

The implementation of CLIL in the educational context of Greek Senior High Schools - A proposal

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Abstract

This paper aims at studying a CLIL practice in the context of Greek Senior High Schools. It refers to an experiment carried out in A' class of 3rd Greek Senior High School of Larissa, in 2011-2012, in order that the following research questions can be answered: a) Is CLIL implementation feasible in a non-CLIL educational context? b) How can CLIL be implemented in a bureaucratic educational system like the Greek one? To this end, we designed and realized a bilingual project with the title: "Democracy: theory and practice". Although there is no official policy for the introduction and implementation of the CLIL approach in Greece, we argue that the CLIL approach can be implemented in the framework of the "inquiry-based projects" introduced as a distinct subject in Senior High Schools in 2011. On completion of the project it was shown that even in a non-CLIL educational context, there is room for implementation of the CLIL approach.

Key words: *CLIL, inquiry-based projects, students' research, teachers' and students' attitude to languages*

Introduction

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) initiative has experienced a considerable growth lately and it is being integrated into curricula all across Europe. The growth of the CLIL initiative can be attributed to the fact that there has been a great interest among education policy-makers in Europe in promoting multilingualism, thus increasing student and workforce mobility and reinforcing European citizenship. European Citizens are expected to acquire at least three languages in the course of their learning life (Council of Europe, 2001). Besides, the highly positive effects of CLIL demonstrated by recent research (Cenoz, 2009; Dalton-Puffer, 2007) influenced the education stakeholders in favour of the approach.

In Greece there is no such thing as a central educational policy for CLIL. The CLIL approach is not implemented at a national level in state schools and at the moment there is no plan for such policy. It is, however, applied in various private schools in big cities (Athens, Thessaloniki) and on a pilot basis in a state primary school which works under the auspices of the English Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Besides, there is no systematic and official training or support for educators related to CLIL.

This paper aims at studying a CLIL practice in the context of Greek State Senior High Schools. It refers to an experiment carried out in order that the following research questions can be answered:

- Is CLIL implementation feasible in a non-CLIL educational context?
- How can CLIL be implemented in a bureaucratic educational system like the Greek one?

The paper consists of three parts. In the first part we refer to the principles of the CLIL approach. In the second part, we describe the bilingual project we designed and carried out, that is the context, the objectives, the process, the materials and resources used. In the third part, we present the evaluation of the CLIL practice and the conclusions drawn.

Theoretical background

CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language with the objective of promoting both content mastery and language to pre-defined levels (Maljers, et al, 2010). Furthermore, achieving this twofold aim calls for the development of a special approach to teaching in that the non-language subject is not taught in a foreign language but with and through a foreign language. This implies a more integrated approach to both teaching and learning, requiring that teachers should devote special thought not just to the way languages should be taught, but to the educational process in general. (Eurydice, 2006).

According to David Marsh (2007), there is no single model which is appearing across Europe, a prototype that is being exported from one country to another. There is a range of different approaches in CLIL, depending on the age of the children, of the situation that the schools are. What these approaches have in common is the interweaving of language and content in a dual focused way, the construction of knowledge rather than the instruction. Since there is no one single way to do CLIL, the starting point is what teachers and students want to achieve with the CLIL approach, either content or language learning or a mixture of both (Coyle, 2008). In countries, for example, where the ability to use a second language fluently is considered to be a necessary and important skill due to existing social, economic and ethnological conditions, subject teachers have been able to promote their subject learning through a language other than the officially spoken one. And in other countries, where speaking a foreign language is seen as an important qualification, teaching a subject through a foreign language has been used as a means for motivating students. In Greece this never happened although there is a great interest in foreign languages and huge amounts of money are spent by families for that purpose.

Description of the implemented CLIL practice

The context

The CLIL practice described in this paper was implemented in the framework of a project class in a Greek State Senior High School. Projects were introduced in Senior High Schools in 2011. They were proposed as a distinct subject to be taught in A' class by any two teachers who would collaborate in their design and delivery. The next year, the projects were also comprised in B class curriculum. The main aim of this reform was to initiate a change in the teaching practices of Greek teachers. The initiative aimed at promoting cooperative learning, which has not been a common practice in Greek high schools, and the investigative approach.

In Greece, all schools, depending on the level, follow a common centralized curriculum. As far as Senior High Schools are concerned, they have a dual educational scope. On the one hand, they are intended to provide students with the right knowledge and qualifications so that they can enter university and continue with higher studies. On the other hand, they aim at offering a wider education in order that students can develop their critical thinking and their ability to examine things and situations in a holistic way. This dual character of the school is reflected in the type of subjects students do during a school year. In all classes students have a bunch of subjects which are called "subjects of general education", a number of subjects of a specialization which are called "subjects of direction" and one elective subject which they choose from a list of offered subjects. English belongs to the group of subjects of general education and is taught as a foreign language in all three years.

Given the nature of the school and the unavoidable big competition in the entry exams for University, students demonstrate a preference for the subjects in which they will take the exams, namely “the subjects of direction” which are most demanding. There is a general belief that the school does not prepare students adequately for the entry exams and due to this false, in my opinion, belief the majority of students, if not all, take private lessons in order to have the best possible preparation for the exams. However, this is not an issue to be analyzed in this report but it is mentioned only to partly explain the general attitude of the students toward the so-called “subjects of general education”, English being included.

Regarding the students’ competence in English, most of them are of B2 level in the English language and there are a few who are of C2 level according to CEFR (2005). However, it is worth clarifying that whatever level of language competency they have reached when they enter Senior High Schools, this level is the result of intensive courses they attend in private language schools at a younger age as a result of the pressure they receive from their parents who consider the knowledge of a foreign language a “must”. As a consequence, in most cases they have developed a rather negative attitude towards English classes at school, as they believe that there is nothing more to gain, due to the false impression that the certificate of language competency they have is what matters. Hardly do they realize that their competence fades away when they do not use the language.

The project was applied in A’ class of Senior High School. The students were from 15 to 16 years of age and they were all, but a few, B2 level English learners, based on the Certificates of Competency in English they held. In practice, to my estimate, although they seemed to be quite aware of the structure of the language, they were hesitant when it came to speaking. Their listening, reading and writing skills were very good, though. It was obvious that the area we had to work on was the oral production of the language that is, fluency and appropriacy of vocabulary. English language course books provide students with predesigned tasks to practice everyday language. Useful as it is, it not enough for a learner who is expected to reach a level of being able to communicate ideas no matter what the context is.

Considering the described conditions, the CLIL approach struck me as the best method to trigger the students’ enthusiastic engagement in language learning. Besides, the CLIL approach appeared to offer me the right framework to identify my role as an English teacher in the supervision of a project in collaboration with another subject teacher, a Greek philologist in particular. The topic of the project was “Democracy: Theory and Practice”. The teaching hours were allotted as follows: 2 teaching periods in Greek, 1 teaching period in English. However, quite too often, we (the teachers) were both present in the classroom, addressing students in both languages (Greek and English,) always working on the same subject. This bilingual context was seen as an opportunity for students to develop their mediating skills.

The Objectives

Before proposing the topic of the research that students would carry out, the project objectives were discussed and a rough outline of the project was designed. Since it was the first time that the students would set on this new way of learning, namely the inquiry-based learning, we had to consider that they would need to learn to work in groups, to do research, to write a research report, to give a public presentation of their research, to use ICT. We also had to decide upon our individual role in the project. I suggested the CLIL approach as the most appropriate for our case. The aim of this attempt was to liberate students from any constraints they might have in using the foreign language to mediate ideas, values and beliefs and engage them in a more creative, higher order thinking and knowledge processing (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, & Krathwohl, 1956). We decided upon four main aims which were associated with four domains, that is, content, language, cooperative learning and technology. In other words, our aims were for the students to:

- develop an insight in the notion of democracy and be able to ask and answer questions related to it

- learn how to work in groups and practice peer-learning
- improve their language skills through their exposure to and use of both Greek and English
- learn to use a wiki

We expected that by the end of the course, the students would have been able to:

- demonstrate a deep understanding of the democratic values in theory and practice in both languages, Greek and English
- to alternate from one language to another easily and naturally
- to use books and online resources in either language for the needs of their project
- to upload their work on the wiki pages, read and comment on their peers' input and respond to their teacher's instructions on the wiki with equal readiness regardless of the language
- To write the research paper and deliver a public presentation of their project

The process

The whole project was completed in 12 sets of 3 forty-five-minute-teaching periods. During the first three-hour-session some time was spent for the students and teachers to get to know one another and connect as a group. Students were advised about the CLIL approach that is the dual focus of our project and the bilingual form of it. Students then formed subgroups and decided upon a set of principles to abide by throughout the course. They wrote their principles in both Greek and English on carton papers. They were also acquainted with the new learning approach that is the investigative method. They learned what doing research means, in other words, that they need to think about and what they want to learn about a topic and write the research questions. They were also informed about methodological tools (questionnaires, interviews), where they can do research (libraries, the Internet) and how they can tell whether their sources are reliable. Besides, the students were informed about ways of listing their sources and what constitutes plagiarism. In the end, the students were asked to discuss in their subgroups the benefits of the new learning approach and they shared their views with the rest of the class. They filled out their personal diary with the description of what they had learned and how they felt about the new method.

The next three-hour-session was devoted to the design of the research. The students were given the topic and they were asked to brainstorm with ideas concerning different aspects of the topic. They discussed their ideas in their subgroups and announced them to the class by their spokesperson. Their ideas were organized in categories and each subgroup opted for one category. Then students were guided as to develop their research questions. They made use of the KWL (know, want to learn, and learn) chart (Ogle, 1986). They also discussed and presented the methodological tools, the resources, the time schedule and the tasks of each member.

The following session was spent in the library where students were acquainted with the way a library is organized, how they could seek the necessary reading material. Finally they searched for the right books and the right websites on the Internet for their research. They borrowed books and made a list of sites they could use for their study.

In the fourth session the students were presented with the way they would be assessed. Moreover, they practiced taking notes using the concept web technique and learned how to cite and make reference to the source of their information while studying their sources. It was then realized that the time available at school for the research was not enough. Students had to study at home and bring to school information to be then discussed and lead to conclusions.

The fifth time in class, the students of each group had to share with the rest of the class the knowledge they gained from their studying and discuss in plenary their conclusions. It became evident that the students needed to have access to one another's work if they were to

compose a research paper in the end. Students were then presented with a wiki platform which could cater for that need and would facilitate their work.

Part of the session that followed was devoted to the students' getting accustomed to the use of the wiki. They created the page of their group where they could upload their work and have it read by their fellow students. They could also turn to it to inform the diary of the course, to check for the assessment criteria, to find instructions, comments and guidance from their teachers, to consult the agenda for the course. They worked in the school's computer lab and they uploaded all their work on the wiki.

In the following two sessions the students discussed how the information they had found could help them answer the research questions and reached the point of presenting their conclusions concerning the evolution of democracy in the course of time, the civil rights and the obligations of a democratic citizen. It was then brought up that students would like to know whether the democratic values were respected in the school context. They then prepared an on-line questionnaire to be answered by the members of the school community so that they could draw some conclusions. They answered the questionnaire themselves and emailed the URL of it to as many students as possible and invited others to fill in the printed form.

In the ninth session the students analyzed the data collected from their small-scale survey. They discussed their findings and drew some conclusions which were written down. It was then explained to them what they needed to do as to prepare their research paper the different parts of which were allotted to the subgroups.

In the tenth session the drafts of the different parts of the research paper were discussed. Remarks were made in terms of content, structure and language (form, vocabulary, grammar, syntax, punctuation). Besides, cohesion and coherence were checked and mistakes in referencing were pointed out. Students were asked to proofread and edit their research paper.

In the eleventh session the students were asked to prepare for the public presentation of their research. Some would prepare a power point presentation, others posters illustrating what they regarded as being the milestones in the development of democracy. The twelfth session was devoted to rehearsing for the public presentation.

Materials and resources

Considering the innovative nature of the project method in the Greek schools, the teaching materials and resources included, besides whatever content related material was needed, articles, exercises, presentations, websites that would help students learn how they could conduct a research, write a research paper, work collaboratively, use the technology, do presentations.

Evaluation of the CLIL practice

On completion of the course, students participated in a focus group interview during which data were collected concerning the students' perception of learning content in a language other than their mother tongue. The evaluation of the pilot implementation of the CLIL approach was also based on the students' entries in their diaries, their self-assessment sheets and their responses to a questionnaire designed for that purpose. Our intention was not to measure achievements in terms of language and content, two areas that could be the object of more specific attention in future investigations. We were mostly interested to understand how the students' attitude towards the foreign language had changed and how they perceived any possible benefits. All the collected data were studied thoroughly and analysed with the aim at finding certain patterns that could lead to further interpretation. The methodology applied is known as inductive approach to data analysis (Sarafidou, 2011), since categories were constructed after the systematic study of the data and no other model of particular categories was used. The main categories formed concerned the language code switch, the general attitude towards foreign languages, cultural prejudices being included and attitudes to the CLIL approach. Some minor collateral findings are also discussed.

Language code switch

According to the students' responses, the big challenge for them was that they had to alternate from Greek to English and vice versa, depending on whom they were addressing to. For some students it took some time until that switch occurred automatically and language came out naturally while for others that happened very quickly. Students expressed their amazement at how often they did not realize this change as after a while it occurred quite effortlessly. They admitted they learned new vocabulary and that there were cases that the context helped them realize how the word by word transfer from one language to another can lead to miscommunication. An example of such a misuse of word was the word "circumstance" for the word "consistency" that students discovered while transferring the rules in their contract into its English version.

Attitude towards foreign languages

Another interesting finding was their initial resistance to using English in their studying of "democracy" which, to their mind, was a topic that should be treated in Greek. Stereotypes like "in Greece was it that Democracy was borne" and thus "it is a shame to deal with such a subject in another language" were deconstructed. Students realized that values are universal and beyond time. And other negative views concerning foreign language acquisition were transformed into positive opinions. For example, quite too often Greek students complain why they must be them who need to learn foreign languages and "not the others" referring to English native speakers in particular. By the end of the course, all of them had reconsidered their older views and expressed their estimate on the value of knowing languages. They started seeing the language as a tool for communication and educational development rather than simply one more school subject and an advantage rather than a "necessary evil".

Attitudes to the CLIL approach

The CLIL related feelings expressed by students could be summarized as positive at the end of the course. The students described how they felt at the beginning of the course using adjectives such as "anxious", "afraid", "embarrassed", and "confident", "better", "comfortable", "appreciative", "eager to try it again", "more enthusiastic and more fond of English" at the end of the course. 25% of them stated that they would like to do Science in English, 19% of them suggested History and another 19% Civics, 6% Mathematics, while 31% of the students said it could be any subject.

Concerning what they enjoyed most among the use of English, the topic, working in groups and the use of ICT, half the students ranked the use of English first, one quarter of them working in groups, 17% the topic and 8% the use of ICT. Regarding the perceived improvement of the language skills, the majority of students estimated that they quite improved their language skills and only a small percentage declared that they did not improve at all. This finding can possibly be explained by the fact that among students there were some who had a high level of English.

Conclusions

Reflecting upon the CLIL practice described in this paper and the students' views of it, it can be argued that even in a non-CLIL educational context there is room for implementation of the CLIL approach and that is in the inquiry-based project classes. Since CLIL is inspired by important methodological principles established by research on foreign language teaching, such as the need for learners to be exposed to a situation calling for genuine communication (Eurydice, 2006), the project classes in Greek Senior High Schools appear to be a suitable educational environment for such a cause. Obstacles in promoting language learning in a bureaucratic system with strict curricula and centrally decided timetable for each subject that

prevent any initiative for possible alterations, can be overcome through CLIL applied in the project classes and thus language is taught on a relatively intensive basis without claiming an excessive share of the school timetable.

Unrealistic as it might sound for subject teachers in secondary education to do CLIL in their subject classes, it seems quite feasible if they collaborate with language teachers and undertake a project class which provides the necessary conditions for this approach. Even when the subject teacher does not speak the foreign language, the presence of the language teacher can motivate them to take up learning the language. In this way multilingualism among teachers is promoted which safeguards their professional development. Moreover the students' autonomy and self-confidence increases as they take on the role of mediators between the two teachers which enhances the authenticity of language use context. In this way, both teachers and learners feel as being part of a learning community-where everyone is useful and has a role to play (Coyle, 2008).

Based on the principles presented by Marsh, Coyle and Hood (2010) and Meyer's Pyramid (Meyer, 2010), our project can be described as an authentic CLIL project. Knowledge was constructed in a way that excluded teacher-centered approaches and learning based on memorizing. The language was developed in social interactions and its use in practice with emphasis given on all four skills (reading, listening, speaking, writing), as well as mediating and not strictly on grammar and vocabulary. Students turned to their peers for assistance whenever they had difficulty in communicating information effectively and thus cooperative learning was activated. There was constant cooperation between the two teachers and a variety of teaching techniques, including ICT, were applied. In addition to all these, since CLIL methodology has a great impact on the development of oral skills and the increased motivation of students (Pavón, 2010) evidence of these two elements in our project justifies our statement.

This first attempt was followed by another two CLIL projects, one in the framework of an extracurricular project named "Our school reading club" and one in the framework of an eTwinning project both of which are extra-curricular activities for the students. This means that students are not evaluated for their performance or their work, while they are in the project class. As a result, it is suggested that projects in Greek Senior High Schools should be carried out under the supervision of two teachers, one of whom be a language teacher. If that happened, then there would be the right conditions for the implementation of CLIL without any dramatic changes in the organization and function of High Schools. Last but not least, there would be more ground for research in CLIL in a context like the one described in this paper, since the results of this case study cannot but be indicative only to some extent. There is still a lot more to be researched.

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