The BiMo Project and the Benefits of Bilingual and CLIL Programmes

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Abstract

The article is a study based on the European Bilingualism in Monolingual Contexts BiMo project, under the Erasmus+ Programme, which is being implemented by six institutions (schools, non-governmental organisations in the field of education and universities) from Italy, Lithuania, Spain, and Romania. The BiMo project highlights that in our society the learning and mastery of a foreign language has become a necessary and indispensable skill for the new generations. The BiMo project focuses on the needs of the main stakeholders involved in bilingual programmes, particularly the families of children enrolled in public and private schools with bilingual programmes. These families, in most cases, lack the knowledge of what a bilingual education programme means and therefore are unable to make the best decisions about the education of their offspring. The objective of the BiMo project is to analyse the views and impressions and meet the needs of the parents in monolingual societies with implemented bilingual education programmes, and to establish synergies between organizations with different experiences in everyday bilingualism and bilingual education programmes. The article outlines the objectives and outputs of the project and focuses on the main research findings on bilingualism education in Romania.

Keywords: *bilingual education programmes, CLIL, parents, informed decisions*

1. Introduction

1.1 The European context

Since the '90s, mobility, the internationalisation of education and the unprecedented advance of technology have challenged education in Europe. The learning and mastery of a foreign language has become a necessary and indispensable skill for the young people who should be prepared for the multilingual and multicultural requirements of Europe. According to the 2021 Eurostat report in all lower secondary school students in Romania learn at least one foreign language and 95.2% of them learn two or more languages; these rates are among the highest in the European Union [1]. According to the Decision no 26/2017 issued by the Ministry of Education, all schools in Romania are supported to develop and diversify foreign language study. Thus, all lower and upper secondary schools can organize intensive (4 classes/week) and bilingual classes (5-6 classes/week) in one and even two languages depending on the demands and available human and material resources. The bilingual program also includes the study of a science subject in the foreign language (CLIL). Most schools with intensive or bilingual study of a foreign language favour English followed by French, German or Spanish.

However, although the CLIL-based approach to learning is part of mainstream school provision it is not widespread. Students' admission to such programs is based on their scores in a language examination taken at the beginning of a school cycle (5th or 9th form). The implementation of such programs depends on the decision of each school board and parents are not part of the board; the law

is ambiguous: schools can organise intensive /bilingual classes, which means that their existence in a school is not obligatory. Parents can have a say but they are not always aware of such linguistic subtleties which would make some difference for their children. On the other hand, they sometimes find it hard to decide on what class their offspring should choose as there are no official guides to help them. In addition to these issues, bilingualism was a debatable topic in '90s Romania when most people believed that it would bring about difficulties in learning and its benefits were held to be simply linguistic [2; 3; 4]. Nowadays, positive learning experiences in bilingualism have dramatically changed people's attitudes. According to our needs analysis (70 parents, Iasi, 2019) aimed at identifying parents' interest in the intensive/bilingual programs and their knowledge about such programs, all 70 parents believed that foreign languages are important but they complained about a lack of information and assistance in this respect.

The BiMo project targets parents who play an important role in students' foreign language study but are often left out and unaware of what a bilingual education programme means and therefore are unable to make the best decisions about the education of their offspring.

1.2 The BIMo project

The project is being implemented by schools, non-governmental organisations in the field of education and universities from Italy, Lithuania, Spain, and Romania, with different experience in language programmes. The main objective of the BiMo project is to raise parents' awareness of and deepen their views about the role that bilingual education programs can play in their offspring's lives. It also aims at establishing transfer of information and sharing of experiences from societies with greater experience in everyday bilingualism and bilingual education programs in a foreign language (Lithuania and Romania) to typically monolingual social contexts and societies (Italy and Spain). The BiMo project looks into and finds solutions to the current situation in monolingual contexts, where teachers and families question the positive effects of CLIL programs on students' cognitive development and their mother tongue competencies [5].

2. Material and Method

What follows is the discussion of the research findings on bilingualism/CLIL education in Romania. The project application stipulated to use interviews with teachers and school principals as a means to conduct the baseline research. The structured interview used in our research (October, 2021) is a quantitative research method based on a set of prepared closed-ended questions. The structured interview was chosen for its reliability: the closed questions are easy to quantify and as a large number of interviews can be conducted in a short period of time, the findings are representative and can be generalised.

The interviewees were secondary school headmasters and teachers with great experience in teaching content subjects in a foreign language.

3. Results and discussions

All respondents stated that generally speaking the attitude towards bilingualism is positive. The interviewer also asked participants about the factors supporting bilingual and CLIL programmes and the challenges the programmes face. The participants held that the success of the programmes depends on several factors ranging from students' language experiences or available funds to parents' attitudes towards language learning.

Thus, the situations encountered by students play a significant role in student engagement. It is vital that students explicitly realize that a foreign language is not a language spoken by the English teacher but a real means of communication. To support their opinions participants gave examples from their own context: when students access a scientific text they need for science classes in English or when a foreign language is learned through the medium of another language. To illustrate the latter, they cited the case of students learning Chinese with a native who does not know Romanian (i.e. English is the only way of communication). There are also instances when the Chinese teachers are not familiar with the platforms and digital apps and are monitored in English by students. Another interesting example was related to the materials available online, most of which are in English. The IT teacher soon discovered that she could use them with her students directly in English as the students were able to understand the content without any problems. Such situations of real communication contribute to the acceptance of a language as a means of teaching content.

Teachers' competencies, enthusiasm and motivation were highlighted as factors contributing to the success of bilingual and CLIL education. The model set by teachers is followed by students and

influences student motivation. "Teachers' enthusiasm is contagious and triggers student engagement and motivation and excitement to learn" [also supported by research in the field: 6; 7].

Participants also highlighted parents' knowledge about these programmes: this influences their decisions to send their offspring to a CLIL or bilingual class. Parents must be knowledgeable about the programmes and their benefits. Once students are enrolled in such programmes the results are visible and contribute to their popularity. Parents take pride in their children when they see how well they perform in situations outside school: "when on holidays, children act as interpreters and handle communication situations. This is a real gain".

In the respondents' opinion, European projects also contribute to the success of the programmes. Children can speak with peers from all over Europe. "Being able to speak a language is an advantage. This helps them to understand the culture created through that language, the historical, geographical and economic connections among nations. Speaking another language opens new horizons. CLIL offers an authentic tool and access to information in specialised fields". On such occasions students also realise that since a language is spoken by many people all over the world each person has their own particular language so each language has lots of varieties.

Parents' attitudes towards foreign languages impact their children's motivation to learn. Parents' perception differed in terms of students' ages. For older students, when parents are more confident in their children's language competences, the use of foreign languages in other classes is perceived as relaxing and motivating while parents of younger children worry about their not understanding content in another language. Respondents mentioned several ways of involving parents in the language learning process (also encouraged by European projects).

The teachers' language level is another challenge. Most of the respondents agreed that it should be at least B2 for the teachers to feel comfortable. Other participants held that teachers could use this method according to their language level. Thus, teachers with a lower language level can work with their students on a glossary of terms of the topic taught in their mother tongue at the end of each unit. Students will be encouraged to present the main ideas in English or do short research on the topic at home and create five slides on their findings to be presented in class. An interesting example focuses on a teacher of history with an advanced level of English who during the pandemic took advantage of the virtual tours in world museums in English and invited his students to join him. Thus, "these programmes gained a convincing authentic touch as students constrained by the pandemic to stay indoors all of a sudden enjoyed the status of virtual tourists".

As for who to teach bilingual/CLIL classes, the answers varied ranging from a language teacher to a subject teacher with an advanced language level. Most of the respondents agreed "the most realistic case is having the subject teacher with a good language level helped by the language teacher", which relies on careful planning, communication and collaboration between the two teachers.

All respondents agreed that we need a clearer CLIL structure and probably the BiMo project which tackles such issues and offers solutions.

4. Conclusions

By relying on the challenges posed by mobility, diversity and the internationalisation of education and by providing solutions and addressing all actors involved (parents, schools and students), the BiMo project enhances the capacity of schools to prepare students for life.

The project's outputs help parents be informed about bilingual and intensive language learning programmes and make the right decisions regarding their children's education. The implementation of intensive/bilingual programmes provide students with linguistic competences in several languages which will enable them to work in diverse professional environments. Language teachers adapt language teaching to students' needs: focus on communication and use of the language for professional purposes (CLIL). Students become better equipped for the world of work; VET students, for instance, will be able to read scientific articles in the field and to communicate with their peers from other countries in exchanges, competitions, conferences.

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