

Rosana Satorre Cuerda (Ed.)

Nuevos retos educativos en la enseñanza superior frente al desafío COVID-19

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80. Employability, international mobility and intercultural awareness in Bilingual Education: Studying the perceptions of pre-service bilingual teachers

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ABSTRACT

Bilingual Education has grown in popularity across Europe, and so has the body of research proving its benefits for students. However, little has been studied about its real impact on graduates from these programs in terms of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness despite having been demonstrated as helpful indicators of the success of Bilingual Education. Likewise, research has not addressed yet if bilingual teachers agree with the importance of developing these elements and feel prepared for such a task. In this study, a mixed-method approach based on the Grounded Theory and content analysis has been used to examine the perceptions of Spanish pre-service bilingual teachers ($n = 53$) regarding their preparation to develop these elements among their future students. Findings show that participants believe these are elements to be developed in Bilingual Education and, in turn, should be the focus of bilingual teaching, although they also agree that some other issues like language proficiency and communication cannot be overlooked. Conversely, they consider online-based teacher training in these aspects is insufficient. The study encourages to rethink the role of employability, international mobility, and intercultural competence in initial bilingual teacher education.

KEY WORDS: Bilingual Education, pre-service teacher training, teacher perceptions, teacher needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of globalization and the consequent increase in mobility rates, Bilingual Education has grown in popularity across European countries, as is the case of Spain. Aiming at enhancing foreign language competence and intercultural awareness among students and ultimately helping them become fully prepared citizens of the 21st-century society, literature has demonstrated the cognitive, academic, linguistic, professional, social, and cultural benefits that this educational approach entails for students (Callahan & Gándara, 2016; Christoffels et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2019; Porras et al., 2014; Romanowski, 2018). Likewise, much has been discussed about the implementation of bilingual programs at all educational stages (Martínez-Agudo, 2020; Rubio-Alcalá & Coyle, 2021; Schwartz, 2018) and specific teacher training for these programs (Lindahl et al., 2020; Marzà, 2021). Up to the research team's knowledge, however, little has been studied about the real impact of these programs on students who had participated in them in terms of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness despite being considered essential landmarks of the world's educational systems (e.g., Dasli, 2019; Ley Orgánica 3/2020). Similarly, research has not addressed the opinions of teachers participating in bilingual programs or whether they feel the importance of developing these elements as well as prepared for such a task.

Among the different approaches to Bilingual Education, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has grown to become the most extended option in Europe (Coyle, 2010) and increasingly

in other parts of the world (e.g., Turner & Fielding, 2020). CLIL has also become common in Spain, where its implementation has increased considerably in the last decade (Palacios-Hidalgo, 2020). In consequence, research in CLIL has also grown, with scholars analysing numerous aspects of the approach, from classroom practice (Gómez-Ramos et al., 2020) to students' learning and motivation (Hughes & Madrid, 2020; San Isidro & Lasagabaster, 2020) and teacher training (Marzà, 2021). For instance, Gómez-Ramos et al. (2020) study the influence of using concept maps and graphic organisers in the development of the linguistic competence of CLIL Primary Education students. On their part, Hughes and Madrid (2020), in order to study the implementation of Bilingual Education in monolingual Spanish areas, examine the academic performance of CLIL learners both in Primary and Secondary Education in the subject of Natural Science and show that CLIL does not hinder the learning process of students. San Isidro and Lasagabaster (2020) evaluate the motivation of CLIL students in Galicia (Spain) and compare it to that of non-CLIL learners, showing more long-term positive attitudes towards language learning in the case of the former. Finally, Marzà (2021) explores the training needs of pre-service CLIL teachers, noting that they demand further training in specific methodologies, language, self-reflection, and classroom management.

In relation to how Bilingual Education helps develop competences among students, Gómez-Parra et al. (2021) evaluate the impact of these programs on graduates by measuring the three key components of what they define as 'linguistic success'. The authors assess the self-reported perceptions of undergraduate students from the University of Córdoba (Spain) regarding their level of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness, confirming differences between Bilingual and non-Bilingual Education students. The differences found show that graduates from bilingual programs believe their employability and mobility are better thanks to participating in these programs, while their level of intercultural awareness is higher too. In doing this, the researchers demonstrate how measuring these three factors allows evaluating the success of Bilingual Education. In this line, if employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness are to be considered indicators of the success of these programs, it seems clear to assume that Bilingual Education must seek the development of such elements among students to guarantee that, once they have completed their bilingual training, they are more likely to be employed and travel abroad, and have better intercultural knowledge than those individuals who have received monolingual training. Nevertheless, the scientific literature is scarce when analysing whether Bilingual Education teachers are aware of the need to develop these three factors among their students and, more importantly, if they feel prepared for it considering the online-based training they are receiving at the present as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study aims at analysing the perceptions of a group of pre-service bilingual teachers (enrolled in the Degree in Primary Education and the Double Degree in English Studies and Primary Education at the University of Córdoba, Spain) regarding two issues: on the one hand, whether they believe the promotion of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students is an important objective of bilingual programs; and on the other hand whether they consider they are being properly trained for this task. Four research questions are established:

- RQ1: What should be the main students' competences developed in Bilingual Education according to pre-service bilingual teachers?
- RQ2: What should be the role of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness in Bilingual Education according to pre-service bilingual teachers?
- RQ3: Do pre-service bilingual teachers consider they are being trained to develop employability?

- ty, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students?
- RQ4: Do pre-service bilingual teachers consider online-based education is helping them be prepared to develop employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students?

2. METHOD

An exploratory mixed-method study is developed to analyse pre-service bilingual teachers' perceptions concerning the role of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness in Bilingual Education and their preparation to develop these elements among their future students. To this purpose, Patton's Qualitative Evaluation Checklist (2003) is first used to determine the appropriacy of a qualitative approach; then, the Grounded Theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and semantic and content analyses (Krippendorff, 2003) are followed to reveal participants' thoughts.

2.1. Context and participants

The study is developed in the course 'English as a Foreign Language for Primary Education Teachers' (bilingual itinerary) of the University of Córdoba (Southern Spain) during the academic year 2020/2021 (between the months of March and April). This is a compulsory course part of the Degree in Primary Education and the Double Degree in English Studies and Primary Education, which aims at increasing students' language proficiency in English. Eligibility criteria are based on proximity and enrolment in the aforementioned course. The sample ($n = 53$), non-probabilistic and chosen based on convenience, is composed by 13 men (24.53%), and 40 women (75.47%). According to nationality, 52 are from Spain (98.11%), while 1 is from Poland (1.89%).

2.2. Procedure

The Grounded Theory is first followed to gain initial insights into the perceptions of the sample. In words of Creswell and Poth, "the intent of a grounded theory study is to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory" (2018, p. 315). Generally speaking, "grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, an action, or an interaction" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 315–316).

Afterwards, content analysis is performed, "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter)" (Krippendorff, 2003, p. 18). In this sense, the three phases established by Arbeláez-Gómez and Onrubia-Goñi (2014) are followed, which are: (1) theoretical, a pre-analysis stage intended to provide a first overview of the analysis process, detailing the procedure employed, with the specific decisions and criteria adopted; (2) descriptive-analytical using semantic analysis; and (3) interpretative, where data are triangulated, interpreted and discussed.

In both cases, NVivo Plus v. 12 for Windows is used for the analysis of the data.

2.3. Instrument

A structured interview is used for data collection, in which participants give their responses regarding four main questions: (1) In your opinion, what should be the focus of Bilingual Education in terms of pupils' competences?; (2) Should employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness be the focus of Bilingual Education?; (3) In what ways are you being trained to develop these three aspects among your future students?; and (4) How does online-based education contribute (either positively or negatively) to your preparedness to develop these aspects? The interview is distributed

online using the Moodle platform or the University of Córdoba (Spain), and participants are asked to submit the written responses in a report format fully in English. Answers are then anonymised to guarantee confidentiality. The response rate is considerably high, since 75.71% of the students enrolled in the course have submitted their responses.

3. CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS

3.1. Coding categories derived from the Grounded Theory

After using the Grounded Theory (Creswell & Poth, 2018) for an initial analysis of participants' responses, 9 coding categories have been identified that correspond to the topics and contents addressed by respondents. Figure 1 shows the coding categories:

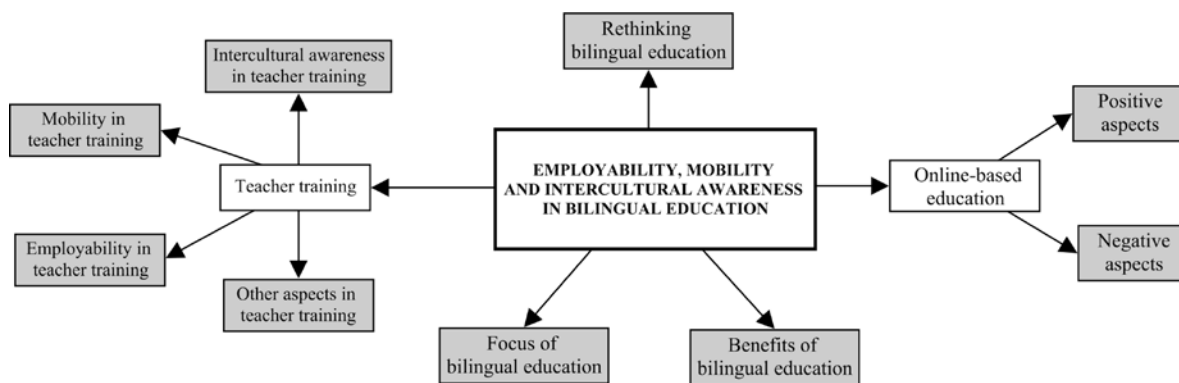


Figure 1. Mind map with the coding categories. Source: Own elaboration.

3.2. Semantic analysis

NVIVO 12 has been used to design a semantic word cloud (Figure 2) showing the 50 most frequent words used by participants. The most frequently employed words (frequency higher than 100 entries in all cases) are: education (n = 309), bilingual (n = 272), and English (n = 109).

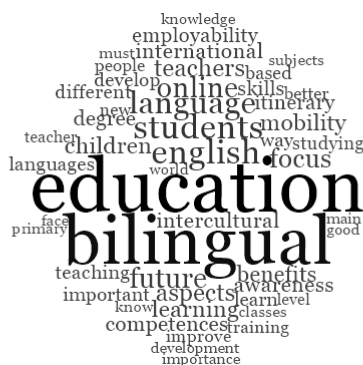


Figure 2. Word cloud with 50 most used words. Source: Own elaboration.

3.3. Content analysis

A total of 381 relevant references has been classified from participants' responses. These have been analysed according to the 9 coding categories established after applying the Grounded Theory. Within these, 66 subcategories (codes) have been identified. Table 1 shows the distribution of categories and subcategories, including frequency and percentage of references for each:

Table 1. Distribution of coding categories and subcategories according to total of references. Source: Own elaboration.

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| <p>Benefits of Bilingual Education (n = 107)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cognition: n = 9 (8.41%) – Communication: n = 8 (7.48%) – Creativity: n = 2 (1.87%) – Job opportunities and skills: n = 22 (20.56%) – Language literacy: n = 20 (18.69%) – Learning content: n = 2 (1.87%) – Learning strategies: n = 1 (0.93%) – Personal development: n = 8 (7.48%) – Social and intercultural learning: n = 14 (13.08%) – Social skills: n = 2 (1.87%) – Study abroad opportunities: n = 2 (1.87%) – Training competent citizens: n = 7 (6.54%) – Travel opportunities: n = 10 (9.35%) <p>Interculture in teacher training (n = 24)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of intercultural learning: n = 10 (41.67%) – Raising cultural awareness: n = 2 (8.33%) – Regular teaching: n = 12 (50%) <p>Positive aspects of online-based education (n = 29)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Comfortability: n = 2 (6.90%) – Connections with people: n = 1 (3.45%) – Creation of alternative resources: n = 3 (10.34%) – Developing digital skills: n = 5 (17.24%) – Educators' efforts: n = 1 (3.45%) – Effective and attractive learning: n = 1 (3.45%) – Greater access to information: n = 1 (3.45%) – Motivation: n = 1 (3.45%) – Preparation for difficult scenarios: n = 2 (6.90%) – Safer environment for speaking: n = 1 (3.45%) – Self-paced learning: n = 3 (10.34%) – Variety of activities and platforms: n = 8 (27.59%) <p>Other aspects in teacher training (n = 24)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Attention to emotional learning: n = 1 (4.17%) – Lack of resources: n = 1 (4.17%) – Language learning: n = 6 (25%) – Need to rethink teacher training: n = 12 (50%) – Teacher cooperation: n = 1 (4.17%) – Unprepared teacher trainers: n = 3 (12.50%) | <p>Focus of Bilingual Education (n = 118)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Communicative skills: n = 16 (13.56%) – Content knowledge: n = 2 (1.69%) – Employability: n = 22 (18.64%) – Intellectual/psychosocial develop.: n = 1 (0.85%) – Intercultural awareness: n = 27 (22.88%) – International mobility: n = 25 (21.19%) – Linguistic knowledge: n = 16 (13.56%) – Motivation and enjoyment: n = 2 (1.69%) – Real-life situations: n = 3 (2.54%) – Social competence: n = 4 (3.39%) <p>Employability in teacher training (n = 12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lack of training in employability: n = 9 (75%) – Real training periods: n = 3 (25%) <p>Mobility in teacher training (n = 14)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – International exchanges enhanced: n = 6 (42.86%) – Lack of attention to mobility: n = 8 (57.14%) <p>Negative aspects of online-based education (n = 43)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Boredom: n = 5 (11.63%) – Demotivation: n = 4 (9.30%) – Distraction: n = 9 (20.93%) – Impossibility to develop activities: n = 1 (2.33%) – Lack of access to technology: n = 1 (2.33%) – Lack of digital skills: n = 1 (2.33%) – Less competences developed: n = 2 (4.65%) – Less interaction: n = 4 (9.30%) – Less orality: n = 5 (11.63%) – Less practice: n = 3 (6.98%) – More work for student teachers: n = 1 (2.33%) – No body language: n = 1 (2.33%) – No presentiality: n = 3 (6.98%) – Technical problems: n = 3 (6.98%) <p>Rethinking of Bilingual Education (n = 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Greater focus on students' future: n = 1 (10%) – More complete approach: n = 3 (30%) – More motivating approach: n = 1 (10%) – More practical approach: n = 5 (50%) |
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4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Benefits and focus of Bilingual Education

In relation to the benefits of bilingual programs, the most highlighted benefit for students taking part in Bilingual Education is job opportunities and related skills as suggested by research (Callahan & Gándara, 2016; Porrás et al., 2014). Likewise, a great part them points at the improvement of language literacy and intercultural learning thanks to this type of education, corroborating the findings of studies in the field (e.g., Romanowski, 2018).

Bilingual projects allow us to develop mainly language skills, cultural skills and professional skills. A language is also culture, and that is precisely what is acquired along with language

skills. Bilingualism allows us to break down cultural and mental barriers, providing a broader vision of the world. With this type of education, professional possibilities multiply, as it is a quality that can make a difference with other candidates for a job. (Respondent 16)

This type of education allows the students to improve their linguistic and their cultural competences. (Respondent 42)

Likewise, respondents also coincide with the scientific literature (Fox et al., 2019) when suggesting that Bilingual Education also enhances travel opportunities, students' personal development, and communicative skills. In this light, however, participants also highlight the need to begin studying in Bilingual Education as a way to ensure that young learners get the most out of these programs.

I think that it [studying in a bilingual program] is important to do it from the time we are in school, because this way the students get used to it and their language bases make them stronger. There is a big difference between children who have studied English since they started school and children who only did so when they were older, in terms of both, language fluency and level. (Respondent 46)

Bilingual Education from childhood makes children open their minds, curious to discover new things and not stop at any cultural barrier in the future. (Respondent 36)

As for the focus of Bilingual Education, intercultural awareness is considered the most essential target of these programs by participants, followed by international mobility and employability.

Bilingual Education should focus on international mobility, employability and intercultural awareness because English will allow children to get a better job and to travel to different countries and develop socially. (Respondent 6)

Other respondents, despite acknowledging the importance of these factors and the fact that many schools seem to focus on employability skills, consider that there are other more relevant aspects.

I am quite reluctant to believe that the focus of bilingual education must fall in these aspects. Although I consider them important, I think that there are other ways to achieve these. (Respondent 27)

[...] current schools focus more on employability, for example, using bilingual education to increase their chances of finding work, which leads students to choose this type of education to have more opportunities in the world of work. (Respondent 38)

In this light, some participants suggest that Bilingual Education needs to be rethought, proposing a more practical and motivating approach.

[Today] it is more important to learn grammar and vocabulary than to learn how people live in that country, their customs, their culture... There is still much to improve. (Respondent 50)

4.2. Bilingual teacher training

There is a prevailing perception among participants regarding their lack of training in terms of intercultural learning, employability skills, and mobility. Although the pre-service teachers surveyed acknowledge the potential of international mobility programs and the benefits of enjoying real training periods in the form of internships at schools, indeed, the general lack of training is the most repeated

idea when respondents refer to the role of employability and mobility in their university education. In the case of intercultural learning, participants agree with the fact that they are provided with this in the regular lessons organized by teacher trainers. This idea seems to suggest that teacher training centres are become aware of the importance of addressing intercultural education, a priority across all educational levels (Gómez-Parra, 2018).

Intercultural awareness and mobility are fostered [in teacher training] thanks to meetings in bilingual, virtual or face-to-face spaces and Erasmus offers. (Respondent 21)

There are activities that help students gain wide visibility on these [employability, mobility and intercultural awareness] such as the Erasmus+ mobility programmes. But apart from this, I don't think there's any other opportunity to really live these three aspects in first person. (Respondent 46)

Respondents highlight some of the most important reasons why these three elements are not been address in initial teacher training: lack of resources, need to improve teachers' language proficiency much more and to focus on teachers' cooperation, unprepared teacher trainers, and a general necessity to rethink teacher training. These perceptions are in line with previous studies that urge governments and educational administrators to provide teachers and universities with teacher training and materials to ensure the best quality bilingual teaching (Palacios-Hidalgo, 2020).

Sometimes it is professors themselves who do not use adequate resources. (Respondent 34)

4.3. Online-based bilingual teacher training

The COVID-19 has certainly changed the way education is carried out, and as a result, higher education and teacher training has been forced to develop innovative teaching methods to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning (e.g., Huertas-Abril et al., 2021). In this light, pre-service bilingual teachers have much to say regarding the strengths and weaknesses of online-based education in terms of their preparedness to promote employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students. Although participants have pointed out a variety of positive aspects of online education, the number of references related to negative issues had been considerably higher (references to positive aspects = 29; references to negative aspects = 43; see Table 1).

In relation to the positive aspects, the variety of activities and platforms to be used, the fact that it helps developing teachers' digital abilities, and the possibility of creating alternative resources are the most prominent, as suggested by Clark (2020).

Despite the pandemic situation, the educational process does not stop and even if it makes some of the teaching methods disappear, different ones appear. As a result of this, it helps positively to form future teachers since it helps developing technological skills and create new resources, which will be useful for the following years. (Respondent 49)

Likewise, respondents claim that the enhancement of a self-paced learning process is both positive and negative, since it favours autonomy but can also cause distraction and, in turn, demotivation, which is also suggested by similar studies on undergraduates' perceptions about online education during the COVID-19 health emergency (Imsa-ard, 2020; Meeter et al., 2020).

In online classes you set the pace of learning, regardless of your capacity. However, you can easily get distracted. So, face-to-face classes are important because the quality of teaching is better. (Respondent 19)

Other weaknesses of online-based teaching in their training to develop employability, mobility, and intercultural competence, according to respondents, include boredom, less possibilities for practice and interaction between them and teacher trainers.

Virtual classes can lead to boredom or demotivation towards the subject. (Respondent 18)

[Online education] generates a lack of communication between teachers and students [and] makes impossible to regularly practice the speaking skills. (Respondent 42)

Online education has a negative influence on the development of these aspects [employability, mobility, and intercultural competence] in the future as it makes communication between teachers and students more difficult. (Respondent 44)

5. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to examine the perceptions of pre-service bilingual teachers regarding (i) whether they believe that the promotion of competences related to employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students is an important objective of Bilingual Education, and (ii) whether they consider they are being properly trained for this task. In most cases, participants show a positive attitude concerning the relevance of these elements as targets of bilingual programs. Conversely, they do not think they are being properly instructed in this respect.

In relation to RQ1 (*What should be the main students' competences developed in Bilingual Education according to pre-service bilingual teachers?*) and RQ2 (*What should be the role of employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness in Bilingual Education according to pre-service bilingual teachers?*), these three aspects are important elements to be developed in these programs (Gómez-Parra, 2018; Gómez-Parra et al., 2021; Romanowski, 2018; Rubio-Alcalá & Coyle, 2021) and, in turn, should be considered the focus of bilingual teaching, although participants also claim that other issues, such as language proficiency and communicative skills. Regarding RQ3 (*Do pre-service bilingual teachers consider they are being trained to develop employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students?*), although respondents highlight the potential of real training periods and mobility programs, they consider they are not being properly trained in terms of employability and mobility in any other ways; on the contrary, they believe their teacher trainers are providing them with intercultural teaching in the regular lessons organized. Finally, as for RQ4 (*Do pre-service bilingual teachers consider online-based education is helping them be prepared to develop employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness among their future students?*), despite the benefits of online education in terms of development of their digital competence and the variety of resources they are being provided with, participants consider that the limited interaction with their peers and teachers, the loss of practice, specially oral, and the lack of preparation of teacher trainers makes online education insufficient for their education in these factors.

These findings, however, should be interpreted considering two limitations. First, pre-service bilingual teachers from a single university have been considered, and therefore the results may not apply to other contexts. In this sense, participants from other universities should be recruited in future studies to obtain more data and draw more generalisable conclusions. Second, only self-reported perceptions

have been studied for the analysis after utilising a structured interview, which may be influenced by the subjective ideas of the sample. Future research should also contemplate using additional sources (both qualitative and quantitative) to collect more reliable and comparable data.

Employability, international mobility, and intercultural awareness have been proved to be relevant indicators of the success of bilingual programs (Gómez-Parra et al., 2021) and, therefore, there is no doubt that Bilingual Education must seek their development among students. Nevertheless, this must involve the previous training of teachers in these matters, for they will be responsible for preparing the future generations that will take over society in all its very areas. Thus, there is an urgent need to rethink initial bilingual teacher education programs, and universities cannot look the other way.

6. ETHICAL STATEMENT AND CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Participants provided written consent prior to data gathering and analysis. Their responses have been anonymised to guarantee confidentiality. Furthermore, the author declares no conflict of interests.

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