CLIL & ICT in English Foreign Language Learning: the eTwinning Experience of a Primary School of Intercultural Education

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Abstract

This paper will consider an eTwinning project undertaken by a Greek Primary School of Intercultural Education and an Italian Primary school. In particular, it will report the learning outcomes and overall experience concerning English Foreign Language (EFL) learning designed within a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) model and realized through the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT).The aim of the cross-curricular project was to explore the history of the castles of the two collaborating cities. The students researched how the relevant sights stand through time affecting and shaping the lives of the citizens in the past and present with the focus being on the multicultural identity of the relevant cities. In Greece there is no official CLIL type provision in state primary schools. Moreover, ICT as part of the regular curriculum is generally introduced in high school. In our project, which had a four-month duration, our eleven-year old students were taught History and Geography though the foreign language (English) for three hours per week. The teaching and learning experience was particularly positive and our basic observations are summarized in the following:

> *a) Besides History and Geography, we had to teach ICT as well*
> *b) Topic-based, cross-curricular and (assisted) discovery learning has motivated our students and brought about encouraging learning outcomes with respect to the subjects taught.*
> *c) As regards foreign language learning, students' end-products in each of the designed activities showed an improvement compared to their written production in previous matching tasks.*

1. CLIL and ICT

The CLIL model of teaching refers to the teaching of certain subjects in the curriculum *with* or *through* a foreign language i.e. with or through a language other than the official language of the school/community. CLIL is a teaching model which does not only target fluency in the foreign language, but also seeks proficiency in the non-language subject(s) [1]. This dual focus shows that, methodologically, CLIL belongs to the influential cross-curricular approach to teaching. At the heart of the cross-curricular approach lies the assertion that the child's development should be viewed in a holistic way, targeting at the same time the intellectual, emotional and social aspect of a child's growth [2]. The competencies associated with such a learning mode are *thinking competency*, *personal* and *societal competency* and *communication competency*. Communication competency is taken to refer to *language literacy* and *digital literacy* [3]. Digital literacy is a key notion and much desired learning result in today's world of information [4,5]. Moreover, it constitutes a crucial point for the project presented in this paper as will be discussed in the following section.

1.2 CLIL and ICT in Greek state primary schools

However, despite the tactile need for digital literacy for reasons that among other things have to do with learner autonomy, life-long learning, and, ultimately, success [6,7], not all Greek state primary schools offer the relevant subject in their regular curricula. With respect to CLIL, in Greece, unlike other European countries, there is no official relevant provision in state primary schools. Any attempts to that direction are undertaken by groups of teachers who are willing to experiment and cooperate at this level. In our primary school, ICT classes are not currently offered as part of the regular curriculum, although there is a fully equipped computer laboratory. During the 2012-2013 school year, ICT classes are offered to students as part of the optional afternoon classes offered by a volunteer teacher at the school site.

2. The eTwinning Project

The eTwinning platform is a safe platform for teachers and students to collaborate on joint projects, share ideas, communicate and develop their skills in a creative and fun way. The eTwinning Project is part of the EU school programme Comenius. At the present time, the platform hosts 28,390 projects realized by 106,406 schools and 206,491 teachers [8]. The eTwinning platform provides an excellent situation for teachers and learners to explore a topic across different curriculum subjects. Thus, from a methodological point of view pursuing this kind of project means following and having to abide by the principles of cross-curricular or topic-based learning and discovery learning (albeit of the assisted type) each reported to have positive learning results [9,10]. As regards foreign language teaching methodology, work related with the platform realizes a CLIL model of teaching.

In February 2013 the Ioannina Primary School of Intercultural Education, a school characterized as such because a large number of its students have an immigrant background and are thus bilingual or trilingual, joined the platform and registered the cross-curricular project with the title '*Living sights: within and beyond the walls*'. A primary School in Corigliano Calabro responded positively to our project idea and became our associate. With this project we aimed to explore the history of points of interest closely related to our school and city, namely the city's castle. We had our students work on and find out how the relevant sights stand through time still affecting and shaping the lives of the citizens as main points of reference of everyday life of the past and present. We also intended to show how multiculturalism, an issue of particular interest for our school, evolved through time and around these sights.

As regards the realization of the project, a different activity was organized every four to six weeks, each one corresponding to an aspect of the project to be covered. The parameters of history/culture and time were crossed yielding the sub-themes that the students worked on.

In the introductory activity students presented their city and castle by means of a photo collection whereby each photo was accompanied by a relevant caption describing it. The collection which was created and compiled by the students was uploaded in the project's '*TwinSpace'*, the section where the online collaborative activities are found. The applications chosen for the first activity where '*files*' and '*archive*'. The transformation of the photo collection in an uploadable form (ppt. and pdf.) was done with the help of the teacher since the students' ICT skills were limited. The second activity involved the presentation of the early years of the castle (i.e. in the case of the Greek castle from the 6th to the 17th century). Students collected information from books and selected websites on the issue mostly in Greek (mother tongue). Divided in groups, they were expected to produce small written texts on specific subthemes (political life, urban organization, religion, culture, commerce & trade) practising the skill of mediation and text organization. As in the first activity, the applications chosen were '*files*' and '*archive*'. Again, upon completion of the activity we exchanged our experience with our partner by uploading to the platform the end-product of the relevant part of the project. The third activity which is at present in process, involves the presentation of the later years of the castle (i.e. from the 18th century up to the present). The method of working is as in the second activity.

The designed/expected learning outcomes are the following: i) students should be motivated and interested in exploring the relevant topic ii) students will practice and improve written production with the focus being on specific aspects of grammatical and sociolinguistic/discourse competence, namely simple past tense use and text design [11] respectively. Notice that our students fall between the A2 and B1 levels of proficiency iii) students will practice discovery learning primarily in the subjects of history and geography, but also, secondarily, in arts and literature

3. The Outcomes

As mentioned in Section 2, the first expected outcome was that students should be motivated and interested in working on the project. Observing student participation and willingness to undertake the work involved, we could say that students were more motivated to get involved and complete the tasks of the project than tasks of matching focus presented in the official course book. What is interesting is that the growth in the rate of student motivation, and, thus, participation was more vividly attested in 'weaker' students who were reluctant to undertake work that involved the writing of texts.

With respect to the second expected learning outcome, namely learner improvement in the organization of written texts, a skill that is expressed in the *can-do*-statements of students of matching proficiency in CEFR [9] we came to realize that even the first drafts of the student written tasks showed an improvement in the characteristic of text organization compared with student written production based on the course book tasks. In particular, student descriptive texts were laid out and sequenced so that they are more informative, better organized, more cohesive and coherent. Although in the course book tasks students occasionally had to use mediation and work with information from

Greek texts along with English texts, in most of the cases they were not expected to work with multiple (i.e. more than two) resources, a process which makes students, firstly, notice the organizational characteristics of different tasks and, secondly, transfer those characteristics into their own written production. As regards the use of the simple past tense we had noticed that our students were accurate in the course book exercises that targeted isolated production of the tense, i.e. completion/production of the tense in separate sentences usually with no meaning continuation, but had problems in using the tense when they had to produce a meaningful text (i.e. narration/description of past event(s)). In the case of the cross-curricular eTwinning project, accuracy in the use/production of the simple past tense was enhanced in the student texts, which could be related to the fact that in these tasks they received extensive and continuous peer-feedback and correction [12, 13, 14, 15] as they were organized in groups throughout the whole project.

Concerning the third expected outcome, which refers to the practise that students were to receive in discovery learning, student reaction was very positive since, besides, the recourses given to them by the teachers on the several aspects of the issue, students were able to locate and suggest other on-line and off-line resources compiling actually and with time a resource bank for future reference and use by all school students.

4. Conclusion & research implications

This paper presented the eTwinning experience of a Greek Primary School of Intercultural education and reported the learning outcomes of the project involved. Despite the short duration of the project, and the fact that it is still in progress, we attempted to analyze the overall positive experience into specific observations with the hope that these can be used to improve teaching and learning in the particular class in general.

However, we acknowledge that a mere presentation of how a specific learner (sub)competence improved does not constitute solid evidence for the usefulness and positive effect of CLIL and ICT in language learning. Such a claim should be supported by quantitative data. A possible analysis in this spirit could be conducted by means of pre-tests and post-tests [16] which could analyse and compare student written production before and after the realization of the cross-curricular project. This is an interesting line of investigation that we will pursue in future research.

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