

## CLIL in Secondary Vocational School Seen Through Students' Perspectives—Action Research Overview

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### Abstract

Communicative competences may be fostered by increasing students' motivation to learn foreign languages. This can be accomplished by applying new approaches, instruments and tools to modern foreign language teaching and learning procedures. This action research, used as a tool for reflection on teaching practices, looked into the possibility that CLIL approach could be one of such new approaches. The purpose of this study was to determine the students' challenges, attitudes and motivation for CLIL lessons, the best methodology and the most important/best acquired language skills in order to improve or adjust the CLIL approach to satisfy ESP students' needs and make ESP lessons more effective. This paper presents the results of action research conducted in two secondary vocational schools in different educational systems, aiming to determine and compare the students' attitudes towards the ESP environment, the challenges students face, and appropriate CLIL methodology.

**Key words:** CLIL, action research, ESP.



## 1 Introduction

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is an increasingly popular method of delivering foreign language training through recognized school subjects, using established syllabi within a school's curriculum. The CLIL approach is focused both on foreign language acquisition and content acquisition of non-linguistic subjects, whereby it is necessary to integrate simultaneously language and content learning.

For the purposes of this research, we should distinguish between “hard” and “soft” CLIL approaches (Ball, 2009; Bentley, 2010). CLIL modules through which certain non-linguistic subjects are taught in a foreign language over an appropriate number of hours constitute the hard version of CLIL. On contrary, a soft CLIL approach refers to certain subjects and content taught in foreign language classes, such as ESP.

It is believed that the greatest benefit of the CLIL educational system is that it provides a stimulus to students learning a non-linguistic subject in a foreign language. Consequently, it is thought that the CLIL approach activates Krashen's theory (1981) on the adoption of L2, i.e. students learn more easily when they forget they are using a foreign language and use it spontaneously (Krashen & Terrell, 1983; Vučo, 2006).

This paper presents action research as a part of the ECML project conducted by teachers working in the CLIL environment. The study explored ESP teaching practices in CLIL classrooms to check if the methodology, activities and vocabulary exercises were appropriate and satisfactory as well as if the ESP students enjoyed learning CLIL and recognized the importance of language skills corresponding to the scope of their future work. The purpose of this study was to determine the students' challenges, attitudes and motivation for CLIL lessons, the most effective methodology and the most important/best acquired language skills in order to improve or adjust the CLIL approach to satisfy the students' needs and make lessons more effective.

The paper gives a short theoretical framework of CLIL in vocational schools, followed by a preview of ECML project and the results of the action research conducted in two vocational schools, both applying CLIL methodology.

## 2 The CLIL approach and its characteristics

An increasing number of educational and school institutions apply CLIL teaching, which suggests the CLIL method must have positive aspects. The reasons for its application in teaching are reflected in the following statements (Çekrezi, 2011): “CLIL teaching strengthens self-esteem and motivation among students; learning foreign languages is the basis of each curriculum; CLIL students are more exposed to the foreign language than students in traditional classrooms and teaching methods are diverse, since each subject uses didactic tools specific to the content that is being taught, along with language activities and methods common to teaching foreign languages.” (pp. 3822–3823).

According to Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010), CLIL is “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (p.1). The vehicular language is mainly a foreign language, but it can be another language, a form of inherited language or the language of a community (Coyle et.al., 2010). CLIL aims to create an improvement in both the foreign language and the non-language area competence. Teachers involved in CLIL classrooms may be subject or language teachers, however language teachers need to learn more about the content and subject teachers need to work on the language needed for their subjects. In some

classrooms, cooperation between subject and language teachers is possible. CLIL classes need a great range of activities, and the materials that will be used in class have to be well prepared.

Lesca (2012, as cited in Manic, 2017) points out the advantages of CLIL classes, which are reflected in the methods and techniques used: multi-focus (the integration of content in the context of linguistic and non-linguistic objects through authentic teaching materials), active learning (where the student has a central role), and an authentic environment and cooperation between teachers in lesson planning.

## 2.1 The CLIL methodology

CLIL teachers constantly look for the most effective teaching methodology between that of the foreign language lesson and that of specific subjects. In CLIL lessons more attention is paid to language than it is when the subject is taught in the mother tongue. The CLIL approach fosters students' self-confidence and motivation, thinking skills and social and national values (Bentley, 2010). Regarding language, content-obligatory language is typical for CLIL lessons, and it comprises the vocabulary, grammatical structures and functional language for specific subjects (Bentley, 2010). Obligatory language should be presented through visual organizers in the early stages. Language is used to learn as well as to communicate. The most evident benefit of CLIL for learners is the improvement it brings about in communication and language skills. Suggested activities for developing communicative competence are brainstorming, open questions, peer discussions, role plays and debates. Before performing these activities, it is important to assign clear roles, timing and purposes. The language focus in a lesson does not incorporate structural grading; it is functional and dictated by the context of the subject. CLIL teachers should highlight vocabulary, allow learners to be more relaxed when using the target language and correct mistakes by recasting language immediately after they make mistakes. Teaching practices need to involve the learner in research and independent study and, in class, encourage interaction among peers. When students work in groups, they exchange information, deal with questions and have discussions among themselves. They describe, explain, evaluate, argue, and draw conclusions, which they then communicate through written or oral reports (Wolff and Quartapelle, 2011, in Quartapelle & Schameitat, 2012).

Texts used in CLIL lessons should be followed by illustrations to help learners visualize what they are reading. Microsoft PowerPoint presentations are very helpful for this purpose. Highlighting useful language in the text may help students to reproduce the core of the text in their own words. A variety of tasks should be provided according to different learning styles, preferences and purpose.

## 3 The ECML project

The ECML (European Centre for Modern Languages) is an institution which encourages excellence and innovation in language teaching. The ECML's strategic objectives focus on best practices of the learning and teaching of languages, on training multipliers and on support to research projects. "In order to implement its strategic objectives, the ECML organises a programme of international projects on language education" (n.p.).

The ECML project Action Research Communities for Language Teachers promotes techniques for action research and establishes a community of practice which brings together newly qualified and experienced teachers with teacher educators and university researchers. The project strengthens professional language teaching networks by forging links between academic expertise on action research and good practice in language classrooms. Language teachers are involved in action researches and



are offered a diverse range of perspectives on teaching methodologies. In addition, this project provides opportunities for language teachers to reflect on practice and to propose and test innovations while working collaboratively within a community of practice. A workshop (as a part of this project) for teachers and teacher trainers/educators from across Europe was held in Graz in November 2016. Throughout the project, participants shared examples from their own teaching, and reflected on action research approaches in different European contexts. The participants then identified their own action research interests, formed collaborative groups and defined a set of pilot classroom projects. One of the collaborations was made between Serbian and Macedonian teachers, both working in secondary vocational schools and applying the CLIL approach in their teaching practices.

The action research rationale relies on the model of the dynamic CLIL teacher (described in the European Framework for CLIL teacher education) who follows a personal path of enquiry, reflection and evaluation. One of the main powerful tools for empowering teaching and learning is the ability to conduct action research in collaboration with colleagues and other stakeholders, including students.

## 4 The study design

The action research, obligatory for Serbian and Macedonian participants of the workshop in Graz, was conducted by the teachers involved in the above mentioned ECML project. It was carried out in two secondary vocational schools: the Aviation Academy (Belgrade, Serbia) and the Secondary Vocational School for Economy and Law “Vasil Antevski - Dren” (Skopje, Macedonia). The collaboration between these two teachers was made due to the similarities in teaching methodology used in their ESP foreign language classrooms. Namely, the mutual methodology used to teach vocational English was based on the CLIL approach. The Aviation Academy is a secondary vocational school within the system of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, and it is the only school of this kind in Serbia and the whole region. The curriculum of the school involves both general English (GE) and Aviation English (ESP). The main difference between these two subjects can be seen in different methodology and activities used in the classroom. CLIL methodology is the core of ESP at the Aviation Academy.

For the purpose of the research, a questionnaire and an interview were used (a sample questionnaire may be found in the appendix). The teachers decided to conduct the research among their own students. It was not important to choose the students of the same age and level of English, because the methodology was the matter under examination. Despite this, it was still expected that the discrepancy in GE knowledge may yield different results, both in Serbian and Macedonian groups.

The overall number of students involved in the research was 50. The first-grade class at the Aviation Academy in Serbia comprised 25 students at A2/B2 level of GE who were learning vocational subjects both in English and in their mother tongue for the first year. Most of the students were not familiar with Aviation English (terminology and aviation operational procedures), therefore they sometimes had problems in acquiring knowledge even in their mother tongue. The group named 1-5 comprised 11 students and the group 1-7 consisted of 14 students. The students from the former group were better in terms of English knowledge (B1/B2 level) than the group 1-7 who were mostly at A1-A2 levels, although the CEFR standard in the first year of secondary vocational school in Serbia is A2 level.

In Macedonia, the final year students were involved in this project. The Macedonian students formed two groups (the group IV-1 with 11 students and the group IV-2 with 14). Business English for the students of economics is the optional subject in their third and fourth years of secondary vocational education. The B2 students were in the second year of studying vocational subjects in English and

in the fourth year of studying vocational subjects in their mother tongue. Most of the students were already familiar with the terminology of business English. The two Macedonian groups involved in this action research were also at the higher and lower levels of English knowledge.

At the Aviation Academy in Serbia, teaching is based mainly on the textbook followed by PowerPoint presentation. The textbook is made up of adapted authentic materials with follow-up language and content exercises. The authors of the textbook are English teachers who have been working at the Aviation Academy for more than ten years. Authentic materials used in classrooms are adapted to the level of students' previous language knowledge. Language and content are integrated, with the focus on meaning, and language skills are combined. Language is functional and dictated by the content of the subject, approached lexically rather than grammatically. Lessons are student-centered, activities are performed mostly in pairs or groups. Visualization and PowerPoint presentations facilitate students' acquisition of the foreign language.

In Macedonia, at the Secondary Vocational School for Economy and Law, the textbooks followed by PowerPoint presentations, online materials and You Tube are mainly used in lessons. The textbook is made up of adapted authentic materials with follow-up language and content exercises. The authors of both textbooks, the Serbian and the Macedonian, are ESP teachers who had adapted the authentic materials to meet the special needs of their ESP students.

In terms of methodology, similar activities and tasks are used in both schools, aiming to develop the communication and language competencies needed for their scope of work. The communicative approach is largely utilized, therefore language is approached lexically rather than grammatically. During CLIL lessons, students acquire vocabulary and grammar, but the focus of a CLIL is on understanding the subject content, not on grammatical structures (Bentley, 2010). Lessons are often based on reading or listening texts, in pairs or groups. Many CLIL activities are similar to those in ELT textbooks, such as cloze tests, gap fill, matching, multiple choice, true/false, ordering words, text completion, etc. It seems that from a language point of view CLIL approach contains nothing new to an English teacher as the methodology is similar to the one used in ESP lessons by ESP practitioners for years.

## 5 The results of the survey

After the analysis of the first question in the questionnaire, we may conclude that 47 out of 50 students like learning ESP. In Macedonia, 65% of the students find CLIL more interesting than GE lessons, and 79% of Serbian students think the same. 96% of the Macedonian students and 88% of the Serbian students find CLIL lessons more difficult in terms of the content and language than GE lessons. Despite this, after being interviewed, the students from Serbia stated that they enjoyed ESP lessons with the CLIL approach more than GE lessons, although ESP was a totally new challenge for both ESP students and teachers. One of the possible explanations for this may lie in the attention that ESP teachers pay to their lessons and methodology. Namely, it appears that when ESP teachers are aware that they are teaching a 'new' language for the first time, they may approach ESP more exhaustively. On the contrary, in secondary vocational school, GE lessons aim only at the improvement of language skills at the appropriate level, building on the competence previously acquired in elementary school.

A large majority of Macedonian students like working in groups (77%), while Serbian students prefer pair work (46% of students like pair work, and 29% of students like group work). It is interesting that some students at the Aviation Academy prefer to work alone. This was typical for the students in the group I-7 who are at a very low level of English competence. In the interview, they explained that they



felt more confident when working alone and at home, preparing carefully for every lesson, since they lacked the skills in GE and were aware of the necessity to do a lot of work on their own time. When they were asked to work in pairs or groups, they felt a little inhibited and uncomfortable due to their perceived lack of foreign language competence. The Macedonian teacher stated that the activities in CLIL lessons at the beginning (when the students were in the first year) were usually performed in pairs. No explanation was offered as to why they should switch from pair work to group work.

Among the many activities used in CLIL classrooms that are similar in Serbian and Macedonian schools, the students chose the ones they preferred. The questionnaire offers four different methodologies: working from a text book, PowerPoint presentation, watching video clips, and listening activities. The Serbian students (75%) like PowerPoint presentations most, 50% of students prefer watching video clips, 33% enjoy using text books (texts followed by language exercises), and only 13% chose listening activities. In the interview, the Serbian students said watching video clips was very difficult because of the need to understand spoken English, since it is the first year of ESP learning. They think that the most attention should be paid to vocabulary, definitions and the content through texts for beginners. Most of the students are new to listening activities, therefore this will require more practice in the higher grade classes. Listening skills are of great importance in aviation. Among the Macedonian students video clips were the most popular (73%) and none of them liked the text book (0%). The texts used in these books should be reviewed for relevance and authenticity, since it is highly recommended that authentic texts be used in CLIL, even if some adaptation to the students' level is required. Of the Macedonian students, 38% like the PowerPoint presentations used in class, but only 23% of students find the listening activities appropriate.

Among the many activities suggested in the survey, Macedonian students chose speaking exercises, such as debates, summarizing and commenting. Most of the Serbian students wanted exercises based on reading (read and choose, read and complete, read and correct). None of the Serbian students liked debates due, apparently, to the lack of content knowledge. They commented that it would be very easy if they had the textbook in front of them during the task. Since it is their first year of studies, they are not familiar with the subject content neither in English nor in their mother tongue.

The vocabulary exercises (see the appendix, question no.7) used in both schools were similar and all aimed to help the students acquire the terminology needed for their respective career paths. Most of the Macedonian students enjoyed exercises such as odd word out, matching the words with their explanation, filling in the missing word, putting words in the right order, while Serbian students enjoyed matching the words with their explanation, filling in the missing word, finding synonyms, choosing the correct answer and odd word out activities. Such exercises are typical in language classes, whereas the emphasis in our CLIL lessons shifted inevitably to content knowledge with language acquisition in context.

All students recognized the importance of language skills for their future professional careers, however speaking was seen as the most important skill for the general improvement in understanding and for bettering communication competence.

In terms of skills acquisition our students believe speaking and vocabulary to be their strongest suits, with the exception of the group I-7 with the modest English language competence who think that reading and vocabulary are the skills that they need to improve. However, if we compare the grades in ESP and GE, we can conclude that the students show greater success in ESP, which proves the benefits of CLIL lessons in terms of improving language skills. These students feel more confident when they attend CLIL lessons, and the results are obvious, not only in their grades but also in their increasingly active participation in every CLIL lesson. Grammar was not seen as a high priority in any of the groups participating in the research.

## 6 Conclusion

The action research conducted as part of the ECML project in two different secondary vocational schools showed results in support of the CLIL learning and teaching approach. CLIL is not easy to apply and it requires effort to be put into practice. Despite the difficulties and many challenges that CLIL brings, students in both schools find ESP more interesting to learn than GE. One of the reasons for that, according to the students, is the fact that English is the language of Aviation, therefore being fluent in English is the utmost competence for them. The students are aware of job-market demands in terms of foreign language skills, thus the language students learn in CLIL classrooms appears to them more pragmatic and vocationally-oriented than GE. The students state they enjoy CLIL methodology since it facilitates their learning, especially when acquiring the unknown content and language. Furthermore, the teachers appear to be more aware that ESP terminology and language are introduced to students for the first time, therefore they pay greater attention to didactic strategies. Contrary to that, GE instruction was focused on revising the material and improving their foreign language ability in terms of language skills. Additionally, the students prefer CLIL classes because of a wide range of activities, well-prepared materials and the variety of exercises and tasks that meet their language learning needs. Finally, the students emphasize the fact that the teachers in CLIL classes seem to feel the need to be more reflective in order to better understand and improve their teaching practices as well as develop strategies geared towards their professional development.

After much reflection on CLIL examples from teachers' own practice we can conclude that CLIL is definitely one of the most useful methodologies for learning ESP. In both schools most CLIL activities have proven to be appropriate (pair work, group work, text book, PowerPoint presentations, video clips, listening activities) as well as the exercises with focus on language (odd word out activities, matching the words with their explanations, filling in the missing words or putting them in the right order). CLIL learners appear to be motivated since they feel autonomous in learning a new language. Learning seems meaningful to them and topics they learn boost their interest and motivation. Since CLIL supports teaching grammar in context, students are not focused on form, but on meaning. The CLIL approach makes students learn language unconsciously while learning content as well as develop cognitive and communication skills. The Action Research at the Aviation Academy led us to improve both student learning and teacher effectiveness, showing that more video clips should be trialed in Aviation English. At the same time, the emphasis should be put on oral activities, even though the students did not identify such activities as essential.

Since GE is the language ESP students were learning for more than four years, they were expected to have acquired some language competences to be able to follow ESP lessons at the same pace. However, this was not in fact the case, therefore one of the conclusions of the study was that no matter how difficult the subject/language being taught, it is of key importance that the level of students' knowledge in any group is comparable.

In terms of the limitations of the study, it would be advisable to conduct additional research in the same school among the students of the different foreign language teachers to check if there are any differences in CLIL methodology among different teachers teaching Aviation English with the same content and the same language, but using different activities. Moreover, it could be equally interesting to include the students of different ages and levels of English in the same school or to involve the students of other colleges. Since CLIL class management appeared more difficult when activities were performed in groups of four than in pairs, this could be additionally researched in terms of age, cognitive complexity, subject understanding, language level and students' self-esteem.



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- d) choose the correct answer
- e) put in the right order
- f) odd word out
- g) other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. What foreign language skills are the most important to you in your CLIL lessons? (1=the most important;4=the least important)

SKILLS	1	2	3	4
Reading				
Speaking				
Listening				
Writing				

9. What skills are best acquired in your CLIL lessons? (circle as many answers as you like):

- a) reading
- b) speaking
- c) writing
- d) listening
- e) vocabulary
- f) grammar

*Thank you for your time and cooperation.*