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The Many Shades of CLIL: A Case Study of CLIL Application by English Teachers of Very Young Learners at a Greek Private School

Οι πολλές αποχρώσεις/σκιές του CLIL: Μια μελέτη περίπτωσης εφαρμογής της CLIL από εκπαιδευτικούς της Αγγλικής σε μικρούς μαθητές σε ένα Ελληνικό ιδιωτικό σχολείο

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This study hones in on the practices and perceptions of a group of English teachers in a private school in Greece through analysis of semi-structured interviews and journals with NVIVO 7, a CAQDAS tool. The research was conducted to illuminate the application of CLIL at very young ages, pre-kindergarten to grade 3. Although there is a diverse application of CLIL at these ages, there is common ground more so because of the teacher and school approach. Findings also showed that teachers find CLIL to be an integral part of their lessons. Barriers to CLIL for the teachers are mostly a need for collaboration with others, time and planning.

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Η εργασία αυτή εστιάζει στις πρακτικές και στις αντιλήψεις μιας ομάδας εκπαιδευτικών της αγγλικής γλώσσας ενός ιδιωτικού σχολείου στην Ελλάδα μέσα από την ανάλυση συνεντεύξεων και καταχωρήσεις ημερολογίων με τη χρήση NVIVO 7, ενός εργαλείου για ποιοτική ανάλυση. Η έρευνα διεξήχθη για να αναδείξει την εφαρμογή της μεθόδου CLIL σε πολύ μικρές ηλικίες, από το νηπιαγωγείο έως την 3^η τάξη του δημοτικού. Παρόλο που η εφαρμογή της CLIL γίνεται με διαφορετικό τρόπο σε αυτές τις ηλικίες, υπάρχουν κάποια κοινά στοιχεία λόγω των προσεγγίσεων των δασκάλων και του σχολικού περιβάλλοντος. Τα ευρήματα κατέδειξαν πως οι εκπαιδευτικοί θεωρούν ότι η CLIL αποτελεί αναπόσπαστο μέρος των μαθημάτων τους. Αυτά που θεωρούν εμπόδια για την εφαρμογή της CLIL είναι η ανάγκη συνεργασίες με τους συναδέλφους άλλων ειδικοτήτων, ο χρόνος και ο σχεδιασμός.

Key Words: CLIL, very young learners, case-study, teacher perceptions, implementation of CLIL.

1. Introduction

The learning of foreign languages and their cultures has been a staple in Europe. Learning various disciplines in non-native languages has had a more rugged development since its introduction in the 1990s (a summary of the actions can be found in the document 'European CLIL Milestones'). The culture and the different state educational systems affect how content areas for the teaching of English (CLIL) are applied. It may involve using native language teachers of a subject matter teaching a class and/or specific lessons as in Germany (Vasquez, 2009) or teaching modules of certain content within language classes in Italy (Ranieri, 2013). In Spain other different examples of CLIL are taught. English teachers or classroom teachers may teach specialized content in a modular form to younger students (Muñoz & Navés, 2009). The teaching of CLIL can thus be found in a large continuum (Banegas, 2012a).

1.1 *The teaching of CLIL in Greece*

1.1.1 *Foreign Language Teaching in Greece*

Learning English is encouraged from the early years in Greece. English is a required subject from grade 3 regular schedule or from grade 1 all day schools (Dendrinou et al., 2013). State schools have English classes for 3 hours per week. Private schools often have daily English classes from pre-K. A second foreign language is introduced in the 5th grade of primary school. However, CLIL has not been officially implemented state-wide (Eurydice, 2006, 2012). Opportunities for CLIL remain restricted to hours allocated for the teaching of foreign languages, within isolated projects or after-school classes when government restrictions do not apply. In some instances, there is the need for the procurement of special permission to teach foreign languages/CLIL during set flexible hours during the weekly school program that are reserved for revisions or more in-depth study during the course of the week.

1.1.2 *CLIL in Greek Schools*

Greece remains one of the countries which have not formally adopted some application of CLIL (Eurydice, 2012). Despite the institutional rigidity, a few schools in Greece seem to have shyly begun some form of application of CLIL. Experimental schools state schools have been at the forefront in applying aspects of CLIL. Experimental schools have a charter allowing them to divert from the state educational program in order to pilot new educational methods and content. The teaching of CLIL in these schools has delved into various content areas such as Environmental Studies, history, geography, religious studies and the Arts (see Korosidou & Griva, 2014; Papadopoulos & Griva, 2014). Most CLIL courses have had limited exposure time lasting from a few days to a short period of time with few exceptions such as the experimental school of Evosmos which has integrated a CLIL studies programs from the third until the sixth grade class (Matheoudakis et al., 2014). There have been some instances of secondary level state schools that have explored CLIL in different subjects and formats. The 3rd High School of Larissa implemented CLIL within a class project dealing with the topic of Democracy using both an English teacher and a content teacher using the native language (Kollatou, 2013). There was team teaching using both L1 (first language) and L2 (second language) languages. Another state school in a province of Larissa taught an Environmental unit in English with the local Greek student population and a group of foreign exchange students from Belgium (Oikonomou, 2012). In private schools that have Greek as their main language of instruction, there are no published data of how CLIL is taught. From information on websites, CLIL is seen to be taught after-school, in clubs or within the English program.

Most of the practices concerning CLIL from published reports (Kollatou, 2013; Korosidou & Griva, 2014; Matheoudakis et al, 2014; Oikonomou, 2012) have been limited to upper elementary classes and to secondary school students. CLIL in lower grades pre-k to grade 3 has had little published implementation in Greece.

1.2 Teacher Perceptions of CLIL

1.2.1 Training and Knowledge CLIL

Knowledge and training of teachers involved in teaching CLIL is vital for creating a quality program (Ioannou-Georgiou & Pavlou, 2011). Training for teachers in Greece in CLIL has been limited to Language Conferences and training sessions provided by the Greek Ministry of Education to its state teachers. According to Griva et al. (2014) most Greek and Cypriot ESL teachers perceived themselves as inadequately trained on CLIL.

1.2.2 Confusion concerning CLIL

Teachers have ambiguity concerning the aims and teaching of CLIL. Teachers in Pokrivcakova's study (2013) in Slovakia voiced concerns about what to assess, how to practically prepare for CLIL classes and how to teach in a way that was not compatible with the local schools. Vasquez and Rubio (2010, p.49) note the differences between teaching content in a foreign language and through a foreign language. "This means that the creative use of language could be the key to understanding, and use is not necessarily tied to accuracy". Finally, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2009) describe the confusion that teachers may have between immersion and CLIL programs in Spain.

1.3 CLIL for very Young Learners

1.3.1 Earlier Starts in the Teaching of English

The teaching of English in Greece is being implemented at even earlier ages within the national Greek curriculum. This aligns with the literature from a global perspective (Enever & Moon, 2008) showing that internationally parents and governments are applying pressure to initiate English at earlier ages. Although most public schools in Greece begin teaching English at the third grade of primary school, it has now been pushed onto the 1st grade (Eurydice, 2012).

1.3.1 Barriers to CLIL

CLIL requires knowledge in a specialized field along with knowledge of the English language and skills in engaging students to understand, use and apply vocabulary in a foreign language within a specific content field (Coyle, 1999). Banegas (2012b) review of the literature presents barriers to teaching CLIL from a top-down approach noting administrator aims and their lack of knowledge to teachers who may not understand what is expected from them and their own lack of knowledge of English or content. In Greece, isolated training has been available to teachers such as small pilot training courses at specific schools (e-CLILT, 2008), but not a comprehensive national effort.

2. Case Study

2.1 Aim of Case Study

This is a case study of the characteristics of CLIL encountered in the English department of a private school in Thessaloniki, Greece that teach to very young learners at the grades of Kindergarten to grade 3 elementary. The aim of the study is to understand the extent of CLIL within the English department and some qualitative characteristics that are involved in its teaching at the school. A major part of the CLIL at the school came in the form of the newly piloted Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) program taught in English in the second grade.

2.2 Description of the STEM program

The STEM program involves the teaching of Sciences in a lab environment for 2 hours a week, one of which is in English and one in Greek. Both the Greek and the English STEM lesson plans are designed by the English team teacher who holds dual degrees in English and in the Sciences. There are 3 classroom sections with 3 different classroom Greek teachers. The classroom teachers with the lead English teacher met weekly to discuss and revise the lesson plans jointly. The classes were held at a lab during the STEM hours. The English STEM class was under the main supervision of the English teacher while the classroom teacher, also present in class, played a supporting role.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case Study Design

This case study involved gaining descriptive data from two concurrent activities at the school, English teaching and STEM. The case study was bounded by the experiences of CLIL within the English department which according to Merriam's (2009) definition of case studies is, "An in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p.37). A mixed method approach was utilized in order to be able to view the processes and grasp the ramifications involved in the application of STEM by the English department at the school. Three forms of data collection were used for this case study of teaching CLIL at very young learners. They included semi-structured interviews of the six English teachers involved in the teaching of K-3 grades, the use of journals/diaries from the English STEM teacher and finally examples of lesson plans involved in the STEM part of the case study. The research questions drew on the teachers' experience and understanding of CLIL and provided their perspectives on CLIL. The journal entries of the STEM teacher focused on the description of her experience and her reaction to the pilot project. Since, the STEM teacher is also one of the contributing researchers of this article, the collaborating researcher provided an objective viewpoint in the analysis and writing of the paper (Tenni et al, 2003). The inclusion of the lab handouts to the students provides a secondary source to the journal entries in order to triangulate the data available and provide validity to the research (Yin, 2013).

The teacher interviews were conducted in English during the months of April, May and October 2015. The STEM pilot program began in September 2015, so that qualitative data between the months of September and December were provided. This data involved personal journals written by the STEM teacher and the handouts provided for the students within the classroom.

3.2 Data Analysis

The teacher interviews, the journals and all of the material provided for the STEM classes were imported into NVIVO 7, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tool. These documents were analyzed using coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Codes were used to formulate patterns within the data and draw conclusions during a continuous process. As described in Miles and Huberman's (2010) handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis, the use of coding, reflections, observations and continuous input of information, "social system models may then be developed, which specify the relationships within different phenomena".

4. Results

4.1 The Breadth of CLIL according to the English Teachers at the School

The English teachers at the school had a varied experience of using CLIL with respect to the content areas used and to the classroom time allocated to CLIL. CLIL spanned the range of taking up part of a class hour to being year-long courses such as STEM.

Teachers created CLIL lessons in a continuum. Some lessons focused on content in order to expand vocabulary and introduce students to critical thinking skills, computers, culture etc. "Also, with both 1st graders and Kindergarten kids when we did sea animals, we heard the whale sounds and they tried to imitate them and spoke about their size and intelligence compared to other sea animals. Then I showed them a book from the national history museum and saw the real whale that was on display in comparison to the other animals of the forest or jungle". "In 3rd grade we did a unit on planets. Students created a planet and learned how to use computers". Another teacher mentioned: "Also we talked about culture and taboos, tattoos and fashion as well as cuisine as a sign of culture. We said how all these are influenced by the region, the latitude and the religion".

Other lessons used content as a means to motivate learners into learning a grammar phenomenon or to practice speaking skills. The content, however, does not remain bounded by the language and can lead further to other kinds of understanding for the students. "Based on the vocabulary we have learnt (apple, mirror, basket, beautiful, girl etc.) I might tell or create a story (Snow-white and the 7 Dwarfs) which I repeat for a couple of days [...] Then we get to act these dialogues/ expressions out (here comes the Drama part)". "We will also use art such as in my 2nd grade class when we were discussing prepositions of place. I did a speaking activity using a painting of Van Gogh's bedroom. This led to students' curiosity by this form of art and to viewing and discussing different painters".

The teachers in the examples above used different content areas of CLIL such as Art, the Sciences and the Social Sciences in order to motivate student interest either in the English language or towards another content area. Content areas such as the example on the planet unit expanded further into other areas. Using CLIL in the classroom even for isolated lessons allows teachers to enrich students into more areas that they could possibly do if the class remained an English language class in a stricter sense.

4.2 Issues involved in Teaching CLIL

The barrier that the teachers noted more prominently was one of organization and curriculum focus. Language and age of students were considered secondary issues in the application of CLIL at such young ages. Most teachers stated that having properly planned

for the language ability of the student, it was possible to teach for content even to students with limited language ability. Teachers considered their own understanding of content, the curriculum and time more often as limitations to teaching CLIL.

“I don’t see any barriers. If you think through the goals of the child at the level they are in. You need to think about what kind of language goals you have for a particular lesson, the student abilities, student attention span and accommodate for all these. Anything is possible if you think it through”.

“The curriculum and teacher knowledge of the content. The content area and time limitations [are barriers to teaching CLIL]”.

Adherence to a specific curriculum may not leave time to explore CLIL possibilities.

The teachers at the school also felt more comfortable with specific content areas depending on their educational and teaching experience. The subject areas that they felt less comfortable with were avoided, but not completely. Teachers with a Science background delved into mini CLIL science units. Teachers having Dance/Movement or Theatre expertise integrated these elements into their classroom. They created plays, stories or movements to teach English.

“We use theatre all the time in classes. Students get in front of the class and act out parts and use their speaking skills at the same time in English.”

“I don’t use the science areas as much in class, mostly in the arts”.

However, the language ability of the students was also a barrier at times, because teachers at the school do not use Greek in the classrooms and there is no Greek teacher present that can help with understanding.

“I think that sometimes it’s difficult to teach CLIL because of the language you have to use (we only use English in the classroom). For example, if you want to talk about the planets and your students don’t know what orbit is in their native language it is very challenging for a teacher to try to explain it in a language that the students are currently learning”.

CLIL was given different interpretations by the teachers. One teacher did not believe that she was applying CLIL at the school based on her understanding of it.

“I haven’t used CLIL in class in the true sense. I don’t assign equal weight to both content and English. I don’t test them on a specific subject. The only exception is Theater Club”.

Another teacher believed that she used CLIL constantly: “CLIL is not something new. You always use content and skills in the class. You need to use CLIL with whatever you can to teach English and develop all their skills. We use CLIL on a daily basis”.

The line between content and English becomes obscure. Are teachers concentrating on language skills? Are they concentrating on learning about a specific subject matter? At times content is a vehicle to teach English and at other times, English is used in order to include other skills and to expand student horizons.

4.3 CLIL and STEM

The STEM course differed in structure to that of the English classes in terms of implementing CLIL. It utilized a Greek classroom teacher that at times gave some instructions in Greek or interjected to clarify either a concept or procedures. It involved more hands-on activities and group involvement within the classroom. However, there was duality in aim here, too. This is similar to Gabillon's and Ailincăi's (2013) study of Science CLIL lessons in Tahiti. They also expressed two aims, both content and language. Both the content and the English were important for this STEM course. The balance as the teacher below expresses was not always easy.

“There are two goals in the class for me, both the English and the Science content and at times there seems to be a conflict. Do I turn away some students because of their inability to express themselves in English during the STEM class? I have to admit that I make some judgement calls”.

4.3.1 Description of the STEM class in English

The STEM class in English often had a preceding STEM class in Greek (two of the three classes). Some of the scientific concepts were already introduced, when the English teacher began her lessons. Students were given handouts describing the content and lab activity. However, the teacher went over the content not by reading the handout, but by asking questions to the students, by demonstrating a principle to raise awareness or even by drawing on the white-board. The teacher explains:

“Although written information was given to the students, due to time constraints, it isn't read to them or they are not asked to read in class. I have chosen to provide them with the material and allow them leeway to go over it on their own. I prefer not to spoil their experience of exploring science by making it seem too much like an English class.”

The preceding class in Greek had the benefit of setting the scene for the students to follow in English (appendix 1). Students were already aware of some of the key issues, so that less time was needed for explanations that may be difficult for the students to understand. Students in this class were not tested on the Scientific or the English content of the class. Assessment was done orally or by completing follow-up questions on the handouts (appendix 2).

“It helps having a task after the main activity for the students to practice the vocabulary or some of the lab concepts”. The content material was reviewed as a class in English, but also in Greek by the classroom teachers.

4.3.2 Challenges in the Teaching of a STEM class in English

The class presented challenges due to the nature of the activities required as a lab class and due to the young age and level of English that the students had. Students had to learn to handle lab equipment, work in groups and follow instructions. They had to learn skills such as completing data tables, setting up and cleaning up lab stations. This required good planning and assistance from the classroom teachers. However, at times, even the classroom teachers had difficulty helping because they also lacked knowledge of a lab

environment. Both the students and the teachers needed a period of adjustment to the climate of a more hands-on teaching classroom.

The use of English as a medium in teaching the class seems to have been a secondary concern for the STEM teacher with respect to acclimating the students in a lab classroom with different expectations.

“Language does not seem the biggest concern in conducting the class. I think that overseeing the smooth completion of the lab is the most critical point for me. Students become too excited and get off task and are learning to work in groups”.

Language appeared to be a problem when students asked questions beyond the immediate content and wanted to gain understanding that extended from the class objectives. There, the STEM teacher faced difficulties and had to make decisions on whether to give in to giving some feedback in Greek or explaining in English and accepting the limits of language understanding.

“In a couple of instances I have used some Greek words in order not to lose some students and keep them interested in the Sciences and in using their critical thinking. Although I have the Greek classroom teachers, because some concepts are unknown to them as well, they are unable to help me at the time”.

The crux of the matter for the teacher was for students to gain a meaningful experience and to keep them engaged in the Sciences when their English level could not always support them in this endeavor.

4.3.3 Practices used to Improve Teaching STEM in English

The practices used by the teacher to improve understanding in the English STEM class involved extra linguistic artifacts (Gabillon & Ailincui, 2013) such as images, demonstrations etc , careful planning of the content and the use of English involved and meeting with classroom teachers to make their assistance more productive in class.

“The English level requires careful planning of what I say and the kinds of words I use to introduce topics. I simplify in the beginning some concepts and/or use drawings on the board to help them understand”. Another teacher stated: “we (STEM and classroom teachers) arranged meetings with them to show them what is to be done before the lab begins and what both parts of the STEM class will be doing. Lab handouts are given a week in advance so that the teachers have time to study the information and ask questions or even have time to get their own ideas on the content”.

The fact that the STEM teacher also taught 2nd grade English courses helped her in understanding the level of English that the students could function at. It helped in honing in on specific terminology and content for the classroom and not adding more confusion by using more complex classroom vocabulary. Key words on worksheets were highlighted, repeated and required in application tasks so that students learned the vocabulary crucial to understanding the content.

The STEM teacher noted that careful planning of the content both in terms of the English used and age-appropriateness was crucial for learning in class. However, all parameters

were not always perfectly planned. At times, the labs took more time than the expected or students raised questions that were not easy to answer and be understood in English as seen by the journal excerpts below:

“I think that I also need to pace my class a bit slower because I end up not doing everything that I plan. It seems that it doesn't matter if I cover everything. Students need some time to digest concepts and to revise them too”.

“In a couple of instances I have used some Greek words in order not to lose some students and keep them interested in the Sciences and in using their critical thinking”.

5. Discussion

The implementation of CLIL had different interpretations at this lower elementary school. CLIL spanned different time intervals from small enrichment lessons to full courses. CLIL was seen as a vehicle for not only learning content, but also language, culture, art and the sciences as seen through descriptions of CLIL activities in the interviews of the English teachers. The scope of CLIL also varied due to their different understanding of it. Some teachers used it almost daily and some less often or very limited. Some teachers believed that CLIL primarily involves a content aim and not a language aim. Others seemed to involve both. CLIL is an approach not clearly understood by many teachers as also seen from the literature. (Massler, 2012; Rowe & Coonan, 2011). The teachers at the school knew of the term, but not all of its ramifications.

CLIL was seen more as a vehicle to enhance learning of the English language within the lower Elementary English teachers. However, the STEM class was considered both as an approach to the teaching of Science, but also of English. This stemmed in part to the time allotted for the teaching of content within the English courses. Within the English classes, communicative skills have a priority within the course description. CLIL must find a space somewhere in-between. As Marsh (2012, p.229) points out, “CLIL is seen as providing a framework for best practice without imposing undue strain on either curriculum time or resources”.

CLIL seems to be more of a challenge for teachers than students. As one of the teachers describes: “There is a case that the students will get too excited and impatient about what it is to follow but then again the result is compensating as they will have enjoyed the lesson more and will also remember and conquer the language more easily and with less effort.” Students enjoy the meaning they receive with CLIL even if they may have some difficulties at times with the language.

The STEM class, on the other hand, had less of an English focus and more of a content focus. Both content and language were equally important. It was a collaborative effort between the STEM English teacher and the Greek classroom teachers. The classroom teachers assisted with the smooth operation of the class in terms of organization and use of some L1 directions. They were also effective in setting some of the basic concepts in L1 before the STEM teacher entry and teaching in the English language. There were, though, issues of coordination and fine-tuning between them. This was probably due to the novelty of the course both in terms of the content and the methodology for all those involved. Teaching two sections alongside with similar, but not identical concepts is an innovative approach which highlights the versatility of CLIL in its use.

The diversity in CLIL probably also stems in its lack of formal status in Greece. A top down encouragement of CLIL would more likely set standards to follow. Stakeholders in the government and at schools need to see CLIL as an important aspect of learning foreign languages and integrate it formally into the schools or isolated initiatives become a hit or miss event. However, as Ioannou-Georgiou (2012) points out CLIL is also dependent on the specific context and perhaps each school and each teacher requires specific materials and approaches that are necessary for their particular situation and the subsequent support to meet the goals.

6. Conclusion

This case study presents unique insights into the realities of practicing CLIL with very young learners within the Greek educational system. It highlights the diversity of CLIL applied and the potential uses that teachers find in it. It also raises the need for CLIL to gain a more formal standing within the educational system so it does not remain as an optional program, but gains credence to be integrated in a more organized and systematic fashion. Although, the study involves six teachers, it provides a unique picture of how CLIL is applied at very young learners and some of the challenges it involves.

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