

Implementing CLIL techniques to History Classes: Action Research

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Abstract

The given action research is aimed at investigating the impact the implementation of CLIL techniques may have on understanding and comprehension of the content in the teaching/learning environment where English is used as a medium of education. The research was conducted in Cambridge department of one of the private schools in Baku, Azerbaijan with two groups of 11-12-year-old learners. CLIL methodology was utilized in History of Azerbaijan classes to check whether the approach can facilitate the understanding of the content matter for the students who are proficient English users. The distinctive feature of this action research is that it allows for viewing CLIL approach from a perspective opposite to the common perspective where the focus is shifted from learning the language through content to learning content through CLIL tools and techniques.

Keywords: CLIL, teaching history, action research

Introduction

With the growing tendency to provide a holistic educational programme which will be acknowledged on international level, in Azerbaijan the majority of the private schools have been switching to using English as the main language of teaching and learning. Our educational centre runs Cambridge International Programme, which provides education for primary, secondary, and high school students using English as a medium of instruction. Though the programme is international and all the course books and syllabi we use are in English, in our educational context, it is more of a format of hard Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as the macro-environment in which students live and communicate in predominately Azeri and Russian. This is due to the fact that CLIL implies not only providing an extra language input, but also content-oriented cognitively challenging tasks (Harrop, 2012, p. 57).

However, the CLIL approach and the main ideas it is based on is not quite spread among the subject teachers in Azerbaijan despite the fact that educators teaching subjects in English face students' lack of content-obligatory language (the language required by the specific discipline) and/or some basic language skills (for instance, reading for specific information or details in humanities subjects or report writing for stating the results of a science experiment). With this being the case, no research has ever been attempted to see whether the students of international programmes in our teaching/learning context would benefit from introduction of hard CLIL lesson formats to the educational process. Thus, the main aim of this action research was to check the difference in the material comprehension between two samples of students, one of which was receiving a course of History of Azerbaijan in a traditional way and the other – through a set of reading and speaking CLIL activities designed for the purpose of the study. Each group of students (Grade 6, 11-12 years old) was having classes on the same material from the same course book for a month and then assessed by the final test to check whether CLIL activities can have a quality impact on the content learning. The results showed that the sample taking CLIL-type instructions scored overall 31% higher than the control group.

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This action research can illustrate how important it might be for the subject teachers in international schools in non-English-speaking environment to pay attention to the language constituent of the content lessons to achieve high academic results. Mainly, teachers believe that students will acquire basic language skills during the process of education; others think that it is an English teacher role to provide his/her students with all the necessary language. The former, however, cannot be quite applicable to our context as some students may not be capable of picking up academic skills by themselves, especially those who have recently come from Azeri and Russian departments in secondary and high schools and have no experience in reading or writing academic texts even in their mother tongue, as it is not required by the Azerbaijan National Curriculum. What concerns the latter, English teachers should incorporate teaching of academic skills into their syllabi as required by Cambridge International Framework, but this does not necessarily mean that the English teachers should provide their students with all the language the students should use at all the subjects. Moreover, enhancing reading, speaking, or writing skills during English classes does not guarantee the success of the learner in other disciplines, it is the subject teacher who should think of what support strategies they can suggest to reinforce the students' basic skills within the subject. These strategies may include eliciting, predicting, using background knowledge/experience, seeing and categorising information, understanding cause and effect, making inferences, observing and comparing information, etc. – the strategies that can help “promote the use of a range of linguistic and cognitive processes” (Brewster, 2004, p. 2).

Literature review

Teaching with a CLIL format lesson in mind can not only help provide extra exposure to English and cater for achieving the language goals – increasing vocabulary or improving listening and speaking skills, but also help bring diversity into the classroom and help view the language from different cultural and educational angles (Ur, 2012, p.221). Such an approach triggers students' motivation to learn the language as they do not learn the language merely to know it but to accomplish certain tasks and to get deeper knowledge of the subjects' content. Hence, the language is used as a key to content (Mehisto et al., 2008, p.11). Richards and Rodgers maintain that content-based instruction and, consequently, CLIL involve activities and tasks that are constructed so that they involve different skills at the same time – just as it happens in the real world. The students can read academic passages or literary texts or watch video clips and take notes, write summaries and discuss and comment their writing. The language is viewed through the content, and grammar and vocabulary are considered as a part of discourse rather than “isolated fragments” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.208). That is why it is the teacher who should carefully select the material and adequately select the language that will be relevant for a specific content matter.

As it was mentioned in introduction, the implementation of CLIL in educational environment in Azerbaijan is not reflected in any research studies or investigations. However, the experience in application of the approach to teaching/learning context in other countries has been richly described in numerous linguistic articles, though they are mostly limited to comparing language proficiency rather than content comprehension in CLIL and non-CLIL groups even though CLIL is viewed as 50:50 Language/Content “equilibrium” (Ting, 2010, p.6). Almost all the reviewed materials have shown that the main focus on investigation and research in CLIL was on analysing the language competence in samples of students that are taught in their mother tongue according to the national curriculum of the country with some hours of English as a Second Language classes and students who took some or all classes in English. Mostly in all the studies the groups were finally checked for reading, writing and speaking, and the results only concerned the language even in the cases of teaching Science or Math through CLIL (Husting et al., 2017; Surmont et al., 2016; Yassin et al., 2010). What is more, regardless of the country and the year of the research, the age

of the participants and the subject in focus, the results showed that the students involved in either hard or soft CLIL programmes were more capable of producing longer and more grammatically correct sentences, used a wider range of vocabulary and were more proficient in reading comprehension tasks and fluent in speaking (Ackerl, 2007; Várkuti, 2010; Zarobe, 2008) than those who were not involved in CLIL programmes.

The lack of research works on the content constituent of CLIL can be determined by the fact that researchers mainly view CLIL as another approach for language teaching (and not subject teaching) which is centred at providing the students with extra language support to develop productive skills. In such studies, the researchers claim that introduction of even two classes of any subject taught in English per week can impact the overall language performance after some period of time (Mariño, 2014, p.153) saying nothing of the content. Another reason may be that the majority of international schools (ours included) which use English as a medium of instruction are mostly concerned in product – external exam results – rather than process – the way this product is achieved. On the other hand, some separate subject teachers in international educational context may use CLIL-type tasks without being aware of it. In his article, Ball (2013) comes up with a formula for teachers doubting whether what they are doing can be called CLIL. It says that CLIL is “*using languages to learn, and learning to use languages*”, and unless teachers experience this postulate in their lessons, they are doing CLIL. Further in his article Ball says that one of the main problems CLIL teachers can encounter is how to apply this “using language to learn” principle and how to adapt the content. However, if retrieving academic content matter from a language syllabus can be challenging, in case of teaching subjects in international schools the issue is only restricted to adapting tasks to the content.

Method

The action research employing a mixed methods approach was chosen for the purpose of this study as an action research allows for a quick and critical evaluation of the new approaches, methods, and/or techniques that the teacher wants to implement in their classroom in order to see if these can bring any improvement to the teaching/learning process (Burns, 2010; Hopkins, 2008; Somekh, 2006). The choice of mixed methods research can be determined by the fact that it can be most useful when few studies on the given issue have been carried out and the results will be used to obtain new information about the research question (Norton, 2009, p.116); thus, a mixed method will help to analyse the data and interpret it making the study subjective.

The research question, aiming at the discovery of new information on using CLIL techniques in subjects taught in English, is formulated as:

- *Will the applied CLIL techniques make improvement in the comprehension of the content in subject classes with English as a medium of instruction?*

The obtained results can help clarify whether CLIL methodology can be applied to international schools where students use English on a daily basis for communication and learning and whether the implementation of the techniques will prove useful.

Participants

For the aim of the study, the investigation was conducted in two classes, where one class – group A – studied History of Azerbaijan using the traditional methods (the teacher delivers a lecture, and the students take notes and learn the chapter at home), and the other class – group B – studied the same academic content using CLIL techniques and activities.

The population of both classes was the students of Grade 6 (11-12 years old) of Cambridge Department who have been studying in English since Grade 1, i.e. for six years. The total number of students in both classes was 19: Group A – ten students (three girls and seven boys), Group B – nine students (five girls, four boys). All the students are Azerbaijani and speak two languages as their mother tongue, Azerbaijani and Russian. It is also important to mention that the students were aware of some CLIL techniques and activity types as CLIL methodology was used in their World Literature classes.

There always is, however, a possibility of attrition in classroom research studies that can affect the internal validity of the investigation. Though attrition is usually the issue in longitudinal studies (Porte, 2010, p.72), the results can be somewhat affected by the students missing the classes during a longer period of time. Taking into account the fact that the students of both groups had only 12 40-minute classes of History of Azerbaijan during the experimental month, the students missing the classes in Group B (CLIL group) did not only skip the clarification of the content, but also did not participate in CLIL activities which were the focus of the research.

Materials

Being a type of a classroom research, action research generally involves classroom observation as a data gathering tool. Classroom observation can be used to provide information about the lesson procedure with the implementation of new techniques directly observing the learners' reaction and involvement in the lesson (Dömyei, 2007, pp.178-179). The observation scheme for the given study was adapted from the *Classroom Observation Tasks* (Wajnrib, 2012) employed by Cambridge department staff of our centre in 2016. The classroom observations helped to get an overall picture of the effectiveness of the CLIL-type tasks and techniques in subject classes.

Also, Cambridge department World History and History of Azerbaijan teachers, as well our CLIL experts, designed a set of CLIL-type tasks and activities to be used in test group classes. Both test and control groups studied the same material, and the newly designed material did not go beyond the covered content. The activities were created to reflect the core features of CLIL methodology, encourage active learning and maximise the students' involvement in the learning process. In the basis of all CLIL techniques lies the activation of students' thinking skills (from lower-order to higher-order) – cognition; thus, the task and activities should engage and reinforce perceiving, recognising, judging, reasoning, conceiving, and imagining to support the holistic development of the students (Mehisto et al., 2008, pp.29-30). Speaking about history as a content matter, Cambridge ESOL suggest the following "appropriate" tasks and activities: collecting and organising information about a battle, comparing and contrasting historical maps, labelling and matching sources and other images, matching sentence halves, doing multiple choice, gap-filling, odd-one-out tasks, describing the picture and analysing the historical evidence it shows, sequencing events leading to the change, etc. (Cambridge University, n.d., p.16).

At the end of the experimental month, the students took the test on the covered units of History of Azerbaijan course book. A final test was created to check the comprehension and knowledge of the academic content matter, providing a fair opportunity

for the students of both groups to demonstrate their abilities – the test tasks were designed on the basis of the tests the students of both groups had before the study. The final test did not include any CLIL tasks so that Group B did not have any advantages (for instance, being better aware of the task type, or being familiar with the instructions). Considered for one 40-minute class period, the test included fifteen multiple-choice questions, one matching activity (rulers and states), timeline with embedded events and missed dates, and one closed-ended question where the students had to describe the relations between Mesopotamia and early states. Up to 60 marks were available for the content of the answer; the marks were not affected by the language mistakes unless they distorted the meaning and comprehension of the response.

Procedure

The given action research took a month during which the students had 12 History of Azerbaijan classes (three classes a week), as reflected in the syllabus. Both classes covered one and the same content matter in accordance with the syllabus, i.e. the students of both groups received the material which was no higher or lower than their current academic and language level. During the research, the classes in the test and control groups were attended by Cambridge staff history teachers and CLIL experts to observe the involvement of the students and the effectiveness of the implemented tasks.

It is worth mentioning that, in spite of the additional tasks assigned to Group B, all the planned academic material was covered timely and the implementation of extra activities did not affect the lesson and course pace. CLIL lessons were based on the model provided by Mehisto et al. (2008) and generally started with warming-up activities or games connected to the previous topic, followed by discussing the language, content, and learning skills outcomes. This stage could then be followed by either topic eliciting or information organisation activities (e.g. filling in the K-W-L charts). Then, the teacher introduced the new topic, and the students were involved in pair and group work to complete the assigned tasks. Each class ended with a wrap-up stage that was aimed at reviewing the learning outcomes set at the beginning of the lesson and deciding “the extent to which the outcomes were achieved” (Mehisto et al., 2008, p. 33).

Group A had History of Azerbaijan lessons in a more traditional way which is generally practiced in subject classes in our centre and other schools on the whole. The lesson started with reviewing the homework – the students, one by one, went to the whiteboard and, facing the class, retold the content of the unit which was assigned as homework. The teacher could sometimes interrupt the student and ask some content comprehension questions (generally of lower-order thinking skills group that involve memorization and understanding) or ask some students from the class to ask their questions to each other. This stage of the lesson was time-consuming and greatly affected the pace of the lesson. Next, the teacher read a lecture or retold the content of the next unit and the students could take notes of the important facts and events. The lesson ended in assigning the homework – next chapter to read and learn. Thus, the main differences between the CLIL and non-CLIL classes were the reinforcement and development of collaborative work and critical and creative thinking in the former, and the lack of language work, content discussion, variety of tasks, and classroom dynamics in the latter.

The results of the research were calculated on the basis of the final test and classroom observation protocols.

Results and Discussion

The results of the classroom observations showed that the students are more engaged, active and enthusiastic during the classes with CLIL instructions. As to the content knowledge demonstrated during the classes, CLIL students were also more successful and accurate. For instance, pre-teaching vocabulary tasks promoted the greater number of correct answers during formative assessments in the test group. Moreover, the activities on content-obligatory vocabulary facilitated the comprehension of the material as during receptive tasks the students were now more concentrated on the content rather than on the language.

Another important factor which was revealed during the observations is the classroom dynamics in the CLIL group. The lecture-like presentation of the new material and overextended homework-checking process notably reduced the active mental involvement of the students in the lesson process. What is more, the "traditional" classes do not consider different learning styles and preferences, which leads to the less motivated and active students not following the teacher and class at all.

During the classroom observations, it was also seen that the most engaging activities were mingling tasks where the students had to mingle in the class to match the words and/or terms with their definitions, questions with the answers, or dates with the events, and applying and analysing activities (promoting higher-order cognitive skills).

Speaking about the final test, conducted at the end of the study, it can be said that the CLIL group surpassed the control group in the number of the correct answers, and, as a result, was more successful in demonstrating their content knowledge. The test consisted of four sections with the total mark of 60. The distribution of the points per section was as follows: multiple choice questions – 30 points (2 points for a correct answer); matching activity – 5 points (1 point for a correct pair); timeline of events – 10 points (1 point for a correctly inserted date); closed-ended question – 15 points (the points were awarded in accordance with the rubrics in the markscheme).

Table 1 shows the mean number of the points the students of both groups gained on each section.

Table1. Test results

	number of students	Multiple-choice questions	Matching activity	Timeline of events	Close-ended question	Total mark
Group A	10	20.4	3.3	6.2	9.2	39.1
Group B	9	29.1	4.8	9.5	14.6	58.0

As can be seen from the table above that Group B students were more effective in the final test scoring 58 marks of available 60, which makes a 31% difference with the result of the control group. What is more, Group A could not surpass the CLIL group in any sections, ending with average 39.1 marks.

Table2. Reaching the top score

	n	Mean %	s.d.	Range
Group A	10	65%	6.3	18
Group B	9	96%	2.1	6

Table 2 clearly shows that Group B students almost managed to reach the top score available for the course with 96% of correct answers with the difference between the highest and lowest score being 6. The control group students were able to achieve a bit higher than half of the total score with the range of 18 points. Relatively low standard deviation figure in the CLIL and "traditional" group, 2.1 and 6.3 respectively, indicates that the students' performance in the final test was rather stable as the data is not dispersed too much from the mean.

The findings showed that the implementation of CLIL techniques can have a positive impact on the comprehension of the content as well as reinforce the students' involvement in the class activities. According to the observation protocols, the students were much more active and engaged performing CLIL tasks, and being involved in activities and tasks activating cognitive domain increased the motivation and understanding of the academic content matter.

Conclusion

The given action research tried to look at CLIL methodology from an angle different from a usual perspective on the approach. The previous studies viewed using content as a tool for learning the language, a sort of an instrument helping students to facilitate the second language learning process by activating higher-order thinking skills and performing cognitively challenging activities. Though the issue of the content aspect in CLIL classes is not reflected in research study reports as widely the language aspect, the impact of CLIL techniques on teaching and learning the content matter is worth investigating. Many schools in Azerbaijan that use English as a medium of education employ the same methods and techniques that the teachers used to utilise for delivering subjects in Azeri and Russian departments. However, the case is that teaching school subjects in the students' mother tongue does not require the work on the language, while in international schools, the students, even the ones who are quite proficient in English, can benefit from some language tasks and activities before being introduced to the content matter itself.

The research results showed that using CLIL techniques and methodology not only motivates and encourages students to participate actively during the lessons, but also contributes to better understanding of the material. However, one of the main issues with implementing the new methodology into the curriculum is the lack of the trained staff and material. Even though the results of the research were quite positive, it will take a while for the subject teachers to take CLIL training courses or read appropriate literature, and even more time will be required to produce activities and tasks suiting a CLIL format.

The given action research will be followed by longer studies on analysing the effect of CLIL techniques in other academic disciplines (like Physics and Maths) to check the possible benefit of "content-through-language teaching" in exact sciences.

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