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CLIL—from theory to practice: challenges and perspectives

An interview with Dr Marina MATTHEOUDAKIS

The introduction of CLIL at all educational levels has been recorded as one of the priorities of various Educational systems in Europe, in acknowledgement of its considerable beneficial aspects. In Greece, CLIL has been making its way as an educational challenge in primary and secondary education, in the past 5-7 years. Marina Matthaoudakis, who is an associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the Aristotle University, has been one of the people who took the initiative to introduce CLIL in the Greek Educational system and she has also been the CLIL coordinator at 3rd experimental primary school in Thessaloniki. In the interview that follows, she provides readers with her insights into the challenges and benefits of implementing the CLIL approach at a global level (abroad), and she talks about her personal experience with CLIL implementation in Greek educational context. She touches upon issues related to CLIL resources, materials and CLIL assessment. Concerning CLIL teachers, she highlights that the main problems they seem to encounter is the lack of CLIL teaching material and the absence of training. Finally, she expresses her belief that there is a significant future for CLIL development in Greek Educational system, however she suggests support from the part of the educational authorities to all those teachers who are willing to experiment innovations. The interview was conducted by Eleni Griva and Angeliki Deligianni, RPLTL Guest Editors, in February 2016.

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Η εισαγωγή της μεθόδου CLIL σε όλες τις βαθμίδες εκπαίδευσης αποτελεί μία από τις προτεραιότητες διαφόρων εκπαιδευτικών συστημάτων στην Ευρώπη, εξαιτίας των ιδιαίτερα ενθαρρυντικών αποτελεσμάτων. Στην Ελλάδα, η μέθοδος CLIL κάνει την εμφάνισή της ως εκπαιδευτική πρόκληση στην πρωτοβάθμια και δευτεροβάθμια εκπαίδευση, τα τελευταία 5-7 χρόνια. Η Μαρίνα Ματθαιούδακη, η οποία είναι αναπληρώτρια καθηγήτρια Εφαρμοσμένης Γλωσσολογίας στο Αριστοτέλειο Πανεπιστήμιο, υπήρξε από τους πρώτους ερευνητές που πήραν την πρωτοβουλία εισαγωγής της μεθόδου CLIL στο ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα, και είναι η συντονίστρια των προγραμμάτων CLIL στο 3ο Πειραματικό Δημοτικό Σχολείο στη Θεσσαλονίκη. Στη συνέντευξη που ακολουθεί, η Μαρίνα Ματθαιούδακη παρέχει στους αναγνώστες πληροφορίες για τις προκλήσεις και τα οφέλη από την εφαρμογή της CLIL σε παγκόσμιο επίπεδο (στο εξωτερικό), και παρουσιάζει την προσωπική της εμπειρία από την εφαρμογή της μεθόδου CLIL στο Ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό πλαίσιο. Θίγει θέματα που σχετίζονται με το εκπαιδευτικό υλικό για εφαρμογές με την μέθοδο CLIL και την αξιολόγηση σε ένα τέτοιο πλαίσιο. Όσον αφορά τους εκπαιδευτικούς, τονίζει ότι τα κύρια προβλήματα που ανακύπτουν είναι η έλλειψη διδακτικού υλικού και η

έλλειψη κατάρτισης. Τέλος, εκφράζει την πεποίθησή της ότι υπάρχει σημαντικό μέλλον για την ανάπτυξη της μεθόδου CLIL στο ελληνικό εκπαιδευτικό σύστημα, ωστόσο, προτείνει την υποστήριξη, από την πλευρά των αρχών, όλων εκείνων των εκπαιδευτικών οι οποίοι είναι πρόθυμοι να πειραματιστούν σε καινοτομίες. Η συνέντευξη δόθηκε στην Ελένη Γρίβα και Αγγελική Δεληγιάννη, RPLTL Guest Editors, τον Φεβρουάριο του 2016.

Eleni Griva (EG): Broadly speaking, what do you perceive are the most positive aspects/benefits/outcomes of teaching Content through English?

Marina Mattheoudakis (MM): The teaching of content through English – or CLIL, as I will refer to it – is a type of bilingual education. Being a form of bilingual education, it is expected to provide linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural benefits similar to those of bilingual education programmes. The language gains that students acquire through CLIL are probably expected as CLIL is input-based and students are exposed to a wealth of language input while at the same time they are required to interact, negotiate and thus produce rich language output. CLIL has a positive impact on language fluency and accuracy, on vocabulary development (both receptive and productive) and on the development of academic language. The fact that learners are taught a school subject in English requires the use of academic language and terminology and this results in what Cummins (2000) has called Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency (or CALP). As for the cognitive benefits, Bialystok (2001) claimed that bilingualism enhances specific intellectual abilities, such as inhibitory control, shifting of attention and working memory. Recent studies have provided evidence for similar cognitive gains for students as a result of CLIL instruction. In this area more research is definitely needed but preliminary findings are quite encouraging and promising. What is clear though is that CLIL promotes learners' critical thinking and cognitive flexibility. CLIL instruction involves implicit learning processes and thus learners are led to develop not only lower-order thinking skills (LOTs) (e.g. understanding and memorization) but mainly, and most importantly, higher order thinking skills (HOTs), such as analysis, evaluation, creation. The third important benefit of CLIL instruction refers to learners' sociocultural development; CLIL allows learners to familiarize themselves with other cultures, it develops their social awareness of self and 'otherness'.

EG: What are the key issues regarding the balance between content and language development in the design of a CLIL course?

MM: According to the CLIL principles, this method has a dual focus, on content and on language, and thus the teaching aims of a CLIL lesson should be both linguistic and content ones. I'm not sure to what extent the balance between content and language can be achieved and maintained as in practice, I suppose, the focus often shifts from the one to the other (from content to language and vice versa), according to the learners' needs and according to the teaching context. Having said that, I should clarify that, when designing a CLIL course, it is the content that drives the selection of the language and not the other way around. Let me illustrate that with an example. A teacher who teaches Environmental Studies through English may ask learners to suggest how they would save the planet if they were the President of their country. In this case, the aim is for learners to make reasonable suggestions and provide relevant arguments. The use of the conditional is a by-product of the topic. Thus, if the suggestions and the argumentation provided by the learners are appropriate, inaccurate use of conditional forms is quite unimportant.



EG: What are the characteristics of the best CLIL model to use?

MM: CLIL is a flexible method; this means that its implementation in different European countries may vary widely in order to serve the teaching and learning needs of the corresponding educational systems and contexts. I would not say that there is one single CLIL model that is considered to be the best. What I would say instead is that a CLIL model is good if it promotes the linguistic and cognitive development of the learners addressed in the particular educational context. I might also suggest that the effectiveness of CLIL is largely dependent on the teacher and on the material used.

EG: What is the process of curriculum development in a CLIL context? What teaching/learning materials and environments, tools and resources would you include to support teachers in CLIL context integrating content and language?

MM: Teachers in CLIL context need an array of tools, resources and materials. The first thing they need is to map the syllabus they need to cover. This requires cooperation between the EFL and the class teacher; in some cases, team teaching might be required. The second step is to design the appropriate CLIL material for the age and grade of learners addressed. This is a long process and teachers need to have access to the internet where there are hundreds of relevant websites with pictures, videos, tips and ideas, interviews, etc. The design of appropriate worksheets, as well as the involvement of learners in interactive projects, are highly recommended in all CLIL lessons.

EG: What about CLIL assessment? Is the language or the subject knowledge assessed?

MM: As we know, CLIL is a dual focused method which places emphasis on the integration of language and content. This does not mean however that teachers should correct errors and mistakes in both language and content. CLIL is a meaning-based method and this means that meaning is given priority in both input and output. So, if learners achieve to convey the meaning intended in the foreign language effectively, teachers should not be concerned with their language inaccuracies.

Angeliki Deligianni (AD): What are the main problems for the Greek teachers working in content and language integration?

MM: The main problems that all CLIL teachers seem to encounter is the lack of CLIL teaching material and the absence of teacher training targeting the needs of a CLIL teacher-to-be. These are problems that CLIL teachers in other countries encounter as well; in fact, most articles and reports on CLIL point at these problems and at the need for coordinated actions in Europe for the organisation of teacher training courses and the publication of CLIL teaching material.

AD: There is some interest around CLIL in Greece, but many teachers consider the approach extremely demanding. What could you say to encourage them to implement CLIL approaches in their classes? Have you got any practical tips for those teachers?

MM: I would prefer to say that CLIL is challenging rather than demanding. The word 'demanding' has negative connotations and that is not a fair description of CLIL. CLIL requires more work, especially from a novice CLIL teacher, because teachers need to design

their own materials and trace their own paths instead of blindly following a school textbook and the syllabus prescribed. It is challenging because it is something completely new for the Greek educational context and in that respect CLIL teachers have to access articles and studies on CLIL in order to inform themselves about this method. Having said that, however, I should also add that CLIL is immensely rewarding and fun. I have met several primary and secondary school teachers who decided to innovate in their schools and implement the method and after one year of CLIL teaching experience, they were enthusiastic and impressed with their learners' language development but also with their skills to cope with unknown content in a foreign language. Apart from their students' language competence, however, what was equally rewarding was teachers' professional development. They were happy and satisfied with themselves and excited about what they had managed to achieve just because they were so much motivated.

AD: What are the implications of CLIL challenge for teacher training and professional development?

MM: CLIL teacher training needs to be centrally coordinated and organized in collaboration with the academia. It needs to be meaningfully integrated in our teacher training system and target both pre-service and in-service teachers. The lack of appropriate teaching materials has been pointed out time and again by various researchers and practitioners in other European countries. At this point there are CLIL materials published and used in a number of European countries but as CLIL is implemented differently in those contexts, it is highly unlikely that those materials are transferable to our educational contexts. Teacher training should therefore include training for material design based on CLIL principles and the 4C framework proposed by Coyle (1999). CLIL is a new method of teaching that aims to integrate language and content; therefore, it should not be seen as an addition to foreign language teachers who are required to teach another subject, nor as an addition to content teachers in order to increase their language proficiency. We need to approach it from various disciplines without the fear of losing territory and take the step further towards enriching it in order to achieve the best possible educational outcomes for students and educators alike.

Personal experience with CLIL implementation in Greek educational context

AD: When did you start your CLIL journey with 3rd experimental primary school?

MM: My CLIL journey with the particular school started in 2010 when we (the EFL instructors and the supervisory committee of the school) decided to introduce CLIL as a pilot project. Now, five years later, CLIL is systematically implemented as a method of teaching various school subjects from grade 1 to 6. CLIL is not implemented in this school as an elitist approach to language learning and thus no student selection is made; on the contrary, CLIL aims at everybody and thus, all learners graduating from this year onwards will have received at least one year of CLIL instruction – for at least one school subject.

AD: What challenges have you been facing as CLIL coordinator at the 3rd experimental primary school?

MM: As a CLIL coordinator I faced only one challenge: that of convincing students' parents that CLIL works. However, this was a short-lived challenge because after the first year all

parents wanted their children to do CLIL. After that I had a different kind of challenge to face and that was satisfying parents' request for CLIL provision to all learners at school.

AD: What issues and challenges EFL and GE teachers of 3rd experimental primary school have been facing when teaching in a CLIL context?

MM: They have been facing various challenges; perhaps the most important one is that of designing their own teaching materials, as neither the school textbook nor other kind of textbook can satisfy their needs. So, they have to use the prescribed syllabus but they need to design their own materials, scaffold them, support them visually and acoustically, grade them, differentiate them, etc. Another challenge they have probably faced relates to the fact that they are teaching young learners whose English language level cannot be too high (no matter how many hours of EFL instruction they get at school). This means that the material designed needs to be both linguistically and cognitively adjusted to learners' abilities and competences. Overall, the challenge is the fact that they have been pioneers in this field. They were the first ones who implemented CLIL within a Greek state school curriculum and they are the only ones who have been doing it systematically within the same school for so many years.

AD: Have there been any limitations within CLIL that you are aware of?

MM: As all other methods and approaches, CLIL has its own limitations as well. These relate to the lack of CLIL materials and to the limited teacher training available for teachers who wish to become CLIL instructors. Somehow, interest in CLIL took off very fast and teachers did not have the necessary time to acquire the training needed. Additionally, CLIL materials are still scarce and even those available do not suit learners' needs in different countries and educational systems.

AD: What is your experience of assessing CLIL in 3rd Experimental School?

MM: The implementation of CLIL in the 3rd Experimental School has been assessed for the past 6 years. This assessment concerned learners' language development, their performance in the CLIL subjects (e.g. Geography, History, Environmental Studies, etc.), and their affective development. Research into the impact of CLIL on content learning seems to indicate that CLIL learners are, in general, better content learners than non-CLIL learners and they often outperform their non-CLIL peers when tested in the L1. As they need to process and comprehend content in a foreign language, they construct complex concepts and schemata. Such findings may be attributed to CLIL students' greater persistence on tasks assigned, and to their higher tolerance of frustration. As for their motivation and affective reactions, CLIL learners usually start their CLIL lessons with skepticism and feelings of concern, but these are soon overcome when they realize that both language and content comprehension improve and develop quite fast.

EG: Can CLIL be recommended for all types of Greek state schools?

MM: If we refer to both general and vocational high schools, yes, of course it can. Especially in vocational high schools CLIL is probably the best method to teach English as it allows the teaching of the foreign language through the teaching of a subject. Thus, learners who study in those schools and who are less interested in the analysis of the language or in the explicit teaching of its forms, will thrive in CLIL classrooms where they will be led to focus on the

content of the course rather than on the medium of instruction. Of course CLIL cannot be implemented in the same way in all school settings. Depending on the student population and the teachers' choices, some schools may implement the hard version of CLIL, as we call it, while others might implement a softer version of CLIL.

EG: What are the difficulties for students in communicating content which 'surpasses' their foreign language proficiency level?

MM: Whether in a CLIL class or not, students in foreign language classes regularly encounter problems with communicating difficult content. As opposed to an EFL class, however, CLIL classes always provide contextualized instruction and a type of immersion, that is, rich and extensive language input in which learners immerse. Given this, it is much more probable for a CLIL learner, than for a regular EFL learner, to be able to communicate the content s/he wants by paraphrasing and making up for the language s/he doesn't have. Of course one might argue that the content in CLIL instruction is more academic and therefore more cognitively challenging for learners. So, I would suggest that what learners might find difficulty with in a CLIL classroom is not the unknown vocabulary or the grammar rules but rather the academic discourse. However, let me remind you here that the acquisition of academic language is one of the greatest benefits that learners gain from CLIL instruction.

EG: Can CLIL be recommended for all language levels, and age groups? For example, can CLIL approach be employed for pre-schoolers?

MM: CLIL has been tried in all sectors of education (primary, secondary and tertiary) and several studies and research projects in Finland, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and other countries have reported on the results of this implementation. Overall, it seems that CLIL is mainly implemented in secondary schools in Europe, even though our CLIL experience in Greece derives mainly from the primary education. As for the pre-schoolers, your question gives me the opportunity to break the news about the recent introduction of CLIL to a kindergarten in Thessaloniki. CLIL teaching at pre-school was launched as a pilot project two years ago by the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The preliminary results of that pilot project were quite encouraging and this year we are officially introducing CLIL in a kindergarten in Evosmos which is expected to become part of the 3rd Experimental Primary School of Evosmos.

EG: Does CLIL make EFL in mainstream Greek Education a more realistic and achievable aim?

MM: I should think 'yes'. Because of the rich input provided and the extensive output required, CLIL promotes language acquisition within the instructed context. If mainstream EFL teaching followed the same principles, languages would be more effectively acquired within the school setting. Unfortunately, EFL teachers focus too much on the explicit teaching of the language and miss valuable opportunities to use the foreign language meaningfully and interact purposefully with their learners.

EG: What would you say to CLIL sceptics to make them believe that content and language integrated learning is not just a 'European' trend or fashion in EFL teaching?

MM: CLIL was introduced because of Europe's dissatisfaction with foreign language education at schools. Several things have changed in EFL education during the last 40 years: The advent of Communicative Language Teaching, early foreign language instruction, use of Computer Assisted Language Learning, projects, cross curricular teaching, and many more.

Although all of them were important innovations at that time, their impact on learning results was not impressive. CLIL seems to work because it increases learners' exposure to the language as well as their opportunities for language production; it is a type of bilingual education which seems to suit European educational systems because it does not require curricular changes and extension of the school timetable. We are all experienced learners of English. Some of us are also experienced teachers of English. We all know how long it takes learners to speak the foreign language and use it meaningfully and fluently; some of them never manage to. These have been the results of mainstream EFL education in Greece and of course in other parts of the world. If we continue to teach in the way we were taught or even in the way we have been teaching for so many years, we are just going to produce the same type of learners and similar learning results. I think that the best way to convince someone that CLIL does work is to help them experience it. Teachers who decide to experiment with the method are very soon convinced of its applicability, usefulness and effectiveness. CLIL is not an ideal method of teaching but it has the potential to improve the quality of both foreign language and subject teaching and bring together language educators and content teachers.

EG: What is the future for CLIL development in Greek Educational system?

MM: Being one of the people who took the initiative to introduce CLIL in the Greek primary state education, I should be able perhaps to have a clear(er) picture of what lies ahead. I don't. What I can see is an unpredictable explosion of interest expressed by practitioners from both primary and secondary schools all around Greece. What I cannot see, unfortunately, is a corresponding and much anticipated initiative taken by the Greek educational authorities which seem to be totally absent from these bottom-up reforms. Greece needs an education reform that will build on what has autonomously been achieved to date and give a boost and well coordinated support to all those teachers who are willing to make a difference and change the status quo at schools.

EG: Professor Mattheoudakis, I would like to thank you very much for this interesting interview, and the time we spent speaking.

MM: Thank you Dr Griva and Dr Deligianni. It has been a pleasure to speak with you.

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