



CLIL Experience through the Prism of Student Feedback

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Abstract

This paper continues the series of papers about CLIL implementation in our institution, i.e., the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences, presented by our colleagues at these annual conferences on Innovation in Language Learning during the last five years. CLIL is implemented to foster students' language learning effectiveness when teaching them professional vocabulary. It also helps cut down on learning hours due to simultaneous subject and language teaching. Thus, this paper examines how the content and language integrated learning practices are perceived by the students of our institution. The main findings are made based on a qualitative analysis of the questionnaire survey conducted in 2018-2020 at EASS. In this paper we intend to examine how students understand and perceive CLIL, and which positive and negative aspects have emerged to improve the quality of content and language integrated learning. In connection with the events of the last two years, when the concept of 'distance learning' entered our life, the question about transferring CLIL also to the online mode has arisen. However, considering the specifics of our academy, it seems to be problematic from a technical point of view. In this regard, the outcomes of our research are also valuable for us because to some extent they sum up the results of the implementation of the CLIL system over the past ten years

Keywords: *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), students' feedback, vocational and higher education*

1. Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was implemented at the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences (EASS) about 10 years ago. Application of CLIL can be considered as a milestone of innovation in language teaching and learning at the academy. The specifics of our institution of professional higher education lies in the close connection of the training content and the goals of curricula (including language training) with the requirements of the stakeholders in the field of internal security, i.e., the EASS students' future employers, respective state institutions. To raise the quality and effectiveness of students' language acquisition CLIL seems to be the most relevant educational approach to achieve the goals of both subject and language proficiency. CLIL also serves the purpose of closely linking language learning and the professional skills of the future public servants in the field of Internal Security, furthermore, CLIL was applied to help EASS students reach the goals and meet the required outcomes, necessary for performing their future professional duties effectively. Since the implementation of CLIL in the academic year of 2012/2013, in 2020/2021 language and subject integrated classes cover all the curricula of the academy (minimum 36 CLIL classes during the study period, i.e., 1.5 to 3 academic years). This paper examines EASS students' perception and evaluation of CLIL practices, as their feedback is essential for developing and improving the quality of CLIL.

2. Theoretical background of the study

CLIL has been a trendy approach employed in the educational space already for the last 20 years and it means progressive development of both knowledge and skills, whereas it is done through the use of a foreign language, i.e., the construction of knowledge and skills and the applied language as they all boost the other (Mehisto, 2008, Mehisto et al, 2008, Coyle et al, 2010, Dalton-Puffer et al, 2010). At the EASS CLIL and immersion elements are intertwined to some extent, while the students are expected to solve work-related cases when communicating at least with Russian and English speakers, still it is important to keep the focus on both language and subject equally as it is the essence of CLIL approach. In an effective CLIL classroom subject and language instructions are



integrated. Students are rather expected to complete work-related interactive activities than acquire the new words and phrases routinely, therefore the elements of immersion are used in EASS CLIL classes.

The symbiosis of several elements, which are *content*, *L1 (mother tongue as a mediator)*, *L2 (English, L3 (Russian) and LSP (Language for Specific Purposes)*, form the specificity and complexity of CLIL practice at EASS. CLIL classes at the EASS can be constructed in a bilingual (Estonian and Russian/English) and even trilingual (Estonian, Russian and English) format. Thus, more time is spared for professional subjects (since the basis of the curriculum is the volume of special subjects), and language teaching is in constant close connection with the content. Simultaneously, the CLIL 4C framework, developed by Do Coyle (cognition, culture, content and communication parameters), has to be under consideration. When preparing CLIL classes, each aforementioned aspect should receive equal attention (Coyle, 2005, 2007).

The present CLIL practice is the result of the close relation with professional standards of specialities (Police and Borderguard, Rescue, Corrections, Taxation and Customs). At the academy, competency-based assessment is employed; therefore, the aforementioned professional standards are embedded in the acquired competences of all the curricula. EASS students 'carry a burden' of succeeding in professional competences and language for specific purposes. It's worth mentioning that for Estonian context such a bold experiment for CLIL in the academic environment meets both students' gratitude and also frustration. However, CLIL theorists point out the necessity of integrated learning for new generation learners focusing on immediacy (Mehisto et al, 2008).

2. The methodological tools of the study

During the period of 2018-2020 the authors conducted a qualitative study, based on a questionnaire survey and collected 122 responses from the students of all the specialties taught at the EASS at vocational and professional higher education level. The questionnaire consists of eight questions and covers different aspects of CLIL in the way it is applied at the academy.

In order to get a deeper insight into students' perception of CLIL practice, a qualitative method was used in the current study. The questionnaire involves questions on both Russian and English language integrated classes, and it covers topics such as how students distinguish a regular language lesson from CLIL, what they like the most about integrated (CLIL) lessons, if students benefit from CLIL classes in terms of the acquired language and speciality knowledge, what students find unsuitable in CLIL practices, what factors prevent students from actively participating in CLIL classes, and what CLIL methods students prefer.

Based on the findings of the research it is possible to make conclusions to improve and enhance the strategy (i.e., distribution of volumes of different language courses as General language, Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and CLIL) and the content (i.e., compliance with students' expectations when studying the subject and the language of the Internal Security specialties) of CLIL practice at the EASS.

3. The results of the study

The study reveals various aspects of how the students perceive the strategy and content of CLIL applied in the institution. The scope of the article does not allow the authors to give an overview of all the aspects identified regarding the use of CLIL, therefore, only some of them will be considered in this article. This paper inter alia focuses on a few aspects related to the intentions of teachers and the expectations of students regarding subject and language integrated learning process.

3.1. The methodological preferences of students in CLIL

The study reveals students' preferences in methods used in CLIL classes. Thus, prevailing methods are active teaching methods, for instance pair work (58,2 %), roleplays (35,2 %), dialogues (27 %),



group work (20 %), debates (24,6 %), etc, while independent work (27 %), seminars (5,7 %) and presentations (7,4 %) tend to be less preferred.

3.2. CLIL pro et contra from the students' point of view

The analysis of student feedback shows that 13,9 % of the students when comparing CLIL with regular language classes do not distinguish them. However, 86,1 % of the respondents perceive the difference between the two forms of language learning through the following aspects. They realize the aim of CLIL in terms of acquisition of both the language and the subject. Students stress the opportunity to practice more language in work-related situations at a more intensive pace and receive immediate feedback from subject and language lecturers.

Among negative tendencies of CLIL implementation at the EASS the respondents mention inappropriate differences in the foreign language proficiency among students in the group (26,2 %). Furthermore, they find the LSP level too high and difficult to achieve (17,2 %). Other negative features stressed by the students are the lack of CLIL hours, some external factors (demotivating atmosphere, emotional and social wellbeing aspects), as well as inappropriate subjects for applying CLIL.

3.3. The challenges and benefits of CLIL for students

The main challenge mentioned by the respondents is an insurmountable language barrier (73,8 %), a lack of general language skills to acquire professional terminology (62,3 %), and a deficiency of motivation (16,4 %).

At the same time, the majority of the respondents (90,2 %) find CLIL classes beneficial for them in terms of testing their foreign language skills (86 %), gaining more specialty and foreign language knowledge (77,9 %), more practical activities (59,8 %), developing as a more independent language user (57,4 %), more pronunciation practice (28 %).

Conclusion: CLIL at the EASS in the nearest future. What's next?

The analysis of the participants' feedback shows that CLIL enhances students' motivation, acquisition of both foreign languages and speciality competency. However, it is important that students formulate all the negative factors that hinder effective language and subject learning, which will later be considered in order to improve the quality of learning and intensify the learning process, as well as to find more effective and student-friendly learning environments.

The feedback on students' perception and understanding of CLIL was received before the COVID-19 pandemic, and therefore, it reflects students' experience of CLIL in face-to-face instruction. Thus, as a follow-up to this study, a research on students' perception, experience and attitude towards digital CLIL (all participants' feedback, including students, subject and language teaching staff) is recommended. Namely, it would be advisable to study how CLIL has adapted to the change due to the pandemic, and how CLIL has adjusted itself to new ways of contact learning, i.e., blended learning, flexible learning, or online environment, etc.

Regarding the above mentioned, it would be rather complicated to create an online authentic learning environment (i.e., a corresponding work-related situation, for instance, proceeding border crossing cases or carrying out procedures in cases of traffic offences, etc.) and enable every student to practice online. Perhaps in the future online CLIL appears, or is it already here? Could it be possible to compile online CLIL classes and receive similar feedback from students? Could distance learning influence or even harm the effectiveness of content and language integrated learning?

These are the questions that have arisen due to the pandemic. Considering the current situation with the digital-oriented trend in education, it is necessary to recognize that in relation to the implementation of CLIL we are still facing the necessity to specify the concept of CLIL and its boundaries, as CLIL experience at the EASS somewhat extends the traditional CLIL methodological framework. Can it be claimed that CLIL is a flexible/adaptable method or is it rather a new hybrid approach? These are the questions that need to be studied in the coming years.



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