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## **CLIL 'ARENA'—EPISODE 3**

### **Reflection on CLIL implementation in an EFL Primary School classroom**

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I am an EFL teacher in the 3<sup>rd</sup> experimental primary school of Evosmos. My school is experimental in the teaching of English, therefore, we, the EFL teachers, have the chance to test and adopt new teaching policies, in order to provide rich foreign language (FL) input to our learners and hence to facilitate their communicative competence in the FL. CLIL has been part of the teaching reality in my school for years but I have been actively involved in it for three years. I teach Environmental Studies to the 3<sup>rd</sup> graders for two hours per week. The remaining one hour per week is used by the generalist teacher for different units in the book.

Although now I feel that I am privileged to have such a teaching experience, I was quite skeptical in the previous years to start a CLIL course, because I was worried about 'What' I could teach and 'How'. While I was helping my daughter study environmental studies in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, however, I got acquainted with the syllabus and I felt that it was ideal, since it serves the 4Cs (see Coyle, 2005), i.e. the principles that drive the CLIL model. First of all, as far as cognition is concerned, learning in this subject can be built on students' existing knowledge and experience. Secondly, the content, the learning skills and the language outcomes are articulated in cooperation with the students. Last but not least, the content is clearly linked to the community within and outside the classroom. The students can apply the new content and develop related skills through experiential activities. Communication can be supported on all types (linguistic, visual and kinaesthetic) through active participation in activities, classroom displays on the walls and other available resources.

However, thinking about how good something can be is quite different from putting it into practice. CLIL has been one of the greatest challenges in my teaching career for many reasons:

- I have been an English teacher for more than 20 years but my orientation had to change into that of a subject teacher. I chose units 2 and 4 from the students' course book. These units study Greece geomorphologically, its fauna and flora, but at the same time attention is put on the mutual influence between the geographical features of a place and the people who live there. I chose these units as the content

was clearly linked to the community of my students and thus the principle of cognition could be served quite satisfactorily. Communication could also be facilitated as my students could share knowledge and experiences from places they had visited in the past. In the process of teaching, however, I had to overcome my inclination to teach the language and thus had to make sure that the material I created focused on geographical facts rather than linguistic elements.

- I am not in good terms with Geography; and although the subject I teach gives general information about the different areas in Greece and what we can see there, I had to go back in time and learn many details all over again in order to be able to give a simple and holistic view of the content. Depending on the topic of each chapter I had to search the Internet for long hours and find relevant photos to make the lesson more vivid and realistic. It goes without saying that I came to appreciate my country more through this process and also 'saw' places that I had never suspected they existed in our part of the planet.
- I had to help my 8 year-olds understand and learn geographical terms, like waterfalls, caves, valleys and plains, mountainous areas, coastal areas but also terms that are linked to natural life, like pine, fir and oak trees, burrows, hibernation and free-ranging animal farming! Although teaching the vocabulary as such may resemble the techniques we use in EFL, as in through picture dictionaries, matching activities etc, the challenging part is helping learners use this vocabulary in a descriptive context. For example, when we were talking about the mountainous areas, my students had to work in pairs and create on paper their own mountainous area. I printed stickers depicting animals and kinds of trees already seen in class and gave them a black and white worksheet picturing a mountain range. I asked them to decide what their mountain range would look like and stick the pictures they would choose on the paper. Then they had to present this area to the class and in that case they had to use expressions like "I/We can see..." or "In my mountainous area there is/are..." for the first time. I have to say that I was in doubt whether they would be able to describe their pictures. So I went on using the necessary forms when I presented the material and I repeated the same structures over again in different occasions. What I saw in my class was the proof of what is suggested widely in literature, i.e. that language teaching through tasks can be more effective than pre-teaching vocabulary. My students picked up the new language after a lot of repetition and they were eventually able to use it for their presentations. There were some students of course who needed help but they also managed in the end to make successful presentations.
- My students' level of English was not high, their skills were limited to speaking and listening and therefore I could not use any text for the first two months. So I had to find other ways to assess and check comprehension at the same time. In this case, my previous knowledge in EFL helped me a lot, because, when teaching the FL, we always try to avoid much use of mother tongue in the classroom and find other ways than mere translation to help learners understand. I used a lot of repetition, paraphrasing, facial expressions, visuals and of course, a map of Greece as my students had no idea where the places they saw on the power point presentations were on the map. In this way I tried to make the topic relevant to the students, to somehow connect it to their previous knowledge and experience and, hence, visualize the new concepts.

- I had to face and deal with my students' anxiety to comprehend concepts not seen in the English class until then and, moreover, to be able to produce them. Curiosity and eagerness to participate often changed places with frustration for not being able to remember all the new knowledge. Nevertheless, students were eventually able to cope with the new challenge in their curriculum, since the concepts were less dependent on the language than on the manner of presentation and the activities organized to support learning.

Despite the difficulties both my students and myself had faced, in the end, it was a rewarding experience as, on the one hand, I became more flexible and resourceful as a teacher and on the other, my students gained confidence in themselves. They knew that after the first puzzlement they would understand whatever new was presented and they would also be able to put their message across even if they hadn't been taught the forms in their English class. They also started thinking more flexibly and they worked better in teams. Hence, I strongly believe that CLIL is worth the effort because of its dual identity, i.e. you learn the language without realizing it because your focus is on content. As Met (1999, p. 48) states, "content serves as a powerful mechanism for promoting communication in the new language" and it is precisely in contexts where the focus is on meaning and communication that, as many researchers suggest (Genesse, 1994; Met, 1999), deeper learning of the language and content may take place.

CLIL tunes into the natural way a child learns the first language. But the acquisition of the first language is effortless because the environment is full of resources that the child learns to use as tools. A CLIL environment provides rich input and opportunities for rich intake and output. In order to facilitate the intake in such a young age, it is essential to remember that young learners need personal engagement with the learning process. Philips suggests "young learners respond to language according to what it does or what they can do with it" (1993, p.7). At the age of eight, students like doing things with their hands and they like sharing the outcome of a task with their classmates. The activities have to trigger their imagination in order to take them away from the confinement of the classroom. I tried to use this element not only in my power point presentations, but also when I had to consolidate and practise previous knowledge in class. One instance I would like to share was when we were talking about the mountainous areas at the beginning of the course. We were talking generally about what we can see there, e.g. rivers, lakes, waterfalls, forests, rocky paths, snowy tops. I gave my students a worksheet in black and white and they had to colour it the way they wanted so as to present their area to the class. There were few students who remembered all the words. But since all students wanted to show their pictures, they listened carefully to what their classmates were saying so as to be able to produce it themselves. These words never left their minds, neither expressions like: "Up in the mountains we can see..." Generally speaking, colouring excites children's imagination and it's a good way to revise the lesson at home. But what also helps is having groups working in cut-and-paste activities. They share knowledge and they feel they can get immediate help by their peers. For instance, in later classes, they had to work in groups to create their own village or town. So I gave each group two sticker papers printed with four divided sets of pictures: animals we see in Greece, plants and trees, jobs and types of houses and I also gave each group a worksheet under the title: "Where do you live?". They had to decide where they would like to live, i.e. village, town or city on a mountainous area, coastal area, near a lake, near a river, in a valley or on an island. They had to give a name to their town or village and they had to decide which animals would live there, what kinds of plants there would be, what jobs people would do and what types of houses they would have depending on the geography of the place. Then they had to present their "poster" to their classmates. After their presentation, the rest of the class asked them questions to learn more details about that place. They were eager to present their creation

and the stronger students helped the weaker ones to learn the words they needed to use in their presentation.

On the whole I strongly believe that the advantage of CLIL is that it promotes the holistic development of learners. They gain needed content and language knowledge and skills. It also promotes opportunities for communication with the other learners. The 4Cs that drive the CLIL model (cognition, community, content and communication) serve long-term retention of new knowledge and enhance the use of skills in a meaningful context. CLIL activities are academically and cognitively demanding, therefore, they encourage creative thinking processes. The only disadvantage I can think of is lack of sufficient time. There were numerous moments when I wished for more than 2 hours per week in order to do more pair- or group-work activities and give more opportunities for co-operative learning.

CLIL is a process worth trying for as the advantages in the long run outweigh the disadvantages not only for the students whose language skills are upgraded but also for teachers whose teaching performance becomes more effective. Personally, I feel that I have developed as a teacher in that I have experienced a new teaching practice and thus have discovered new ways of guiding my students into learning paths. Reading articles on the Internet and books on CLIL helped me understand the theory better but there is still a lot to learn and comprehend. Sharing knowledge and exchanging ideas with more experienced in CLIL colleagues at school have been proved equally valuable as I had immediate feedback on the material I had created for my students. I also worked with the generalist teachers in order to understand better the subject I was called to teach through the foreign language. I am lucky to be an EFL teacher because my command of English gives me an advantage for CLIL. Some of my colleagues at school who are not EFL teachers feel less confident when it comes to use English for their CLIL lessons but this does not discourage them as they also see this experience as rewarding and educational not only for their students but for themselves as well. Cooperation between teachers is essential as they can help each other on different areas and thus make a better job.

Generally speaking, I believe that an effective CLIL teacher should have a good command of the FL but also good knowledge of the content subject. This does not imply that a second degree is necessary. The school books give a solid basis to work on but they need to be enriched and in many cases more details need to be added in order for the topic of the lesson to be adequately analyzed and learnt. Another point I keep in mind in order to teach CLIL effectively is that my lesson plans need to ensure gradual content and language progression. The age of the students in primary education calls for a holistic approach which is action- and content-based and process-oriented. They need hands-on, concrete experiences gained through multi-sensory activities linked to the spheres of experiences. For that purpose the lessons need to be planned within the broader framework of three essential conditions for language acquisition suggested by Willis (1996, p.11): exposure, use and motivation. Corrective feedback should also be provided either explicitly or implicitly when meanings are wrongly identified. As a CLIL teacher therefore I need to be flexible and never forget that sometimes code-switching is inevitable as a natural communication strategy. Repetition, demonstration, giving cues and using visuals, describing tasks accurately and giving instructions clearly, sequencing tasks and maintaining learners' engagement in the tasks are important points to keep in mind.

As I mentioned earlier, CLIL helps a teacher develop professionally. Since 'development' to me is another meaning for 'learning', I believe that it would be of great help to me to have some kind of consultancy on the professional standards that L1 teachers have when they are trained to teach Environmental Studies to the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Moreover, since I believe that

modern technology is necessary to make my lessons more interesting and challenging for my students, I would like to have some kind of training on alternative ways of brainstorming and assessment through computers.

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