

CLIL in Teaching English. Engaging Young Learners through CLIL

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to explore to what extent the educational approach represented by CLIL (Content language integrated learning) engages students in language learning and its impact on motivation in language acquisition. I will also outline how CLIL could be used to attain “authenticity of purpose” (Coyle, Hood and Marsh, 2010) and provide a better vehicle for authentic language exposure and production in English as a Foreign Language context. The paper will also provide insights into CLIL’s methodology as well as into some major CLIL practices.

Key words: CLIL, methodology, motivation, scaffolding, meaningful learning, engaging CLIL activities.

I.1 Contextualising the CLIL approach

In a world of growing multilingualism, engaging students toward language learning has become a great challenge, even for the most experienced teachers . However, positive linguistic and academic results have been obtained through CLIL programmes, which led to further implementation of this educational approach in a lot of European countries. Through CLIL, both content and language skills are acquired , with the aim of offering students a natural situation for language development. Haataja (2007) points out that CLIL is just a covering expression for all language and content teaching done in an integrated way. Furthermore, Coyle states that “content and language integrated learning is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. CLIL is content-

driven, and this is where it both extends the experience of learning a language, and where it becomes different to existing language –teaching approaches” (Coyle, 2010:25).

On the other hand, demographic changes experienced in Europe during the last decades, led the Council of Europe to find a solution to improve educational systems. The EU began sponsoring research projects on language learning and CLIL arose “as an educational approach which can enhance plurilingualism” (Nikula, 1999). Additionally, a “series of policy papers issued by EU bodies and institutions since the early 1990s has made it clear that CLIL is regarded on a political level as a core instrument for achieving policy aims directed at creating a multilingual population in Europe” (Dalton-Puffer, 2008:18).

Other similar approaches such as Canadian immersion, content based-instruction, bilingual education, languages across the curriculum, which used content as a tool to teach language, stimulate natural supportive language-learning environment. According to Christiane Dalton-Puffer, Professor of applied linguistics at the University of Vienna, there are certain features of European CLIL that differentiate it from other forms of bilingual education. The teachers engaged in CLIL lessons will normally not be native speakers of the target language. Furthermore, CLIL is usually implemented once learners have already acquired literacy skills in their mother tongue. This is because students rarely learn to read or write through a foreign language, but can transfer already existing literacy skills to the foreign language. In this respect, CLIL differs from other content-based approaches in that “classroom content is not so much taken from everyday life or general content of the target language but rather from content subject, from academic/ scientific disciplines or from professions” (Wolff, 2007:23). Additionally to traditional language instruction, the scope of CLIL is to improve both the students’ accuracy as well as motivation toward the learning language.

As far as I am concerned, despite the potential for CLIL to offer educational benefits in two distinct areas (language and content), it also challenges teachers and students alike in the sense that language and content teachers should work together in collaboration and share their skills. This means they have “to combine methods and techniques of two subjects” (Massler, 2010:12). Also for students, the dual focus of CLIL means that the amount of workload in class can be too demanding.

I.2 An insight into CLIL methodology

CLIL methodology is an important factor which influences the whole process of the CLIL programme. According to Mehisto, 2008 the core features of CLIL include: *Multiple focus* that refers to supporting language learning in content classes, but also content- learning in language classes, integrating several subjects and organizing learning through cross-curricular themes and projects.

A key principle in the CLIL model is meaningful learning. Meaningful learning means offering opportunities in which learners can connect to the material individually or use the language for personal expression. When material is personally meaningful, research has shown that it is retained longer by learner. Furthermore, the interaction to share meaningful information allows authentic practice of language skills in which the learners are not exclusively focusing on the forms or structures of language. “Ways of creating opportunities for meaningful learning refer to nurturing creative and critical thinking, building accessibility into presentation of new information, drawing connections between the content and the students’ personal lives, attitudes and experiences ” (Mehisto, 2008:21).

Another aspect promoted by CLIL is a safe and enriching learning environment which has to be created by CLIL teachers, who have to support and encourage students to experiment with language and content providing guided access to authentic materials and learning environments. “Naturalness of the environment is one reason why children seem so good at picking-up languages (...) a language classroom where learners go through the difficult process of sorting out sounds, structures, grammar or vocabulary is rarely natural ”(Marsh, 2001:24).

Professor Dalton Puffer explains that authenticity has been frequently referred to as a defining aspect of CLIL and one of the main advantages of CLIL is that content subject gives rise to real communication by “tapping into a great reservoir of ideas, concepts and meanings allowing for

natural use of the target language” (Dalton Puffer, 2007:25). The traditional teaching of foreign languages has been criticized for not providing sufficient input, an input that in addition is too often inauthentic, functionally restricted and therefore lacking a real communicative function. This obviously may have an impact on students’ motivation, especially in the long run.

Another focus for CLIL teachers is creating opportunities for active learning. Students in CLIL classroom learners are active participants in setting learning objectives, outcomes or evaluation and they participate in a more verbally active manner through cooperative learning and interactive activities. The CLIL teachers design lessons in which they act as facilitators and guides, in this way favoring peer cooperative work. The linguist Teresa Naves emphasizes active and interactive behavior for teachers. She suggests that teachers provide clear and comprehensible instructions, descriptions of tasks and convey their expectations to students. When presenting new information, Naves promotes the use of demonstrations, outlines, visuals, repetitions, scaffolding and linking to learner’s past knowledge as ways to make input comprehensible to the learners (Naves, 2009).

II Motivation and CLIL

Motivation counts as a determinant factor of language learning, and for this reason I support the idea that motivation should be the main pillar when teaching, and therefore it should be continuously nurtured. CLIL in the English lesson broadly encapsulates aspects of the target-language culture, cross-curricular material as well as topics which are selected according to students’ interests and experiences; this actually increases their motivation and hungers toward learning the language.

Engaging young learners in CLIL lessons, is deeply connected with motivation. Since at certain ages students rely strongly on extrinsic motivation, I personally consider, it is the teacher’s job to attract them into learning a foreign language. Sometimes it can be difficult and tiring to maintain pupils’ attention, since young learners have very short attention spans. However, there are many CLIL games, funny videos, songs, TPR activities which can be introduced in traditional

English lessons that could enhance motivation, thus making children fully absorb language in a natural way.

Another way to support children's learning is by building scaffolding. To make sure that students successfully deal with authentic materials and that as much *input* as possible can become *intake*, it is essential for students to receive ample support : “He who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance; one cannot fly into flying” (Mehisto, Marsh, Frigols, 2008:35). According to Mehisto and Marsh, scaffolding helps pupils access previously acquired learning and, by creating new relational links, they begin to acquire the content. Recent studies have shown that students who are not as talented in language learning as other students greatly benefit from scaffolding. Their motivation for language learning often increases once they understand how and in which order to proceed, and which phrases to use when describing pictures, analyzing charts, or interpreting cartoons . Students need scaffolding until they feel safe, confident enough to dare to speak. CLIL can offer students the feeling of being immersed in something practical, related to their own experience and interests. “To scaffold students’ participation, we should welcome every interaction, and add corrective feedback only when it is relevant for them, showing that making mistakes is not something to be ashamed about, but a means of progressing. In this way CLIL classroom will become non-threatening supportive contexts, where most of the students feel comfortable to participate”(Mehisto, Marsh, Frigolis, 2008:42).

Scaffolding can be constructed and supported, for example not only by teachers but also by parents, by other learners or by various materials. Besides, there are also certain scaffolding strategies that enhance the process of learning. Among strategies offered by the authors Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols, I decided to mention some , preferably those, that are helpful and useful in primary school:

- “brainstorming a topic to determine the existing level of knowledge
- providing language immediately, as it is needed
- placing notes in the margin of handouts
- shortening sentences
- using pictures and realia
- breaking material into chunks

- highlighting the most important text in a passage
- giving clues and asking follow-up questions helping pupils to better understand and manage the learning process” (Mehisto, Marsh, Frigols 2008:45).

In order to help learners construct their own learning, they need to be taught how to learn efficiently. Learning skills and strategies, and especially subject- specific study skills like working with maps, diagrams or pictures, must be practiced continually and become an integral part of every CLIL lesson. They are the pillars of CLIL learning and their potential for promoting language as well as higher order and critical thinking skills has long been neglected.

III.CLIL activities

CLIL has been successfully implemented in primary school level educational contexts and with lower-proficiency learners and it has proved to be very effective and engaging for students.

However, I would emphasize that in order to teach CLIL and for it to be effective, the teacher either needs to be experienced and familiar with both language teaching and the content area, or there needs to be a team-teaching scenario in which teachers support one another in their “specialisms”, as is suggested by Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010).

It is not only by means of research, but also from a first hand experience that I have been in contact with the CLIL approach. Firstly, I applied to a Comenius project which was carried out in Exeter, England where I attended a course entitled: “ CLIL- Practical Ideas for primary classes” and I also got the chance to witness various CLIL lessons in International schools. After attending these type of lessons, the major benefits of integrating content and languages became obvious: not only better learning outcomes, but also the achievement of more sophisticated skills.

In Romania, I was able to introduce a couple of CLIL lesson to my 1st graders (science and maths lessons) in some extracurricular activities and I observed the positive effects and the impact CLIL had on students. The flexibility, creativity the approach entailed, made my students’

motivation flourish, and so did my own motivation . One of the lessons that I taught to my 1st graders was entitled: "Shapes". Some relevant CLIL activities included in my lesson were:

- song called: The Shape Song
- brainstorming objects with one shape, rectangular classroom objects (like TV, carpet, window etc.) and running and touching real objects or flashcards stuck up around the classroom.
- matching pictures (shapes) to their corresponding word.
- a picture dictation – explaining a picture that students can't see for them to draw and identify.
- Spot the wrong shape- for example: The carrot is a rectangle!
- TPR activities include students making the shape together, e.g. by three people lying on the floor in a triangle. The whole class or large groups could also hold hands and stand in a circle, square.
- story-telling using shape cards. Each student has 5 different shape cards. Everytime they hear the name of a shape, they have to raise the correct shape.

Since young learners proved to be very competitive, I decided to reinforce the new vocabulary by using a game called "**Fly Swatter**". The "Sight Words Fly Swat is a game for building speed and confidence with identifying sight words. The teacher says a word, in our case a shape and the child has to spot the word and *splat* it with a fly swat. Children find the physicality of the activity fun. Sight Words Fly Swat is a great way of giving children the repetition they need to achieve mastery while keeping them engaged.

Implementing CLIL activities with my own students reinforced the idea that this pedagogical approach causes a shift from traditional teacher-centred practices to more innovative and engaging student centered approaches. Taking into account my students' performance and their participation and enthusiasm with this approach, I have decided to further implement some of these activities to my non-CLIL classes, whenever I have the chance.

Conclusions

In most of the countries where CLIL is taught such as Spain, Austria, Finland, England, results into language acquisition show, that young learners' motivation has increased and that using authentic materials along with teaching language through content will pave the way to successful learning. As far as I am concerned, I would advocate the implementation of CLIL courses because of the rich opportunities and positive effects they can have on the classroom and on the learner's experience of learning the target language.

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