CLIL 'ARENA'—EPISODE 5

Reflection on CLIL implementation in an EFL Secondary School classroom

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Even though CLIL has spread across Europe and has been incorporated in the school curriculum of many countries, there is still no official framework to regulate it in Greece (Mattheoudakis et al., 2014). As education in Greece is tightly controlled and regulated centrally, whenever a teacher is willing to incorporate CLIL in his/her classes and take the initiative to teach his/her subjects in a foreign language, s/he would most probably find him/herself involved in legal proceedings over the compatibility of his/her actions with current school policies.

Thankfully, experimental schools have the opportunity to break new ground and introduce innovations such as CLIL within the framework of their extracurricular activities under the supervision and approval of their Scientific Supervisory Boards [SSB]. As a teacher of English at the Experimental Junior High School of the University of Macedonia, I took this opportunity to teach an astronomy course to the students attending the after-school English Club, which mainly aimed to prepare them for the KPG (National Foreign Language Exam System) exams in English at the B1/B2 level. Implementing CLIL in this setting entails limited funding and informal student evaluation but, at the same time, teachers can shape and tailor the curriculum to their students' needs.

Teaching astronomy to 13-year-old junior high school students proved to be a challenging endeavor not only for the students but also for the teacher himself. Normally, students in Greece can take up astronomy as an optional course while studying at a senior high school. Approaching the subject in English much earlier allows for a clearer picture to emerge concerning the effect of CLIL implementation on the students' cognitive awareness and language skills as students at this age do not normally have a L1-based background on astronomy that could significantly affect their performance in class. For the English teacher, on the other hand, teaching astronomy requires a substantial time investment to prepare and familiarize himself with the subject that is to be taught. In this case, the teacher had good, solid knowledge of basic astronomical concepts as an amateur astronomer that allowed him to plan and implement a 30-hour long CLIL project with relative confidence.

Students had the opportunity to learn basic astronomical concepts along with English structures and terminology related to the thematic units taught through a variety of methodological approaches and techniques: introductory video sessions, reading comprehension along with consolidation exercises, group and pair work, etc. As students progressed, they faced the challenge of using the vocabulary, structures, and concepts learnt to create their own presentations, conduct practical experiments, and use on-line resources that helped them come to grips with difficult aspects of astronomy that would otherwise seem vague or simply incomprehensible. Throughout this journey, student learning was supported by a Moodle-based dynamic learning environment that presented each lesson in a clearly structured format that helped them focus on the subject being taught while, at the same time, offering them a variety of activities and resources for further study as optional homework. Complementing in-class work with the online learning experience offered to students through Moodle's active learning environment allows teachers to keep their students engaged in the learning process interactively (Rice, 2008), encouraging both language production and content comprehension.

As the group of students that participated in this CLIL course had been selected through a B1-level placement test and were supported throughout the course with parallel English language classes that were meant to prepare them to take the B1/B2 level exams, they formed a more or less homogenous group language-wise, which facilitated the learning process. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that students had never taken an astronomy course in their mother tongue and English was the vehicle through which they came to understand astronomical concepts for the first time. As a result, when speaking about astronomy they had no option but to think directly in the foreign language and use it naturally to express concepts learnt within the framework of classwork. This became obvious a couple of months before the course ended when students from the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, expressed interest in attending the club and helping with one of the lessons. At the end of the class, they voiced their surprise at the terminology students seemed to be able to handle with ease and their readiness to adapt to the different types of activities used in class.

This, of course, does not mean that everything went smoothly. Like every other class in Greece, this was just another group of students that shared the same L1. Even though ideally the language used during student interactions should be the foreign language taught, the common language tool students shared often meant that they would resort to Greek to complete an activity swiftly (even though they sometimes used Greek with embedded English astronomical terms), which is not always frowned upon in a CLIL context (Deller & Price, 2007). As most of the work done in-class required the use of computers, it soon became obvious that one of the main distractors that led students to use their mother tongue was the language of the computer interface. It is believed that switching the computer language and locale to English and UK/USA respectively would allow students to adapt more easily to using the foreign language in class even though this transition to a different language/locale is not always feasible when the computers are also used by most of the other teachers in school.

Another major obstacle on the path to using CLIL in a Greek secondary school is the lack of suitable textbooks and supporting material or the steep prices of those that have been prepared and made available by privately owned publishing companies (cf. Coyle et al., 2010). Even if one decided to use one of the latter textbooks, it would soon become obvious that they mainly focus on language learning and, as a result, seem to miss one of the targets of CLIL, i.e. subject learning. On the other hand, using material that is publicly available to

teach specific subjects to students in English-speaking countries would also be problematic since they need to be pedagogically adapted to the needs of students with different background knowledge and language competence (Mattheoudakis et al., 2014). Relying on the variety of CLIL resources that is available on line could help a teacher put together and teach a CLIL course effectively, but the situation can develop into a heavy burden for teachers who decide to implement CLIL, as a significant amount of time needs to be devoted to developing and/or adapting material to one's teaching situation no matter its origin or previous use.

Nevertheless, the results seem to be rewarding both for the teacher and the students. Both seemed to enjoy teaching/attending the CLIL course more than they did when they were studying English in the examination preparatory class and they actually said so every time they had the opportunity to express their views on the matter. Even though quite a few students found some of the material hard to follow, student self-confidence was boosted as they could understand texts they would be otherwise unable to tackle (Coyle et al., 2010). The use of L2 as a means to acquire knowledge on an unfamiliar scientific field also allowed them to be less hesitant when expressing their views in English both orally and in writing. The results of the B1/B2 examination that students took at the end of the course also speak volumes. All 12 students that attended the CLIL course were encouraged to take the exam in May 2015. Even though only eight of them decided to take the plunge, they all passed and received B2 certification. Of course, the CLIL course alone cannot take credit for these results. However, conversational feedback received by the students made it obvious that the familiarity students developed with L2, the techniques they mastered to handle unknown words, and the everyday in-class vocabulary they practiced most of the time during the CLIL course certainly played a significant role in lowering their stress level during their exam and, eventually, achieving the language level needed to be certified.

As far as teaching efficiency is concerned, lack of experience with CLIL projects meant that not all activities developed as planned or achieved the expected results. However, good communication with the students allowed for swift adaptation to the feedback received, which usually entailed falling back to backup material that was cognitively or linguistically less challenging (Bentley, 2010). Thankfully, an introductory distance-learning course on CLIL is regularly offered by the British Council. Having the opportunity to attend this course and exchange views with the rest of the participating teachers can help improve the methodology and techniques implemented in class as well as develop new ideas and insight on the subject matter and language that is being taught. Moreover, the fact that the aforementioned course was also offered on a Moodle platform helped move the Astronomy Club's Moodle website one step further in terms of organizing group work and student interaction better.

Of course, more formal and organized training and legislation that would set the framework within which teachers could innovate and initiate CLIL projects is essential if more teachers of English and/or teachers of other school subjects are to get involved. Introductory courses to school subjects and foreign languages should be offered respectively to allow teachers to familiarize themselves with concepts and language structures they don't feel confident using and/or teaching. Within this framework and depending on teacher interests, university departments could organize intensive courses that would allow teachers to teach basic subjects at school in a foreign language. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that foreign language teachers could ever teach higher level subjects in senior high school without a degree on the subject to be taught.

Apart from training, though, what Greek schools seem to need most is the spirit of cooperation and the interdisciplinary approach to learning that CLIL is based on. The legislation that regulates primary and secondary education in Greece is more likely to encourage antagonistic relations among teachers who try to preserve their rights and position in school rather than joint projects that would benefit the students most. However, even though legislative changes could be easily introduced, given the necessary political will, teacher perceptions and attitudes could be difficult to modify. As a result, human resource management projects might need to be initiated to promote the behavioral adaptation needed.

References

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