



## Implementing CLIL at the Primary School Level: a Pilot Study

**Artur Stępnia**

Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)  
[dyrektor.zamosc.sp@smartschool.edu.pl](mailto:dyrektor.zamosc.sp@smartschool.edu.pl)

### Abstract

*As the need to reconsider the implementation of CLIL at the level of primary education has sprung across, the importance of the teacher's identity at this very specific stage of education has also been given considerable attention. At the same time, Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols confirm the information that there is a shortage of teachers who are capable of using CLIL while teaching. They continue informing us that even if there are such teachers who are equipped with the ability to teach a foreign language and also have the subject-area qualification, not all of them will be able to focus on teaching both at once[1].*

*This paper is to examine whether introducing children in grades I-III of primary school into the CLIL oriented foreign language learning environment is of any importance; if yes, to what extent. The pilot study I prepared and introduced in the Bilingual Primary School Smart School in Zamość, Poland, has been authorized by the Polish Board of Education and will serve as the basis for the assumptions. Being the headmaster of this school and gaining from the experience attained during my ongoing PhD research in the field of CLIL in the Institute of English Studies of the Catholic University of Lublin I will present my observations. The innovative system introduced in the above mentioned school creates the teaching environment where both English and the scope of integrated subjects (grades I-III) are taught by one teacher, who has been formally skilled in both these areas of education. Therefore, the questions to be answered during my presentation will center on whether there are theoretical grounds and practical implications for introducing such innovation, and if so, what conditions and directives need to be fulfilled prior to and during the process itself.*

### 1. Introduction

We happen to live in the times of multicultural and multilingual global society. What is more, our reality seems to be best described as one that is constantly changing and adjusting to new innovative ideas and devices that soon become inevitable in everyday existence. This also happens in the field of educating new generations. As implied by Serratos, the Chairman of an airline company, in the foreword of Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols "In the airline industry, as in education, new necessities derive from broadening perspectives in a dynamic, increasingly integrated and converged world. Innovation has always been the leading edge for achieving advancement" [1]. Innovative methods and approaches to teaching and learning itself, once proved to be successful, immediately substitute for the ones previously believed to be the only credible frame of reference to a particular scheme.

As far as teaching and learning English as a foreign language is concerned, we have participated in various shifts from one to another approach to the actual process of education or to the methods and techniques used in this process. Is Content Language Integrated Learning just another one? Is it the ideological fabrication of overambitious English teachers and methodologists or is it a genuine scientific breakthrough in the area of ESL? At what point of education to implement CLIL and whether should it completely or only partially substitute *classical* teaching of the English language. What does CLIL and bilingual education offer from the perspective of Polish educational system? On the basis of both theoretical research and practical knowledge on the subject area, this paper is an attempt to answer all these questions put forward by both the experts and the laymen in the field of teaching foreign languages.

### 2. CLIL from the Polish perspective

For the sole purpose of understanding the concept of bilingual education in the case of schools similar to Smart School the definition of bilingualism needs to be clearly put forward at the early stage of the discussion. According to Spolsky, who attempted to name what being bilingual means, it is "a person who has some functional ability in the second language" [2]. On the other hand, Macnamara, as quoted by Hamers and Blanc characterizes bilingual person as "anyone who possesses a minimal competence in one of the four skills, i.e. listening comprehension, speaking, reading and writing in a



language other than his mother tongue” [3]. While Hamers and Blanc define bilingual as “an individual who has an access to two or more different codes or languages” [4].

Bilingual school cannot therefore be understood here as the school that gathers bilingual children for one simple reason, namely, there are no children in Smart School that can fall into the category of being bilingual. Poland, being one of the East European societies can relatively rarely encounter bilingual citizens, and even more rarely the children for whom one of the languages of communication is English. Hence, bilingual in the *Polish edition* means mainly trying to reach the point of actually being bilingual, rather than providing grounds for already bilingual children to educate in two languages, as in the case of some national schools run by the embassies of various countries.

## 2.1 The pedagogical innovation

Recently reformed Polish system of education rightly incorporated teaching English as a foreign language into the curriculum from grade one of primary school. Nevertheless, learning English has been completely isolated from learning the scope of integrated subjects in grades I-III and has been concentrated on two hours of weekly tuition during English lessons. The Bilingual Primary School Smart School in Zamość is one of the very few schools that introduced CLIL at the level of primary education. The school went even one step further and proposed a correlation of both areas of education, namely English and integrated subjects from grade one. The pedagogical innovation I prepared entitled “English is everywhere” has been officially accepted by the Polish Board of Education and introduced in Smart School at the verge of the school year 2012/2013. As the name of the document implies, the main aim has been to implement children at the very early stage of their formal education into learning English not as a *foreign* language, but as one of the natural means of communication.

A great majority of children starting their formal schooling in Poland and in many other countries are at the elementary level of their English language communicative competence. That is why the key objective is to build that competence as soon as possible. Resulting from this presumption is the condition that appears to be most crucial in achieving the required fluency in both languages, that is increasing the amount of the English classes from two to minimum six per week, as in the case of the earlier mentioned innovation. Only then will the teacher be able to broaden the language competence of his pupils to the extent when a process of correlating chosen parts of the integrated education with English is possible. This is the first, most vital rule that any school has to follow in order to introduce CLIL, but by no means is it the only one. Here is a list of other not less important factors that have been taken into account when introducing the innovation:

- Each class should be piloted by one teacher, who is formally qualified to teach both the integrated subjects and English. Only then will this teacher be able to knowledgeably choose the areas in which the correlation is adequate. He will continually supervise the process of learning English by the pupils and therefore will also competently assess whether to introduce English at particular moments of other lessons. Moreover, the bilingual teacher will be able to change the language of communication (*code switching*) freely without any inhibitions, not only during formal instruction, but also at lunchtime, during school trips, breaks, school parties etc.
- Usage of the English language during non-English lessons should be preceded by familiarizing pupils with necessary vocabulary or grammatical constructions during language classes. By no means is it acceptable to introduce new pieces of information at integrated education classes together with new English language items. This would certainly lead to a confusion in acquiring knowledge, as the pupils could not concentrate on one particular item of new information.
- CLIL oriented integrated education cannot base on clear separation between the parts of the lessons that are taught in mother tongue and in English. That situation would cause escalation of the process of detaching learning English from learning the integrated subjects corpora. Thus, one of the main teacher's duties during CLIL lessons is to interchange the language of communication at any moment, bearing in mind all the other conditions.



- Although introducing CLIL in grade one of Polish primary schools is still highly inhibited by the low level of the English communicative competence of pupils, it should become the language of communication between the teacher and his pupils from the very beginning of the school year. The first English lessons should be devoted to familiarizing the pupils with the so called *classroom language* used for classroom routines. Once pupils become able to ask their teacher different questions concerning everyday activities, i.e. *May I go to the toilet?* or *Can I have some water, please?* their self-confidence, internal motivation and self-esteem will boost.

Fulfilling these conditions and having remembered all the other rules governing CLIL oriented tuition, one can launch the process of correlating the two main areas of education from grade one of primary school.

## 2.2 Evaluating the innovation

As each innovative idea in any branch of science needs to first prove its relevance to be accepted for broader use, also this pedagogical innovation is being under constant evaluation. Each teacher taking part in the innovation is obliged to prepare in advance a monthly schedule including possible paths of correlation between the elements of both educations.

MONTH	WEEK	English used during other lessons		
		Subject	Active language (teacher and pupil)	Passive language (teacher)
February	1	<i>Sprzedam, kupię, oddam.</i> (transl.: Sell, buy, give away)	Vocabulary: <i>sell, buy, give out, advertisement</i> <i>What we can sell/buy?</i> <i>What we can find in the newspapers?</i>	<i>Everybody sells and buys something.</i> <i>We can find adverts in the newspaper.</i>
		<i>Masz wiadomość- historia przekazywania informacji</i> (transl.: You've got mail- the history of information)	Vocabulary: <i>message, e-mail, letter</i> <i>What do we do if we want to contact someone?</i> <i>We can call/ send a message or write an e-mail to someone.</i>	<i>What do people sell?</i> <i>Ways of communication: calling someone, writing an e-mail or a message</i>

**Table 1. Correlation of English and integrated subjects, grade three, February 2013, week one.**

This document could not be constructed in advance for the entire course of tuition in grades I-III as it is impossible to foresee at what moment of time will the pupils be able to understand and use particular vocabulary in English during other lessons. The monthly table prepared prior to the lessons may also demand changes in the course of the month, since some unpredictable occurrences may take place, i.e. school assemblies, trips, meetings, etc. Only the teacher of particular class is therefore able to exactly assess and use the abilities of communicating in English during any other lessons his pupils have at a precise moment in education.

Other tools of evaluating the innovation include observing the lessons, completing a questionnaire by pupils' parents and teachers, analysing school documentation and pupils educational results. The final outcomes together with the conclusions and recommendations will be presented at the end of the process of innovation in June 2015, but the ongoing current evaluation gives real hopes for positive results.

## 3. Conclusion

CLIL certainly has a positive influence on the overall process of learning English as a foreign language. Expanding the number of English lessons from two to six per week, using English as a classroom language, swift and inhibited code switching by the teacher, building self-esteem and self-confidence among pupils, are just some of the advantages of introducing similar innovations in primary schools in Poland and other countries. Having in mind the fact that according to the Critical Period



Hypothesis formulated by Lenneberg the optimal age for introducing the second language falls at early grades of primary school the CLIL oriented teaching in this case appears to be even more desired [5]. On the other hand, it is also the process of integrated education in grades I-III that needs to be put under attention. The main fear could be that using English too often may lead to decline in the process of learning the corpora of integrated education. Nevertheless, fulfilling all the conditions described in this article will exclude such case and guarantee the correct course of educating in primary school. What therefore hinders the introduction of CLIL approach to teaching on a broader scale. There are two main obstacles, the former being the economic struggle connected with expanding the time of English tuition to minimum of six lessons per week. The later is the *human factor*, what in this case means shortage of the teachers, not only qualified in both areas of education, but also willing to undertake additional duties connected with the process of CLIL. Yet, on the basis of innovative ideas and their practical implementations presented in this paper, one may believe that wider introduction of CLIL at primary school level is only a matter of time.

### References

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