



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 8, No. 2, February 2017, 152-154

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

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CLIL 'ARENA'—EPISODE 2

Reflection on CLIL implementation in an EFL Primary School classroom

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My first and most noteworthy experience with ConBaL took place while I was teaching English at a Primary School in a rural part of Halkidiki during the School year 2013-14. Within the context of Flexible Zone, I was assigned to organize and teach a two-hour weekly course to a class of sixteen (8 boys and 8 girls) underprivileged D graders. The subject of the courses was open, so I decided that it had to be somehow challenging to the particular students and relevant to their reality, needs, and concerns. After discussing with the pupils about their interests, and conducting some research about the subjects they had previously been taught, I organized and carried out a Health Care Program entitled “Getting to Know my Body-Living Healthily”. The aim of the course was to help these young learners get to know their body and how it related to other people and to the world and stimuli around them. At the same time, I aimed at increasing my pupils’ receptive skills as well as their understanding of and capacity in the English language. Following the Method of Project and organizing task-based activities (see Willis, 1996), every two-hour session focused on a different aspect of the described program, with specific aims, procedures, and desired results.

Beginning with physical and psychological awareness, we opened up our investigations to include nutrition, agriculture, and farming; we organized visits to doctors, to the American Farm School of Thessaloniki, we invited dieticians and biologists; we also cooked and collected olives. Although it was not required of me to teach in English during the two-hour course, I decided that this was a wonderful chance for me to experiment with Content Based Learning on a subject that I had not taught before and, simultaneously, immerse my pupils into as much authentic English as possible. I began hesitantly with this three-month program, but suffice it to say, my students were enjoying it as much as I was so I decided to continue exploring the subject and the different paths that were opening up to us in an interdisciplinary way during the whole school year. At the end of the school year, I had the chance to present a qualitative (rather than quantitative) description of the approach to Primary and Secondary teachers of English, assess its benefits, and discuss possible difficulties at a day event organized by the ELT School Advisor, Dr Angeliki Deligianni.

Since then, strict programming of Greek schools has not allowed me to enjoy the privileges of teaching within the context of Flexible Zone (Vygotsky, 1987). Only this year I have been assigned a one-hour weekly course within the contexts of Flexible Zone, which I am planning to devote to the teaching of simple philosophical issues to young learners through the tales of Aesop. After my previous experience with the implementation of ConBaL, I intend to adopt the CLIL approach as I believe that the teaching of Aesop myths through the medium of English and within a participatory environment is going to help my pupils in both their competence of the English language and their critical thinking skills (see Coyle, 2007; Dalton-Puffer, 2008). I expect that the young learners' possible prior knowledge of the myths is probably going to facilitate their understanding of the stories in the English language and it is going to increase their critical skills and their ability to make connections between the two languages.

What is more, I have had very fruitful cooperation and exchange of ideas with the main subject teacher of the pupils. The main teacher has already worked on philosophy and storytelling with the particular pupils during the previous year in Greek and is willing to cooperate with me on this great endeavor, share experiences, ideas, and offer feedback. We are going to be in close cooperation with the Greek and ELT School Advisors, accepting academic guidance from Dr. Matheoudaki, Assistant Professor in the School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki as well.

The English Department of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki has been a hub of teaching and training activities relating to CLIL. I have been following closely the mobility of Dr. Matheoudaki, Assistant Professor in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, who, in the last two years, has been lecturing to teachers of English in Greece about the implementation of CLIL in the English-speaking classroom. After I got informed about the method through my personal research into bibliography about CLIL-and got over some misconceptions-I realised that its philosophy was quite close to my experience with ConBaL and decided that I wanted to give it a try. I only needed the "space" within the School's Curriculum in order to be able to test the method.

The problems I have experienced as a language teacher, who wants to experiment with the method, are mainly institutional and practical. CLIL involves the teaching of curriculum subjects in a foreign language but there are very few schools or subject teachers who are willing to experiment and allow a language teacher teach a curriculum subject, such as History, Maths, Geography etc. in English. Due to the economic recession that the country is facing, teachers are facing salary and working-hour shortcuts, literally struggling for their survival in the Greek School. Apart from such practical problems, language teachers face the restraint and suspicion of their colleagues and head teachers who have not been informed about the method yet. Many challenges may come from subject teachers and parents who might worry about the effects of the implementation of CLIL. Fortunately, due to constant lecturing, teachers are gradually getting informed and seem more open to new challenges.

As CLIL challenges the need to translate into the learners' mother tongue, one of the most difficult tasks of the participating language and subject teachers is to explain to the parents that they need not interfere with the teaching and learning process of the pupils. The teacher who decides to use CLIL as a method of teaching and ESL instruction needs to inform the parents about the careful steps to be followed. Most surprisingly, young learners prove to be less intimidated than anyone else. Less biased and adjustable by nature to changing teaching conditions and environments, they are open to new ideas. If convinced about the truth of the cause, they are the teacher's best allies. By building a stress-free English-

speaking environment for the learners, they have many more chances to develop linguistic competence in the target language, as well as critical thinking due to the correlations that the pupils have to make between the mother tongue and the target language. After feelings of inhibition and anxiety are tamed, learners can experiment with the language freely, paying more attention to *content* than to *form*. Free from the 'tyranny' of the textbook, they have more chances to bring their knowledge and experience from their life into the classroom.

Through the activities that I have been organizing, the learners can become more flexible and learn to contribute to participatory teaching and learning environments. Due to the great possibilities that information and computer technologies offer, both the teacher and the learners have the chance to bring into the classroom authentic material in English and actively contribute to the teaching events. The implementation of the method, hopefully, will increase their enthusiasm and their active involvement, their inter-cultural understanding, and their communication skills in the English language.

As I will not be depending on text books any more, I have already turned into a researcher, actively involved in both the organization and the teaching of the subject. I choose to be an orchestrator rather than an authoritative person in the learning environment.

Through my previous experience with ConBaL and presently with CLIL, I am happy to see my role as a teacher changing, evolving, helping me grow personally. What drives me is my constant search for new and effective ways of teaching learners who have to deal with the challenges of the New Media era in a globalized shrinking world, where English is the first language that they will have to use. On this journey, I feel that I will definitely need the help and expert guidance of my tutors, whose not only theoretical guidance but also practical tips and solutions can prove invaluable. Co-operation, possibly co-teaching, observations, and feedback from my colleagues, school advisors, and tutors are going to be needed.

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