

Teaching vocational subjects in a foreign language

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Abstract. The article deals with the main aspects and problems of teaching vocational subjects in a foreign language (English) at various degrees of education focusing mainly on secondary and concisely on tertiary learning. The main principles and methods have been outlined, supported by longstanding experience in teaching under the CLIL mode. The answers to both language-related and subject-related questions are sought.

Keywords: CLIL methods; language related subjects; knowledge related subjects

1 Introduction

More than two decades, methods of Content and Language Integrated Learning (hereinafter CLIL) have been used, they have been gradually implemented in all levels of educational systems all over the world and intensively developed and legitimized in most countries in Europe. The CLIL acronym was preceded by various similar terms as described in “CLIL—A Pedagogical Approach from the European Perspective” [1] or “History of CLIL” [2]. CLIL theoretical framework has been built [3] and numerous definitions formed. However, some calls for their clarification have appeared [4]. Concurrently, interest in implementing CLIL has been growing and has become “a breeding (nutritive) ground” for demanded (and sometimes policy-driven) research. The most frequent fields of study is language (L2), followed by attitudes and motivation of learners. The question whether “CLIL leads to better subject matter knowledge than traditional learning” [3] has not brought clear answers yet, and therefore “more research is needed to entangle the considerable number of context variables and their influence on older pupils’ knowledge acquisition” [3]

The paper firstly describes the background and context of researched objects, particularly some practices in implementing CLIL in observed schools and finally focuses mainly on post-teaching (learning) self-evaluation, motivation and preferences of / pupils / students of a particular secondary comprehensive school and only marginally compares some results with a smaller sample of university students. The objective of the research is to obtain students opinion of their learning subjects in English and to verify the initial

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hypothesis based on observations that (some) students appreciate their study and benefit from getting higher knowledge in lexis, in particular. However, the prime purpose and still the most meaningful reason is to get a feedback and a sort of “fuel” for further teachers’ development and appropriate activities while teaching in a CLIL mode.

2 History and background

One of the first results dealing with CLIL practicing in the Czech Republic were published in 2008 (processing the EU document “Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: An action plan 2004—06”) [5]. In the same year the first project of National Institute for Further Education on implementation of CLIL methods started. Both institutions provided the identical data (6%) about the number of schools using CLIL in 2008. For the year 2011, the National Institute published the percentage (19 %) of CLIL inclusion in Czech elementary and secondary school educational plans and even 30 % as its implementation according to headteachers’ estimates. The percentage has not changed significantly so far.

The research sample school belongs to the system of secondary comprehensive schools. The particular school integrates business, economics, social studies and languages (intended mainly for the public). The curriculum has usually included a vocational subject – business correspondence - since this type of schools was established. From today’s perspective, the subject was based on CBI method (Content-based Instruction) with traditional translations from L1 to L2 (and vice versa) and memorising business letter phrases. Since 2007 it has been included in CLIL subjects (L2 is only English, unlike almost a hundred years ago when French and German were taught) together with economics. In 2013 CLIL biology classes started in cooperating (team teaching) as the only CLIL item based on a Project. As well as in Slovakia a foreign language is used up to maximum 50 % of the lesson time in this country. Therefore all subjects are taught independently both in Czech (L1) or in English (mainly L2), in 45-minute classes (in ratio L1: L2 – 1 : 1, 2 : 2 or 2 : 1) and moreover only in classes of Enhanced Language Teaching. Although CLIL is not confined to higher-achieving students and it should not be an approach for the elite [6] in other classes CBI method has been used only as a part of general language (L2) so far.

Before implementing the first CLIL subjects (business correspondence and economics in English) in 2008 two involved teachers (both language and content qualified) decided to follow the basic principles of CLIL [7] – the topic shall be at least as important as the language, the theme and task should be the driving forces, teachers are supposed to be more facilitators than instructors, making mistakes is a natural process – fluency should be over accuracy (but CLIL is not language teaching without grammar) [8] and teachers should encourage students for their life-long learning. Classes planning was designed (in spite of different content focused and offered subject) according to Brinton and Holton [9] three traditional stages: into – including introduction, initial knowledge and motivation; through – as the main part developing both skills, opening new content, using necessary grammar and processing relevant vocabulary; beyond – stage of consolidation and application, resulting in individual presentations.

Naturally, the essential question was how to present a new subject content using a foreign language, how to explain to students a large number of new words they are exposed to and particularly the words they do not know in their mother tongue (L1) or how to minimize using the L1 [8].

Business correspondence is a subject with a long tradition and sufficient number of various sources less or more convenient for school purposes. Also presenting this subject while giving instructions does not seem to be an obstacle to learning, but yet students’ attitudes and final results are usually not much satisfying. One of the CLIL principles –

language does not have to be accurate to be communicative – is modified. Implementing of the other two courses has been a typical example of pioneering and searching own ways in CLIL story. The first experiments were translations of Czech textbooks to English, which failed from many reasons not only because of rather different conceptions of the books. To use (mostly UK) sources helped to tackle the issue considerably but the main problem was to find an appropriate textbook. The conditions have changed dramatically recently as the first CLIL school books in Biology appeared in the Czech market. Economics is based on an English content textbook completed with ESP textbooks and inspired by those books, in particular, supported by own sources. Approximately one third of the content of CLIL subject is almost the same as in Czech version (for example Marketing), one third is quite similar (Human Resources) and one third is different (Businesses).

Vocabulary development which is arguably central to language acquisition and use [10] was a part of the inquiry and is mentioned later.

As described above a foreign language is used up to maximum 50%, this regulation helps in some way to minimize the use of L1 and all CLIL teachers take it seriously trying to keep the character of an English lesson as much as possible. Naturally, there are some unpredictable situations but many times more advanced and trained students can help solve the problem in L2.

Apart a sample secondary school the research also included just a quick preview done at the Faculty of Management (University of Hradec Kralove) which offers 62 content-based classes (2016) with 15 content-based involved teachers (from assistants to professors). All of the teachers' level of L2 is mostly B2 of CEFRL except for the members of the Department of Management of Tourism where all linguistics tutors teach professional L2 and have also some experience with CLIL elements.

3 Methodology and data

In the paper two analyses have been used: the quantitative analysis based on questionnaire with both closed and open questions and a qualitative one focused on opening questions and observation. Time-lapse questionnaire was designed to search three basic aspects in 15 questions: 1) students' motivation attitude to CLIL subject, 2) effects on their level of L2, 3) students' preferable strategies in their studies.

In a 5-year continuous observation and evaluation 270 16-year-old students of the secondary school and 135 18-year-olds participated in the questionnaire, 35 students of third grade of Management of Tourism were interested in filling out a survey form and also 63 Erasmus students of the Faculty of Management were addressed to join the survey.

3 Results

3.1 Attitudes and motivation

CLIL subjects have become a part of curriculum in the focus secondary school and they are compulsory. The school management like many headteachers in other schools have decided about a possible choice of CLIL subject according to existing appropriate teachers' qualifications or have motivated willing colleagues to expand their competence or degree.

At first younger pupils were asked about their attitudes to English, biology and biology in English. Students prefer English because they can communicate much more easily about everyday life, events, hobbies, etc. The percentage was very high – 92% but not surprising. Foreign language does not seem as boring as one of the principles claims – “... they (students) are not asked to discuss “vox-pop” content as in standard learning books... but

because the content is important in itself' [11]. To speak in detail of viruses or bacteria seems not to be as attractive as that "vox-pop" content. Nevertheless, there was not a significant difference in students' interests between biology in L1 and L2.

Even though economics is one of the most important subjects for the students' future jobs, the results of older pupils attitudes differ only slightly (85 % of preferences were for English). About 5 % did not like all three subjects but on the other hand 18 percent appreciated the unique chance to take part in the CLIL course. In 2012 there was an experiment - students could take final exams in economics partly in English, in other words, CLIL subject was a part of their leaving exams. Students' preferences of CLIL subject went up dramatically, in fact, they considered economics in English equal to any other subject. The different result from this year is included in the total 5-year score of the focus group of older pupils.

As CLIL subjects are obligatory, students have no other choice, they were asked which other subject(s) after their one or more year experience with biology or economics in L2 they would choose. The results partly correspond to existing CLIL subjects in this country. Most frequently indicated are civics, history and geography (72 %) followed by all possible subjects. Sciences and mathematics, in particular, were reported only rarely. Students could also mention that they would not select any and could report the reasons. Not only one answer was like this: It is better to know the contents in L1 thoroughly than in two languages not so properly. A large number of content subject teachers share the same idea. They usually feel responsible for preparing their students for demanding final exams and cannot appreciate the CLIL duality.

Finally, students were inquired about their motivation of learning CLIL. (In order to get more colourful picture about participants' motivation, the question was open.) There were three strongest motivations – marks, jobs and studying at universities. The higher the class the lower importance of marks – younger students (52 %), older ones (33%). Surprisingly a high number of students (total 46 %) even in the first grade (38 %) reported the importance of CLIL for their future jobs. 61 % of older students consider economics in L2 to be an advantage for studies at universities, which was naturally higher evaluation than in the classes of younger participants (38 %). The last more significant motivation was interest in CLIL subjects, which appeared in 8 % of interviewed students. For the first time (2017) self-education has occurred twice. Among the other possible incentives there was a humorous one: "My parents are proud of me."

3.2 Effects on students' language 2 and content subject / knowledge

After finishing courses 92 % of students reported improvement mainly in vocabulary expansion (94 %), 55 % feel that they speak more fluently, 40 % think that they got better at reading comprehension and only 7 % of interviewees suppose some positive effects on their knowledge of grammar, listening or writing comprehensions. Differences in focused CLIL subjects (biology and economics) were not significant (up to 5 %).

Students' opinions reflect the fact that most of the training time is devoted to vocabulary from the first step - getting familiar with new words to the last stages – testing the knowledge and continuous and never-ending consolidation. All possible techniques, methods and strategies are used not avoiding translation from L1 to L2, which however mainly serves as a support tool or background and is mainly employed by less advanced students or those who are just used to working with it.

Three years ago students were asked for the first time whether they feel some effects of CLIL subject on content subject / knowledge. Younger students' answers were rather evasive (don't know), or negative, if positive (from 30 participants about 2 – 3 every year), they were not able to specify how. Up to 12 students of economics admitted they could have improved. They wrote about better overlook, broadening horizons, different point of

views... Almost 30 % feel that CLIL helped them in some way but they were not able to define how.

3.3 Preferable methods, techniques, strategies

Students were asked to choose any teaching / learning method, technique, strategy, activity etc. which they prefer during CLIL classes while getting familiar with new words. This year data changed the position of preferences in this time-lapse research. For the first time the most popular is reading the word in the context – 62 % (more times and try to remember it), 43 % go for an explanation in other words and form a definition, 40 % like examples, 25 % need translation from L2 to L1 and vice versa, less than 10 % mention listening and only 4 % use monolingual (paper) dictionary. One student thinks that mobile application is convenient, in fact, everybody uses it.

3.4 Tertiary education

Although only a part of questionnaire was convenient for a simple comparison of the two levels of education, the essential answers were obtained. Subject content classes at the faculty are also compulsory, there is no other choice. But 62 % expressed their positive attitude to the courses, (even 12 % were interested in some more) and 32 % would prefer different opportunities. The difference between preferences at the secondary and tertiary level are significant. Random sample of the interviewed Erasmus students revealed that about 80 % have some experience with CLIL from their studies in their home countries and that more than 50 % would prefer classes more relevant to their specialisation.

Some elements of CLIL have been implemented in teaching professional English of tourism and finance in the Department of Applied Languages [10].

4 Conclusion

During years of the time-lapse research at a focused secondary school, not many changes appeared in students' preferences, only a slight movement towards CLIL subjects. Based on continuous observation in surveyed classes, enthusiasm of highly qualified, experienced and committed staff and also the first relatively high percentage of positive attitudes to a CLIL method when CLIL subject was experimentally implemented in a leaving exam programme (which still rather distorts the total results) higher students' appreciation has been expected. The outcomes of questionnaire revealed quite low interest in all CLIL subjects.

Since 2007 when the first CLIL subjects were implemented, the intention has been to reach approximately the same position of CLIL subjects in preferences as the other ones, to get good reputation inside the school among other colleagues as well as outside in the public and to settle CLIL subjects in curriculum.

The second part of the initial hypothesis has proven to be true. The vast majority of students confirmed that they improved particularly in enhancing their vocabulary and also their speaking in L2 became more fluent.

As mentioned above there is "a significant number of context variables and their influence on older pupils"[3]. They occur in any other subject - such as various students' levels of a foreign language, teachers' experience, personality, quality or qualifications. But in CLIL there is not only one but two subjects that have slowly merged and something similar have changed in students' preferences or teachers' attitudes, which certainly increases the number of the variables.

The simple questionnaire in the research has not been designed and has not aspired to unknot this issue. However the answer for the question whether CLIL leads to better subject matter knowledge than traditional learning is rather interesting. Almost one third of older pupils feel they were influenced by CLIL in their content subject in some way but were not able to state some details.

The above mentioned findings should be taken into account in further CLIL procedures and following questionnaires focused more on some students' suggestions for improvements as the part of higher students' involvement in CLIL courses.

Although the research analyses data of only one particular comprehensive school, some of the identified results may contribute to general discussion about teaching based on CLIL method.

Acknowledgement

The paper was supported by the IGA Project 2017run at the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove No: 1903/1190/024302017.

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