Spain and the Context of English Language Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing impact of English in Spain and in the Spanish education system. The analysis focuses on issues of educational policy and practice and addresses the discrepancies that exist across these areas with regards to English proficiency and use among the Spanish. The first part of the paper examines English dominance in non-Anglo countries, the educational system in Spain and foreign language initiatives of the European Union that impact language policy and practice in Spain. The second part of the paper reports on findings of a survey completed by high school teachers and professors of English as well as interview data on their perceptions on the role of English in the Spanish education system and the society at large. While this study focuses on the situation in Spain, the results have resonance for other contexts in Europe and Asia.

Key Words: Linguistic imperialism, Lingua franca, Common European Framework of Reference, Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)

Introduction

That English is the most widely used language in the world is an undisputed fact. Globalization has assured that approximately 25% of the world’s population uses English in some capacity (Crystal, 2003), and this number is liable to increase. The status of English has reached that of the language of global communication, the world market and the commercial lingua franca (Kachru, 1990). The hegemony of the English language is now affecting countries with previously limited Anglo influence (e.g., Spain). These countries are currently facing a challenge of continuing to preserve their own language, culture, and history by not participating in the growing impact of English, or by embracing the spread of English as the economic lingua franca.
This paper investigates the increasing influence of English in Spain and the Spanish Education System. Part one of the paper looks at the dominance of English globally and the effect on Spain’s education system and language teaching practices of EU policy. Part two presents results of an investigation into the perceptions of English teachers in Spain on the function of English in Spanish society and on the education system. Using questionnaires and interviews, the following two themes were extracted: the importance of motivation in English language teaching, and the role of English in the Spanish public school system. Due to the emerging role of English as a lingua franca in Europe and the language of globalization and internationalization, the analysis focuses on discrepancies between the policy initiatives of the EU and its implementation in the Spanish context. Finally, the paper presents some areas for future research regarding English language education and the spread of English in Spain.

Part One: Spread of English in Non-Anglo areas

The last twenty years has seen an increasing interest in research on the influence of English in English as a Foreign Language context. Foreign language here signifies a language which is not used for communication within a specific context. The impact of English on the national and supranational levels has been documented in Asian countries such as Japan and Korea (e.g. Kubota, 1998; Park, 2009), in Latin America (e.g. Berens & Friedrich, 2003) and in Europe (e.g. Erling, 2007). Furthermore, the linguistic dimensions of globalized English and their supra national and global impact have been investigated (Pennycook, 2007; Phillipson, 2003) as well as the expansion of English as a type of linguistic imperialism and post or neo-colonialism.

Relating to Europe, the influence of English in the EU has been investigated (Labrie & Quell, 1997) and in specific countries as well, for example, Finland (Nikula, 2007), France (Truchot, 1997) and Spain (Lasagabaster & Zarobe, 2010). In addition to the general influence of English in the European domain, a number of studies have looked at specific contexts where English holds sway such as education in Germany (Erling, 2007) and Finland (Nikula, 2007), and marketing in France (Martin, 2006). In spite of the plethora of studies on the influence of English internationally and in the EU, little research has investigated the Spanish context (see however, Chislet 2005). Chislet has looked at Americanization and Anglicism of the Spanish society. Chislet states that the first half of the 20th century revealed a hostility towards English and Americanization, and the second half of the century showed signs of “accommodation” and “acceptance”. This study addresses a gap in research examining the role of English in the Spanish context partly by examining the role and impact of English and English education from the perspective of high school English teachers and tertiary level instructors within two regions in Spain.
Education system in Spain

In order to investigate the role of English in Spain, it is necessary to briefly examine the Spanish Education system. Education in Spain is administered by the Ley Organica de Educación (LOE Organic Law of Education). In spite of this centralization, Spain has taken steps over the last 15 years to grant increased autonomy to each of the country’s 17 autonomous communities. There is a central general administration of elementary and secondary education called Ministerio de Educación Cultura y Deportes which overseas primary and secondary schooling. This Ministry makes decisions regarding curriculum development and implementation, teacher recruitment, funding and other school matters (European Commission, 2015).

Figure 1 describes the Spanish education system. Compulsory education in Spain is free for all children from 6 to 16 years of age (European Commission, 2015). Preschool is divided into two cycles (0-3 years and 3-6 years); primary education (6-12) is organized into three cycles (6-8, 8-10, and 10-12); and secondary education (Educación secundaria obligatoria or ESO) includes either bachillerato (college preparation) or professional training (vocational training), and are divided into two, two-year cycles. The most common ages for the first cycle are 12 to 14 years, while the ages for the second cycle are 14 to 16 years. Compulsory education is considered to be a public service and, as such, is publicly funded. The organization for economic cooperation and development (OECD, 2012) ranks the Spanish education system as 26th in the world, significantly below the OECD average for the educational systems of 57 countries that were compared.

Universities in Spain serve a variety of functions by providing higher education to both the arts and professional areas such as technology, industry and medicine (Euro Education, 2014). Admission to the Spanish university system is determined by the nota de corte (cutoff

![Figure 1](image-url)
grade) that is achieved at the end of the two-year *bachillerato*. In line with other countries in the EU, Spain initiated several reforms in its higher education system in 2007 by adhering to the Bologna Process, which attempted to harmonize the academic degree standards throughout Europe. As such, implementation of the Bologna Process should be providing students with a more personalized service that includes more professors, smaller class sizes and a shift from a traditional 5-year degree to a new system that divides the degree into two stages: the three-year degree program followed by a two-year program which is equivalent to a master's program. Admission to various degree programs are subject to specific requirements and may or may not include foreign language proficiency requirements.

**English in the European Union (CEFR)**

In 2007, The European Union (EU) expanded to include 27 member countries and 23 official languages. The European Council in Barcelona designated that at least two languages should be taught in addition to each country’s mother tongue. The EU’s multilingual policy intended to increase awareness of the EU’s linguistic diversity and ensure that all citizens have access to resources to learn two additional languages (European Commission, 2015). Although the policy statement does not explicitly point out which additional languages should be taught, there is an implicit understanding that English is the first language (Hilgendorf, 2005). Although the EU has not dictated explicitly a language policy regarding language use or desired proficiency, there is tacit understanding that English should be the language of communication, and thus has become the *lingua franca* of EU member countries (Phillipson, 2006) in spite of a concern that national languages may be at risk (Pennycook, 2007).

In addition to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), other initiatives by the EU have expanded English in Europe. The Bologna Declaration in 1999 intended to increase compatibility in universities throughout Europe (European Commission Higher Education and Training, 2016), by streamlining academic mobility for students, researchers and teachers. This has resulted in a growing requirement for citizens of the EU to know and use English (Phillipson, 2006). A result of this has been the growth of European language exchange programs, especially The European Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus), in which students study in the university of another country for a period of six months to one year. Universities across Europe recognized units from courses granted at partner institutions, and promoting language learning and the use of English throughout Europe was certainly one of its chief goals (Erling, 2007). In general, close to 100% of EU members learn English, making it the most widely taught foreign language (European Commission, 2015).
Foreign Language Education in Spain

In order to understand the trends in the teaching of foreign languages in Spain, it is useful to turn to the European Commission report (2015). In 2002, once European member states agreed that at least two foreign languages should be taught from an early age, Spain introduced reforms related to the teaching of foreign languages. Spanish, Catalan, Galician and Basque are the official state languages in Spain, with Spanish spoken at home by 88% of the population, followed by Catalan 12%, Galician 5% and Basque 1%. Spaniards begin learning English as one of two additional languages as a compulsory subject in elementary school, at age 6. Spain is among the European countries in which English is taught earliest in their education.

Thus, Spain has committed itself to the European policies aimed at fostering multilingualism and the awareness of the need to learn foreign languages. In fact, Spain has become one of the European leaders in the development of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) which has been described as “the growth industry of educational linguistics” (Coyle, 2010). In nearly all European countries, certain schools offer a form of education provision according to which non-language subjects are taught either through two different languages, or through a single language which is ‘foreign’ according to the curriculum. This is known as CLIL. Of European countries, only Denmark, Greece, Iceland and Turkey do not make this kind of provision (European Commission, 2015).

Spain’s rich cultural diversity has made foreign language education in general, and CLIL policies and practices in the country difficult to describe in simple terms. To understand CLIL in Spain we must take into account that Spain comprises 17 autonomous regions guided by the Organic Law Education 2/2006 (Ley Organica de Educación LOE 2006). While the Organic Act of Education creates a framework for the educational system of the country at a national level, the autonomous communities regulate and adapt this law to their respective areas, and thus there are various EFL/CLIL models throughout the country. Due to this lack of a blueprint for a cohesive language education policy, the Spanish model may serve as a model for the variety of countries hoping to foster foreign language learning.

Although CLIL models in Spain are region dependent, they can be divided into two main contexts: monolingual communities and bilingual communities (Coyle, 2010). Monolingual communities are those in which Spanish is the official language, and education is done in Spanish and one or two foreign languages as dictated by CLIL. Bilingual communities represent those where Spanish is the official language in conjunction with another co-official regional language, specifically Basque, Galician, Catalan and Valencian. Both co-official languages in these communities are used in the classrooms, plus one or two foreign languages
when applying the CLIL methodology. CLIL has been seen as the best method to increase multilingualism in both the monolingual and bilingual communities in Spain since the bilingual communities have had years of practice accommodating two languages into the curriculum, and this knowhow has enabled them to transfer their experience to monolingual communities. Therefore, priority has been given to CLIL in fostering multilingualism in Spain, although not all regions implement it in the same way. The remainder of this section will focus on English education through CLIL in Andalucia and the Madrid Autonomous Community where CLIL is a relatively recent teaching-learning phenomenon.

In 2005, the Andalucian government devised a language policy in line with the directives of the EU that outlined a number of schemes, chief among them was that up to 40% of the content of the school curriculum could be taught in English, the utilization of native speakers, and continuous assessments of results and mobility (Lorenzo, 2010). Although there was real fear among teachers that there would be a loss of content learning due to the use of L2 in the classrooms, teachers did not mention this happening. Native speakers brought the opportunity for students to mold their learning around native models as well as allow teachers to put their English into practice and improve their levels. Furthermore, the assistants became a resource for the production of authentic learning materials, which had been a time consuming task for the teachers. Assessment followed the guidelines of CEFR in which it provided “a more manageable, compartmentalized description of skills development” (Lorenzo, p2). Finally, EU mobility programs such as Socrates, Leonardo da Vince and Minerva were set up for teachers and students to promote teacher training, student exchanges and lifelong learning.

According to Dafouz and Llinares, 30% of the Madrid curriculum must be in English and a maximum of 50%. This means that 8 hours is taught in English, 3 hours is devoted to language study and 3 hours is devoted to one other subject. Mathematics and Spanish must be taught in the students’ native language. Specialized teachers and AETs are being recruited. What distinguishes Madrid from other CLIL programs in Spain and abroad is its scale of implementation; more than 300 primary and secondary schools offer subjects through English as a foreign language.

The study

Participants and Data Sources

Data for this investigation was gathered through questionnaires and interviews with high school English teachers and university professors of English. All interviews and questionnaires were conducted in English and participants were from a large city in Central Spain. The questionnaire investigated the perceptions and attitudes about the role of English and English
education in Spain from 14 English teachers. Two of the participants spoke English as their first language, while the remaining spoke Spanish as their first language. Nine participants were high school English teachers and five were university professors. Participants were asked to rank their responses on a four point likert scale: strongly disagree-disagree-agree-strongly agree.

Findings

This paper focuses on the three major themes that emerged out of the survey and interview data: (a) the need and motivations for learning English, (b) the role of the English language in the Spanish public school system, and (c) preferences for British and/or American English.

Perceptions of the need and motivation for learning English

All participants strongly agreed on the necessity of learning English to enter into the global economy. This is in line with the trend toward globalization and the role of English as a *lingua franca*. On the other hand, merely 71% of respondents thought the Spanish were motivated to learn English, and the level of motivation varied among participants for primary, secondary and university education. While 75% of the participating educators believed that students at the primary level were motivated to learn English, that number dropped to 64% at the secondary level, and increased to 87% at the university level. Teachers and professors thought that the students’ exposure to the Internet, music, movies and their prospects for future employment contributed to their motivation to learn English. Nearly all the respondents thought that the proficiency in English enhanced employment opportunities within Spain (91%), and that such knowledge increases opportunities abroad as well (95%). Furthermore, a majority of respondents (95%) thought that English was necessary for youth and their participation in youth culture (e.g., media, music, movies, travel). Regardless of the high reported levels of motivation, only 7% of the respondents felt that Spaniards attained passable levels of English proficiency compared with other Europeans. One professor of English felt that Spaniards motivation to learn English was superficial rather than deep:

> Average Spaniards are motivated to learn English in order to travel, to increase their employment opportunities and to understand movies and music. However, Spaniards are not motivated at a “more basic level” because: they can succeed without knowing English, and there is a strong vibrant Spanish culture to enjoy.

The subject continued to use the prime minister of Spain as an example of a successful
individual who does not know English very well. Therefore, he believed that Spaniards can be quite successful without high levels of English proficiency. The subject’s views on issues of motivation for learning English partly explains the perceived lower level of English proficiency of Spanish citizens compared to other EU countries.

Low levels of motivation can be further explained by the fact that books, movies and other media are generally translated into Spanish; this contributes to less desire to know and learn English. Only 43% of the respondents believed that there were opportunities to be exposed to English outside of the school environment. One university professor remarked “Even if you don’t know English, it is OK because most things get translated right away and you are not cut off from the rest of the world.”

**The Role of the English Language in the Spanish public school system**

There was unanimous agreement among the participants on the influence of globalization on English education in Spain, although only half (51%) of the participants felt that participating in the global economy was the goal of English education. Regarding availability of English instructions in the public school system, 92% of participants felt that English education is available to all students in the public school system, and 60% indicated that English instruction is available to students at the tertiary level. Interestingly, only a quarter of the respondents (24%) agreed that public language education is effective, and no one strongly agreed with this statement. Furthermore, less than half (48%) felt that the teaching methods used in English classes in elementary and secondary schools are effective, all of the participants (93%) agreed or strongly agreed that teaching methods need to be improved, and three quarters of them (78%) agreed or strongly agreed that there are sufficient resources such as textbooks and consultants in educational institutions for teaching English. The above results indicate public English education is available at the primary and secondary levels, and with the new foreign language policy reforms English instruction is available from a very early age (i.e., age 6) but educators in this study do not think it is effective. An English teacher commented on the new foreign language policy that went into effect in 2006 making two foreign languages mandatory in the public school system:

That policy went into effect 10 years ago and colleagues were not happy about it. Some thought it was ridiculous that they are not learning English very well. And now they are learning another language pretty badly too. It may have been exaggeration, but her comment was interesting.
The survey data and interviews show that in general teachers were not satisfied with English instruction in Spain. Teachers also complained about the effect excess bureaucracy had on their free time. Teachers have to spend a lot of time filling out forms and testing their students. Angel, an English teacher commented:

What distresses me in the Spanish school system is how much we have to do a lot of other bureaucratic things like filling out so many forms, and doing a lot of grading at home...which you have to do all the time. We have to test them a lot, orally and written many times a year. It becomes quite a hardship, this structure that makes you not free.

Teachers also stated that although education reforms had been put in place, especially with the incorporation of CLIL methodology, English language teaching still tended toward grammar and accuracy which tried to prepare the students for national exams at the end of the year.

Preference for British or American English

Neither the questionnaire data nor the interview data indicated a preference for British or American English. A third of the participants (33%) disagreed with the statement that Spaniards prefer British English to American English, while 33% agreed or strongly agreed with this statement (36% did not respond to this survey question). Several teachers held the following view, “I studied in England, so I like British English, but of course American English comes over in movies, so I like both, and students should be exposed to both.” The teachers went on to explain that due to the proximity of England to Spain, students have more chances to learn and be exposed to British English. And, compared to the US, there are more opportunities to travel and study abroad in the UK. All teachers believed that both varieties should be presented to the students in the classroom.

Discussion

There is no doubt that the Bologna Declaration Policy has majorly impacted foreign language education policy in European contexts since English is the de facto first foreign language in primary and secondary education and is used as the medium of instruction in such contexts and in many degree programs in higher education as well (Hilgendorf, 2005).

In the case of Spain, educational reforms have resulted in introducing English as early as grade one and increasing the number of hours devoted to language instruction in lower
secondary school. This initiative can result in high school graduates receiving up to 13 years of language instruction by the time they graduate from high school. However, Spain still has one of the lowest levels of English proficiency in Europe. The Spanish are renowned for being poor at foreign languages which can be attributed to the high levels of illiteracy resulting from the Civil War and subsequent Franco regime, which attempted to squash the use of English as well as the regional dialects of the Iberian Peninsula. Europa (2012) reports that less than 19% of Spaniards speak any foreign language, although Spain is the country in Europe where English is introduced earliest in the curriculum. The length of teacher education in Spain is also among the longest in Europe. Thus, although policies and practices promote the learning and use of English, the proficiency of the citizenry does not reflect such emphasis. It must be noted that these policy initiatives in Spain are still fairly recent, and that more desirable outcomes may be forthcoming.

The impact of infrastructure on the success of policy initiatives should also be noted. The concerns of the teachers in Spain about the overuse of the grammar translation method and the emphasis on testing should be considered, as well as effective measures such as expanding the use of CLIL methodology to support the development of communicative language ability in the students. Although the learning, textbooks and curriculum seem to be aligned with the expectations of CEFR, the teachers’ self-reports do not indicate widespread implementation of CEFR-informed policies. Furthermore, the role of English and English education in Spain have presented conflicting views, especially with regards to its importance in employment and mobility for individuals. The government and individuals have made great effort for English education, but there is resistance on the individual level that the hegemony of English could dilute their linguistic and cultural identity. This has resulted in what Gardner and Lambert (2001) identify as individuals possibly possessing instrumental motivation rather than the more potent integrative motivation which is “a complex of attitudinal, goal-directed and motivational variables” (pp.1-2).

Overall, the respondents did not believe that Spaniards possessed a preference for American or British English, and that students should be exposed to both varieties. This illustrates a pragmatism toward English and English proficiency in Spain. Thus, it was clear that the idea of English as a lingua franca was dominant in that English was learned and used as a means of global communication rather than as an identity marker.

**Conclusion**

Due to the small sample size and limited geographical reach of the data, it is not prudent
to conclude concretely about the role of English in Spain. However, the importance of conducting more in-depth analysis on language use and the implementation of communicative methodologies like CLIL become evident. The growing impact of English as a global language has had a toll on Spain, as evident through the widespread adoption of CEFR policies. However, it seems that its penetration in the Spanish society and culture has been moderate compared to other European contexts.

Questionnaire

Answer with following questions with **Strongly Agree – Agree – Disagree – Strongly Disagree**

1. English is necessary to enter the global economy.
2. Spaniards are generally motivated to learn English.
3. Primary school students are motivated to learn English.
4. Secondary school students are motivated to learn English.
5. University students are motivated to learn English.
7. English proficiency enhances employment opportunities abroad.
8. English is necessary for youth and their participation in youth culture.
9. The English level of Spaniards is on par with those of other European nations.
10. There are ample opportunities to be exposed to English outside the school environment.
12. English education is available to all students in the public school system.
13. English instruction is available to all students at the tertiary level.
14. Public language education is effective.
15. Teaching methods used in English classes in elementary and secondary schools are effective.
16. Teaching methods need to be improved.
17. There are sufficient resources such as textbooks and consultants in educational institutions for teaching English.
18. American English is preferable to British English.

Interview Questions

1. What are you satisfied with in the Spanish education system?
2. What are you dissatisfied with in the Spanish education system?
3. How do you feel about the foreign language policy in Spain?
4. What do you think motivates high school students to engage with English?
5. What do you think motivates the general public to use English?
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6. Do you think English is necessary to thrive in Spanish Society?

References


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