total score</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content (30 points)</td>
<td>25.11</td>
<td>23.50</td>
<td>Desv. est. 2.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation (20)</td>
<td>16.33</td>
<td>14.77</td>
<td>Desv. est. 2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary (20)</td>
<td>16.27</td>
<td>14.35</td>
<td>Desv. est. 2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language use (25)</td>
<td>19.11</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>Desv. est. 2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics (5)</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>Desv. est. 0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01

Statistically, the group that had studied English from the age of eight scored better than those who had studied it since the age of 11 on three of the five scales used to calculate the total score: organisation, vocabulary and language use (Jacobs et al., 1981). These differences were particularly notable, then, in the tests that focus most on language skills, and above all in vocabulary and language use. They also did substantially better than the other students in their average writing score (total score of 81.1 as compared to 73.6). We may conclude that the starting age exerts an important influence here on the results obtained for writing in English.

Ruiz de Zarobe (in press) also analyses the writing skill of 62 pupils who started English at different ages (one at four and the other at eight), and again finds that those starting earlier score better, thus corroborating the findings of Doiz y Lasagabaster (2004). The small size of the sample was also due in this case to the fact that only subjects who had not attended classes outside school were included.

However, early starting is not the only option available if the ultimate objective being pursued is for pupils to achieve better English language competence. In this connection I shall now touch on four studies, the first of which (Egiguren, 2006) was mentioned earlier when discussing the effect of early contact with English on the normal development of the other two languages that form part of the school curriculum. Subjects were divided into two groups depending on the age at which they started: at four in the case of the first group and at eight in that of the second. However, the latter group were additionally taught Art in English for two hours per week.

The results showed no difference between the two groups, and this led the author to claim that early learning is not the only option for improving foreign language training, since within just a year and a half (they were tested in fourth year of primary school) pupils who had started learning English later had attained the same level as those who had commenced their contact with English at the age of four.
The second study, carried out by the Federation of Ikastolak in 2003, showed that where English had been used as the medium for teaching Social Sciences, the pupils had no difficulty explaining what they had learnt through a foreign language in Basque. In a test in Euskara administered at the end of the experiment, those who had studied the subject in English were not only perfectly capable of expressing in Basque what they had learnt in English, but actually did better on the test than other pupils who had studied the same subject in Basque! This may be on account of the higher motivation of both the teachers and the pupils in the course of this experiment in using English as a teaching medium, but is also valid as a demonstration that even in situations of trilingualism at school adequate transfer of knowledge from one language to another can take place.

The third study (Cenoz, 1998), which analysed the use of English as a medium of instruction in a D Model (i.e. Basque medium) school, found that teaching through English not only influences English language competence positively but furthermore exerts no negative effect on either the normal development of Basque and Spanish language competence or the learning of course content.

In addition to the three foregoing studies, we may mention one more here (Azumendi, 2007) that has been carried out by the Basque Institute of Educational Testing and Research (IVEI), which also concludes that pupils taking part in experimental programmes in which certain subjects are taught in English show considerable improvements in their foreign language skills (in comparison to those who only study English as a subject) and also equal the control groups (who have studied in Basque or Spanish) with regard to knowledge of the subjects in question. In the first year of the programme, the experimental groups' English language competence was 8% superior, and the figure reached 22% by the end of the second year. Therefore, it would seem that there can be no doubt about the effect of using the foreign language as a medium of instruction on language competence.

Conclusions

The few studies that have been carried out in the BAC to examine the effect of early introduction of English all agree that this has no negative effect on normal cognitive development or on Basque or Spanish language competence. As we would expect, given increased exposure to English resulting from early learning, English language skills apparently improve in comparison to those who start learning English later. Pupils' attitudes to Basque are comparable, no matter whether they begin learning English at four or at eight. Consequently, this review of existing studies must conclude that early trilingualism does not bring with it any disadvantage for the minority language. The answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article is therefore that English and Basque are complementary in the Basque educational system, provided of course that certain essential conditions are met.

The limited empirical data available thus seem to indicate that the experiments in trilingualism that have been undertaken are on the right track. It is also the case, nevertheless, that experiments focusing on the use of English as a medium of teaching clearly show that early learning is not the only solution, given that pupils who have begun to learn a foreign language later take under two years to catch up with the level of competence of those that began at an early age.

In any case, it seems clear that it is necessary to continue observing, studying and researching about the existing trilingual programmes in order to be able, if not to win over, at least to refute the claims of those who express scepticism about the linguistic benefits of English, and in particular those who are worried about the
possible damaging effect with regard to Euskara (or any other language in a similar position, e.g. Catalan in Catalonia). Although such trilingual programmes are spreading to various bilingual areas in Europe, research in this area is still at an early stage and we therefore lack systematic knowledge of such programmes (Lasagabaster, 2003). For this reason our final conclusion must be that further research is necessary in order to answer confidently (as far as this is possible) the questions raised concerning such multilingual experiments. This is so much truer considering that researchers such as De Angelis (2007) and Jessner (2006) have demonstrated convincingly that learning in an L3 (or further languages) differs in many ways from learning in L2. This is no doubt an area for research that will require greater attention in the future.

Closing remarks

The issue raised here is a pressing one because studies focusing on the effect of early learning of English and its use as a teaching medium are directly relevant to the new language model now being proposed in the Basque Government’s Department of Education, Universities and Research. After more than twenty years with the three language models described in the introduction to this article, the Department of Education has submitted to debate in the Basque Parliament a proposal to change over to a single language model in which Euskara will be the main language (in order to strengthen the position of Basque and ensure its acquisition), but flexibly, so that each school is free to adapt it to its characteristics, needs and resources. In the new model, all three languages will figure as subjects and as languages of teaching. Thus all pupils will be expected to attain certain levels of Basque, Spanish and English. As is always the case with such suggestions, these proposed levels have provoked some controversy; but here I shall not address that matter. Instead, I shall comment on the idea that forms part of this proposal of generalising the use of English as a medium of teaching in all Basque schools.

The thinking in the Department of Education is based on the idea that within twelve years all schools should be in a position to teach core subjects in English. To this end, a discussion is currently underway about the possibility of setting up a programme comparable to Irale (a programme for teaching Basque to school teachers), but in this case in order to teach English.

In this regard, a recent study (Lasagabaster, 2007) of 222 first-year teacher trainees found that only 2% considered they had a very good level of English, 34.2% good and the rest, 62.6%, considered they had a poor knowledge of English or none at all. Attitudes towards English were not overly positive either: seven out of ten (72%) displayed a neutral attitude, while only 24% were positive (3.6% could be described as negative). These data show that both knowledge and attitudes are far from those required to address the needs that will arise from the establishment of such a language model as is being proposed.

Since Lasagabaster (2007) found that people who had visited an English-speaking country had substantially more positive attitudes than those who had never been in one, there would seem to be a pressing need to promote such exchanges in teacher training schools, taking advantage of programmes to promote mobility and quality such the European Erasmus programme, for such contact with speakers of the target language and their culture will no doubt result in greater language competence and better attitudes towards foreign languages. Thus this is a challenge with which we ought to engage so that future generations of teachers can acquire the training they need in order to meet the growing needs of the Basque school system.
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References