

# Facing CLIL Challenges at University Level

## Enfrentando los retos del aprendizaje integrado de contenidos e idiomas a nivel universitario

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Experiments in Content Language Integrated Learning have been carried out most of the time at primary and secondary education. However, not much is known about what higher education institutions are doing in this respect. This article aims to present an experience that occurred in the Languages Department at Universidad Central (Bogotá, Colombia) in relation to the inclusion of content in language classes by means of project work. The way project work was organised as well as how it was evaluated in the different levels will be explained. Finally, a discussion of some surveys applied to both students and teachers to evaluate the experience will be presented, taking into consideration the advantages and limitations of this kind of work for university contexts.

**Key words:** CLIL, Cross curricular work, curriculum design, ESP, project work

La mayor parte de las experiencias en CLIL (*aprendizaje integrado de contenidos e idiomas* por sus siglas en inglés) han sido desarrolladas en la escuela primaria o secundaria; sin embargo, no se conoce mucho de lo que las instituciones de educación superior están haciendo a este respecto. Este artículo busca compartir una experiencia desarrollada en el Departamento de Lenguas de la Universidad Central (Bogotá, Colombia) relacionada con la inclusión de contenido en las clases de inglés mediante el trabajo por proyectos. En el documento se explica cómo el trabajo por proyectos está organizado y se evalúa en cada uno de los niveles. Finalmente, se discuten los resultados de algunas encuestas realizadas a estudiantes y profesores con el fin de evaluar la experiencia en términos de las ventajas y limitaciones de este tipo de trabajo en contextos universitarios.

**Palabras clave:** CLIL, diseño curricular, inglés para propósitos específicos, trabajo interdisciplinario, trabajo por proyectos

## Introduction

Content Language Integrated Learning is an approach mostly followed in bilingual schools in our context. The experiences shared have to do with an integration of subjects

such as math or science with English in elementary schools. In the same way, project work is an idea which has been implemented in the same kind of settings. However, not much has been said in relation to what higher education institutions have done in terms of this integration or which approaches universities are taking for integrating language and content. How successful have those experiences been? Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe an experience using project work as a way to integrate an ESP component in a communicative English syllabus.

## *Background*

Universidad Central is a non-profit institution of higher education located in Bogotá, Colombia. The institution has three faculties: (1) Economics, Accounting and Business Sciences; (2) Engineering; and (3) Social Sciences, Humanities and Art and offers different majors such as accounting, advertising, systems engineering, drama and music, among many others. The target population of the university is comprised of members of the working class who may not have many opportunities to access higher education; this is the reason why most of the students belong to the night shift, so they can work and study at the same time.

The Languages Department at Universidad Central was started in 1997 and it has become a strong academic unit since that year. It offers language services both to the external and internal community, as well as teacher training programs (Diploma programs in Teaching English in Primary school and Teaching Spanish to Foreigners) and short courses (Learning English through Project Work and Technology Applied to TEFL). One of the services offered to the internal student community is the English courses for those in the different majors since they are required to demonstrate mastery of a foreign language upon graduation.

The courses are organised as four levels, Basic 1, 2, 3 and Pre-intermediate 1, and upon completion students should attain level B1. Students usually take these courses during the first four semesters of their studies, although they can take them any time. The approach used in these courses is based on intercultural learning and the promotion of communicative competence through the development of language skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing), as proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001).

## *Research problem*

One of the concerns of the Languages Department at Universidad Central was the way in which students could be made aware of the importance of learning English, particularly in an EFL setting like the Colombian one; therefore, in 2005, this academic unit set up an awareness campaign towards the learning of English. This campaign

involved the lobbying of bilingual signs for the different places within the university, the development of events related to the cultures of the target languages, the broadcasting of foreign language programs in the cafeterias, and lectures about opportunities for studying abroad, among other strategies.

However, there was a problem: We still needed to find a way to integrate an ESP component into the regular communicative English classes so that students could experience the application of the language in their immediate context and thus see the future usability of the language in their work. One of the possibilities considered and applied was to ask subject area teachers to assign some readings in English in their syllabi. As a result this had many students coming to the Department asking English teachers to translate the reading texts for them because the teachers in charge of the disciplinary areas could not help as they did not speak English either.

As a result, it was necessary to set up another solution which was not dependent upon subject area teachers but upon English teachers together with students. That is how the team in the Languages Department decided to implement cross-curricular and project work as a way to integrate content with language in the different majors of the university. Initially, this idea of project work was implemented only with pre-intermediate levels since we considered they had the proficiency necessary to be able to carry out the task. However, after experiencing this kind of activity, it was decided to work with all the levels, adapting the project to students' particular language level and language needs.

## **Literature Review**

In order to implement this strategy, we took into account – in addition to the institutional and students' needs – some concepts that provided a basis for the proposal: English for Specific Purposes, cross-curricular work, content language integrated learning and classroom project. Some basic ideas in relation to these concepts will be explained.

### ***English for Specific Purposes***

English for Specific Purposes or ESP can be understood as a derivation of English Language Teaching in which the reasons for learning English determine both the syllabus and methodology, for example, English for Business or English for Engineering. As Hutchinson and Waters (2006) stated, ESP is an approach to language learning based on students' needs; that is to say, learning and teaching are directed by specific and apparent reasons for learning.

The characteristics of this derivation of ELT have been determined initially by Strevens (1988). However, Dudley-Evans and St. Johns (1998) updated and redefined them. They divided them into two categories: absolute and variable characteristics. Absolute characteristics

refer to ESP as an approach designed specifically to meet students' needs; it makes use of the underlying methodology and activities of the discipline it serves and finally, it is centred on the language, skills and genres appropriate to these activities. As for variable characteristics, the authors determined that ESP may be related to specific disciplines, it may use methodologies different from General English; it is more commonly designed for adult learners and is usually addressed to intermediate or advanced students.

For our particular context, the inclusion of an ESP component has as a main purpose to respond to students' particular language needs in relation to their majors. Additionally, in pre-intermediate levels in which students carry out a project, we make use of the methods and activities typical of the discipline.

### *Cross-curricular work*

Cross-curricular work is understood as an approach that goes against compartmentalised knowledge and, therefore, has as a goal the establishment of connections among the different subjects in a curriculum. Savage (2010) explains that cross-curricular work implies an exploration of the teachers' understanding, knowledge and skills within different curriculum subjects. Also, Aastrup (2009) defines cross-curricular teaching as a way to organize the curriculum to help learners recognize natural connections between separate subjects; in our specific case, English and students' specific majors. This kind of teaching brings together concepts and skills from different subject areas as a major concept or theme is explored.

Some of the most important principles of cross-curricular teaching imply a connection with students' previous knowledge and experiences, collaboration among teachers and the support of the institution managers. Savage (2010) includes these principles in his definition:

Cross-curricular teaching and learning is:

- Based on individual subjects and their connections through authentic links at the level of curriculum content, key concept or learning process, or through an external theme/dimension;
- Coherent in its maintaining of links with pupils' prior learning and experience;
- Contextualised effectively, presenting opportunities for explicit links with pupils' learning outside the formal classroom;
- Demanding in its use of curriculum time and resources, requiring flexibility and often needing the support of senior managers if collaborative approaches are to be implemented effectively;
- Underpinned by a meaningful assessment process that is explicitly linked to, and informed by, the enriched pedagogical framework;

- Normally collaborative in its nature, requiring meaningful and sustained cooperation between subject teachers with support from senior managers.

For our experience, both teachers and students decide on a major theme to work on the projects, and based on that decision, they start the process of developing their projects. Also, not only do they make use of the knowledge they have gained during the semester they are carrying out the activity in but also rely on the concepts they acquired in previous semesters not only in terms of language but also of content. Additionally, there is a continuous assessment of this work during the whole semester: there are drafts submissions of the written papers and also rehearsals of oral presentations for showing the final product.

### ***Project Work***

The idea behind the use of project work is to establish a link between what students will face in the real world and what is done normally in class. As Cerda (2002, p. 52) states, “project work becomes the bridge that mediates between class work and outer reality and helps students to establish the connection with that reality”. Additionally, project work contributes to the development of students’ research skills and autonomy since it is their responsibility to define the topics, the means, the places and the purposes of the projects.

There are different functions project work can serve. One is the integration of different kinds of learning since it fosters the components of general competence such as learning to be, learning to know, learning to live together and learning to do. Another important contribution the use of project work provides the class is the contextualisation of the use of language as well as the development of students’ communicative competence and the four language skills. Additionally, it responds to the needs and interests of the students. In an ideal situation, this kind of work will help toward the establishment of a relationship with other academic areas making it cross-curricular.

For the context of Universidad Central, taking into consideration students’ proficiency and skills doing this kind of work, we decided to do project in conjunction with regular classroom activities since students are not fully familiarised with the activity. Additionally, as explained in the frameworks developed by Legutke and Thomas (1991) and Stoller (1997), we have decided to practice continuous assessment; that is to say, evaluation does not occur only at the end but throughout the development of the project. Furthermore, as both the teacher and individual students provide input in the evaluation process, it becomes collaborative.

### **Pedagogical Strategy**

The organisation of this cross-curricular component works as follows:

As students in Basic I level do not have enough tools in a foreign language yet, the activity selected was the design of a glossary with the technical terms of their core area. This work is evaluated by means of a short quiz in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the words related to their discipline which they learned in the English class.

For Basic II, the students develop a reading workshop, although it is set up as a web page exploration exercise. In this case, the teachers are asked to explore web pages that they consider useful for the students' level and content area and based on it, they create a workshop of webpage recognition and exploration.

In Basic III, as the students are able to identify the vocabulary related to their majors because of the work done in the previous levels, they work with reading skills. For this purpose, the teacher will select a text on a particular topic of the major and then design a reading guide to be done with the students.

For pre-intermediate levels, students develop a classroom project. This project is carried out under the following conditions:

1. Students hand in a draft of the project as part of the writing skill portfolio work; that is to say, for the first term students hand in an individual work related to the class topics and for the second and final term, they hand in a first draft and the final written report of the classroom project accordingly.
2. The theme of the project is only one per group. The topic will be the core problem that is agreed upon by students and teacher before starting the semester.
3. As part of the grades of the first and second midterms, a grade equivalent to the presentation rehearsals will be included.
4. The score for the final written report will be over 10 marks, which is equivalent to the final exam portfolio. Likewise, the presentation of the project is worth 10 marks, the 10 marks of the oral exam.
5. The class project is not a presentation. In this project, students should create a product in which they involve both the contents of their major and the foreign language component. For example: consulting or auditing companies, handbooks of international accounting norms, web pages, among others.

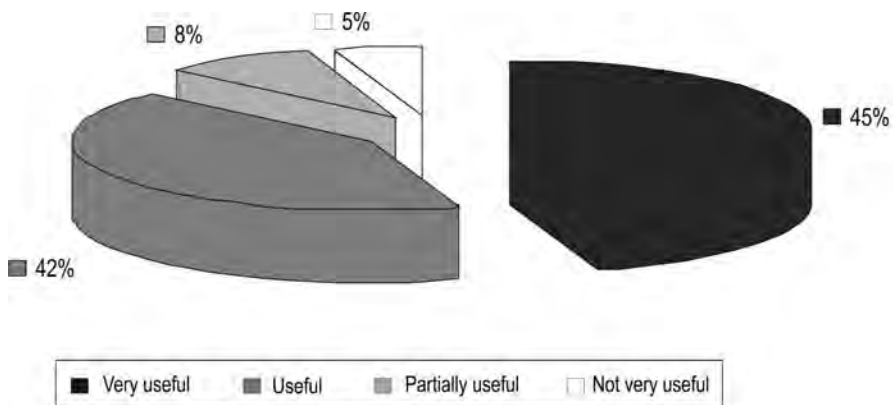
## **Results of the Experience**

Several surveys have been done in order to evaluate the impact this kind of work has had on students; however, two were the most important. One was done during the second semester of 2008 and another in the first semester of 2010.

### *Students' First Survey*

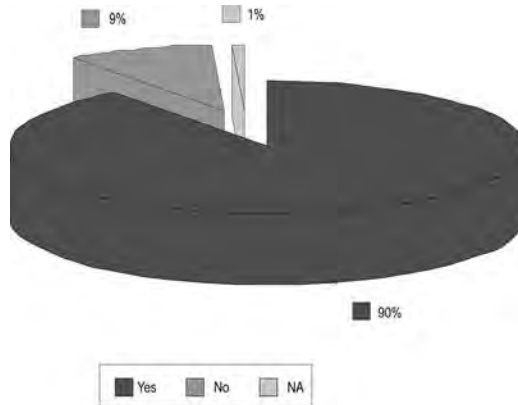
Three hundred twenty-four students answered this survey. The form (see Appendix 1) contained eight questions divided in two sections, one in relation to the activities regarding interdisciplinary work and the other about the TV programs in foreign languages in the cafeteria. For the purpose of this article, emphasis will be placed on the first section. The aspects considered were the knowledge students possessed about interdisciplinary work, the activities they had developed during that semester, the perceived usefulness of the activity and how aware students had become about the importance of learning a foreign language by means of these activities.

In this survey, students were asked for the first time how useful they thought the activity was and why it was useful. Forty-five percent of the population considered the activity to be useful and 8% thought the activity was partially useful. Finally, only 5% considered the activity not very useful. These results can be observed in Figure 1. Among the reasons students named to explain the usefulness of the activity, 33% mentioned that it improved vocabulary; they also mentioned that it was a very practical activity (23%), and that it reinforced knowledge (22%), among other aspects. Some of the population considered the activity to be partially useful because the activity was somehow limited since it only promoted vocabulary learning (33%). Nineteen percent expressed that the time to carry it out was not enough and 15% stated it was not practical enough. Those who thought the activity to be ineffective said it lack some more in-depth work (38%), the activity developed with the webpage was not well designed (21%) and some others mentioned the lack of time.



**Figure 1.** Usefulness of interdisciplinary work

Another question in the survey had the purpose of determining if the interdisciplinary activity had helped students become aware of the importance of English in their area of work or study. Ninety percent of the students affirmed that this kind of work did make them become aware of the need for English in their areas. Nine percent considered that this activity had not contributed in this respect and 1% did not answer (See Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Becoming aware of the importance of English

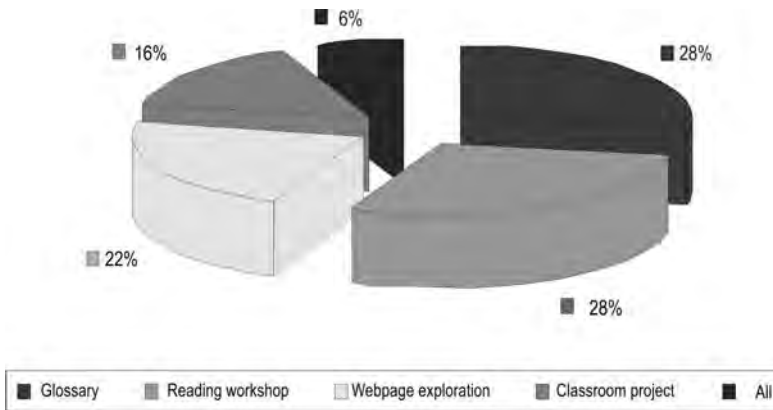
Among the reasons students mentioned in relation for this activity to help them become aware is the need of knowing English in order to be competent in the labour market (18%). Thirteen percent stated that the specialised literature of their majors was written in English, 11% pointed out the relation there is between this interdisciplinary work and their majors and 10% considers English to be an everyday issue which should be studied and learnt. On the other hand, the people who expressed that the activity did not help them become aware expressed the need for more in-depth work (22%), others stated it was not related to their area, 14% affirmed it was not clear and 14% expressed that the activity as such does not help people become aware but more continuous work in the English class does.

## Teachers' Survey

Additionally, a survey composed of four questions was taken of the teachers of the academic unit (See Appendix 2). The purpose was to determine their perceptions in relation to the activity, the inconveniences they had experienced and the usefulness they saw in it as well. Eighteen of the 30 teachers answered the survey.

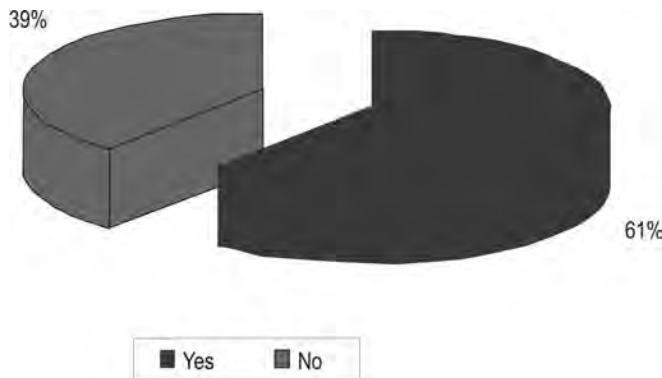


The purpose of the first question was to find out which cross-curricular activity they had carried out. Twenty-eight percent developed glossaries, 28% reading workshops, 22% webpage exploration workshops, 16% classroom projects and 6% developed all the activities since they had classes in all the levels (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Activities developed

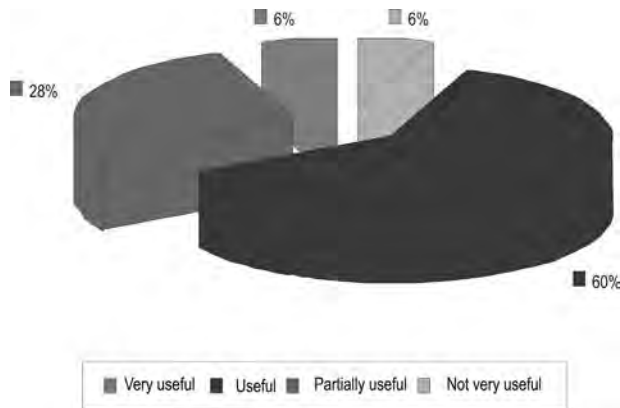
The second question intended to find out about the inconveniences teachers had encountered during the execution of this work. To this question 61% affirmed they had had inconveniences while 39% had had no inconveniences (See Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Results on whether teachers encountered inconveniences in the execution of their work

Among the inconveniences mentioned by the teachers we find the lack of time (27%), the character of the activity itself (20%), that is to say, students did not consider it to be important despite the value it had for their classwork grade, or the fact that they thought of it as just another mandatory task for the subject. Another aspect that was mentioned was the connectivity of the equipment in the multimedia room (20%); however, this inconvenience was already solved due to the change of lab equipment. Another difficulty mentioned was students' language level to develop those activities (13%).

The purpose of the next question was to determine to what extent the cross-curricular activity was useful for students. Sixty percent of the teachers surveyed consider it is useful, 28% believed it was partially useful and 6% considered it to be very useful and not useful at all, respectively (See Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** Usefulness of the activity

The reasons that teachers considered the activity either useful or very useful lay in the relation that was established between English and students' work, the enrichment of specialised vocabulary and the opportunity to consolidate topics which this activity offers. The teachers who considered the activity not very useful affirmed that there is a lack of effort and motivation on students' part; other people think the objectives were not fulfilled and therefore the results are not immediately observable.

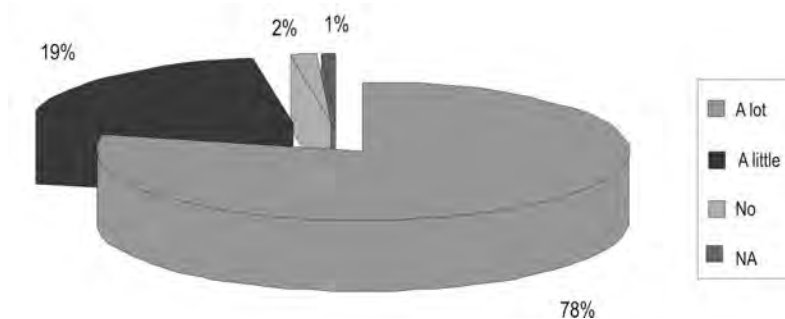
The last question was intended to have teachers provide more options to get students aware of the need to learn English. The suggestions made included the development of reading workshops related to the area, the carrying out of activities which prepare them for their jobs (such as the development of interviews and *résumés* in English), the carrying out of

activities which highlight the importance of English, the inclusion of cultural aspects within the syllabus, activities which relate English to the current social problems, exploration on the Internet of job offers which require English, inviting graduates who can tell about their work experiences in relation to the use of English, inviting a native speaker, and organising English days, among others.

### *Students' Second Survey*

During the first semester of 2010, another survey was taken (see Appendix C). In the same way as in the first survey, the students affirmed that cross-curricular work was a useful activity which helped them become aware of the importance of English in their core areas. Two hundred thirty-eight students were surveyed and they provided these results:

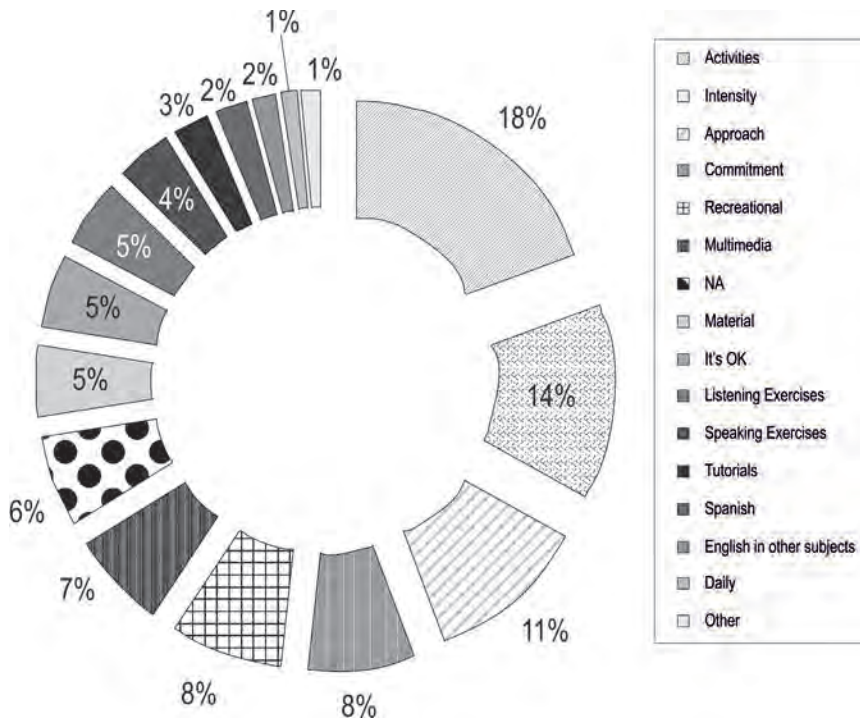
In relation to the usefulness of this activity for students, 78% of the population surveyed answered that it was very useful and 19% expressed that the activity had little usefulness for them. Two percent affirmed that this work had not been useful at all and 1% did not answer the question. This can be seen in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Usefulness of cross-curricular work

The students were also asked about which suggestions they would make about ways to improve this work in particular. However, they also provided some information about the English classes in general. The results can be seen in Figure 7.

Eighteen percent of the students surveyed considered that more activities of this kind should be carried out; they also considered that more workshops should be included but with a higher time allocation so that they are more productive. Also, 14% of the people surveyed affirmed the English class should count for more credits, and as a result, have an academic intensity that is higher than the current one. Likewise, students affirm that the university should offer more levels of English, especially business students who suggest a better



**Figure 7.** Ways to improve cross-curricular work

sequence in the levels since they are taking them alternately. Eleven percent of the population suggests relating English more directly to the majors so that the immediate application is seen. Other people surveyed (8%) affirm that the success of the activity depends a lot on students' commitment, others recommend carrying out the activity in a more dynamic and recreational way. Five percent advises providing more material and more tools for the development of this work; another 5% recommends developing more listening exercises and the other 5% is satisfied with the activity as it is.

Students consider this kind of work as something very useful for their academic formation; however, they believe the time available is not enough for developing the activity. It is for this reason that they suggest English should consist of more levels with a higher degree of intensity and a higher number of credits since this would enable the subject to have the number of hours necessary to develop more activities with these characteristics as well as with time to carry out a more rigorous follow-up. It is important

to say that students are conscious of the need of the language for their professional development and that is why they ask for activities which are more focused on their respective majors.

## Limitations in the Implementation of the Pedagogical Strategy

Despite the great acceptance students have for this kind of activity, there are some limitations, as expressed previously on the survey. They can be divided as follows:

- a. **Logistics:** As the Languages Department is a cross-curricular department, in one course teachers may have students from different majors such as accounting, economics, music and drama. This makes it difficult for the teachers to decide upon only one topic to work in class and how to set up the groups for project work. Another limitation is the lack of possibilities to socialise the students' products because of the lack of this space and also, even though some teachers try to work in coordination with others, they do not have space available in their schedules to attend students' presentations in other classes.
- b. **Time:** English has been allocated 4 hours per week which seems insufficient for all the processes students need to follow during the development of the projects since they become an additional activity as regards the rest of the syllabus. It also limits the time teachers can have available for providing feedback on students' work. Also, the fact that there are only four levels of English contributes to students' low proficiency which makes their project work more difficult to undertake.
- c. **Institutional:** There is no clear policy in relation to bilingualism or the fostering of learning a foreign language. And additionally, there is no direct coordination with the other subjects since not all the core area teachers are bilingual.

## Conclusion and Implications

As is well known, one of the goals of the Colombian Ministry of Education is that by 2019 most of the population will be bilingual according to the National Bilingualism Project. One of the ways which has been used and proven, especially in schools (see Brisk, 1998; García & Baker, 1995; and Genesee & Boyson, 1999, among others) in order to help not only children but others become bilingual, is through content learning. Nevertheless, as mentioned by Mc-Groarty (2001), the conditions for this kind of work to be successful are coordination within the curriculum, the provision of time for teachers of different areas to

meet, and a joint work of the language teachers and the content area teachers, as well as the involvement of both parents and community.

As a result, it is clear that for these efforts to be fruitful, they cannot be seen as an isolated endeavour undertaken solely by languages departments. Most of the institutions of higher education state in their *Proyecto Educativo Institucional* (PEI-Institutional Education Project) objectives in relation to internationalisation and the mastery of a foreign language in relation to this, but it is already time that these words from the PEI become a reality. Institutions should be aware that there is a need to support their languages departments in order to go beyond policies which are only stated in the PEI but which are not implemented in real life.

This support needs to be reflected in an increase in the number of levels and hours allocated to English classes bearing in mind that the Common European Framework, which all language teaching institutions should follow, specifies a definite number of hours for each particular level. Additionally, the issue of the assignment of credits should foster discussion at all institutional levels in order to be coherent with what the policies state.

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## Appendix 1



UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL  
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El propósito de esta encuesta es determinar el impacto de las actividades de la campaña de sensibilización durante el segundo semestre de 2008. Agradecemos su colaboración.

### I. Actividades de trabajo transversal

1. ¿Conoce las actividades de trabajo transversal en inglés? Indique con una X.

Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

2. ¿Cuál actividad desarrolló este semestre? Indique con una X.

Glosario \_\_\_\_\_ Lectura página Web \_\_\_\_\_

Taller de Lectura \_\_\_\_\_ Proyecto de aula \_\_\_\_\_

3. ¿Considera usted que esta actividad fue? Indique con una X.

Muy útil \_\_\_\_\_ Útil \_\_\_\_\_

Parcialmente útil \_\_\_\_\_ No muy útil \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_

4. ¿Cree usted que esta actividad le ayudó a tomar conciencia de la importancia del inglés en su área de estudio y/o trabajo? Indique con una X.

Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_



## II. Programación en lengua extranjera en las cafeterías

1. ¿Ve usted televisión en las cafeterías? Indique con una X.  
Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_
2. ¿Qué clase de programas ve?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. ¿Vio usted programas en otros idiomas en la cafetería? Indique con una X.  
Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_  
¿Cuáles? \_\_\_\_\_
4. La programación en lengua extranjera en las cafeterías fue... Indique con una X.  
Muy útil \_\_\_\_\_ Útil \_\_\_\_\_  
Parcialmente útil \_\_\_\_ No muy útil \_\_\_\_\_  
¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 2



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### Trabajo transversal (docentes)

El propósito de esta encuesta es determinar el impacto de las actividades de trabajo transversal durante el segundo semestre de 2008. Agradecemos su colaboración.

1. ¿Qué actividades de trabajo transversal realizó este semestre? Indique con una X.

Glosario \_\_\_\_\_ Lectura página Web \_\_\_\_\_

Taller de Lectura \_\_\_\_ Proyecto de aula \_\_\_\_\_

Todas las anteriores \_\_\_\_\_

2. ¿Tuvo algún inconveniente en la realización de estos trabajos? Indique con una X.

Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

En caso de que su respuesta haya sido afirmativa. Especifique las dificultades.

\_\_\_\_\_

3. ¿Considera usted que para los estudiantes esta actividad fue? Indique con una X.

Muy útil \_\_\_\_\_ Útil \_\_\_\_\_

Parcialmente útil \_\_\_\_ No muy útil \_\_\_\_

¿Por qué? \_\_\_\_\_

4. ¿De qué otras maneras se puede hacer a los estudiantes conscientes de la necesidad de aprender una lengua extranjera? Enumere. \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3



UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL  
DEPARTAMENTO DE LENGUAS  
CAMPAÑA DE SENSIBILIZACIÓN

El propósito de esta encuesta es determinar el impacto del trabajo interdisciplinario y las maneras en las que éste se puede mejorar. Agradecemos su colaboración.

1. ¿Qué clase de trabajo transversal desarrolló este semestre? Indique con una X.

Glosario \_\_\_\_\_ Páginas Web \_\_\_\_\_

Talleres de lectura \_\_\_\_ Proyectos de aula \_\_\_\_\_

2. ¿En qué medida le ayudó este trabajo a vincular el área de inglés con su disciplina?  
Indique con una X.

Mucho \_\_\_\_\_ Poco \_\_\_\_\_ Nada \_\_\_\_\_

3. ¿De qué manera considera usted que se podría mejorar el desarrollo de este trabajo?

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4. ¿De qué otras maneras vincularía su disciplina con el área de inglés?

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