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CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL): STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES, PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION

This study aimed to enquire into high school students' experiences, perceptions and satisfaction related to content and language integrated learning (CLIL). The sample consisted of sixty students attending a private grammar school. Their responses were gleaned by means of an online questionnaire. The results indicate that the students are mostly satisfied with their CLIL classes, CLIL teachers and language improvement due to education in English. With the purpose of ameliorating CLIL experience, several suggestions were made: additional professional training for teachers, careful consideration of language use and translanguaging in class and implementation of an explicit language policy.

Keywords: content and language integrated learning (CLIL), high school students, experiences, perceptions, language use, language proficiency, language teaching

Циљ је ове студије био истражити искуства, запажања и задовољство средњошколских ученика интегрираним учењем садржаја и језика (CLIL). Узорак испитаника чинило је шездесет ученика који похађају приватну гимназију. Њихови су одговори прикупљени методом мрежног упитника. Резултати упућују на задовољство већине ученика интегрираним учењем садржаја и језика, наставницима, као и развојем језичких вјештина

захваљујући образовању на енглеском језику. Са сврхом побољшања образовног искуства препоручује се додатно професионално усавршавање наставника, пажљиво промишљање језичке употребе и пребацивања језичких кодова у настави те увођење експлицитне језичке политике.

Кључне ријечи: интегрирано учење садржаја и језика, средњошколски ученици, искуства, запажања, језичка употреба, језичко умијеће, подучавање језика

1. Introduction

In the last several decades, the spread of English has taken an unprecedented pace in various domains, where English serves as a lingua franca and facilitates communication, access to knowledge and information exchange on a global level (Jenkins 2007). One such domain is education, where English in addition to being a subject is transformed into a medium of instruction in which other subjects are taught and learned. Specifically, English is used "to teach […] subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language of the majority of the population is not English" (Macaro et al. 2018: 37), such as France, Norway or Poland. By employing English as a medium of the teaching-learning process at different levels of education, teachers and students participate in a form of content and language integrated teaching and learning as an innovative pedagogical approach (Gabillon 2020). While students focus on the content, which is presented, explained and discussed in English, they concurrently acquire the language they are exposed to. Hence, they do not only learn the language within one subject but are also immersed in it while learning the content of other, non-philological, subjects, such as history, maths or chemistry, and learn it incidentally.

There are different terms used to designate the integration of content and language teaching and learning, such as content and language integrated learning (CLIL), content-based instruction (CBI), English-medium instruction (EMI) and integrating content and language in higher education (ICLHE). CLIL and EMI are most frequently used. CLIL usually implies the symbiosis of content and language at high school level, while EMI stands for merging the English language and subject matter within three-cycle university education (Richards – Pun 2023).

The present paper focuses on CLIL with English as a medium of instruction and aims to investigate high school students' experiences, perceptions and satisfaction related to learning content in English as a foreign language. The underlying rationale for this study is that first-hand experience offers directions regarding what to maintain as examples of best practices and what to treat as areas for improvement. Also, although constantly growing, CLIL is still an underexplored area that requires further enquiry and critical reflection. This is espe-

cially true for some contexts, such as Croatian, where CLIL calls for an in-depth exploration of its impacts and potentials. The present study, which is partially based on Peulić (2023), was conducted in order to address this research gap.

The paper comprises six parts. After the introductory part, sections 2 and 3 describe the theoretical background of CLIL and give an overview of the findings obtained in previous studies. Section 4 presents the methodology of the study, that is, the aim, research questions, research method, participants and context. In section 5, the results are analysed and research questions answered. Section 6 includes a discussion of the findings and concluding remarks, and puts forward some suggestions for improvement of CLIL (in Croatia).

2. What is CLIL

English language learning has become an imperative in today's globalised world and has been promoted by governments and educational policies. However, questioning the sufficiency of traditional foreign language learning has led to language immersion, where knowledge of different subjects is acquired via English (Heras – Lasagabaster 2015).

CLIL, as Coyle et al. (2010: 1) define it, is "a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language". Dale and Tanner (2012) explain that being a CLIL subject teacher means interweaving language into a lesson and vice versa. CLIL is well described through the 4Cs Framework, which stands for content, communication, cognition and culture (Coyle et al., 2010). Content is the subject matter, communication refers to learning and using the foreign language, cognition is related to the learning and thinking processes, and culture is a part of CLIL in which intercultural understanding and global citizenship are developed. McDougald (2018: 11) explains that "the beauty of working with a CLIL-oriented curriculum is that language, content, and cognition can all be linked together". Although primarily driven by content, CLIL enhances language learning by diverging from conventional language teaching methods (Ball et al. 2015; Coyle et al. 2010).

In Europe, the term CLIL was introduced in 1994 to encompass effective practices observed in diverse educational settings where learning occurred in a language other than the students' mother tongue (Marsh et al. 2001). In line with this, the European Commission proposed teaching through using multiple languages as the mediums of instruction (Coyle et al. 2010). This initiative served as a springboard for the widespread adoption of CLIL throughout the continent (European Commission 2023). Coyle et al. (2010) list four main reasons for this: a) developing proficiency in at least one foreign language among young people; b) improving language education for socio-economic advantage; c) laying the foundation for greater European inclusion and economic strength; and d) further integrating language education with that of other subjects.

Regarding the benefits and potential of CLIL, Pavesi et al. (2001) underline that CLIL fosters students' motivation and active participation by engaging them in simulated authentic communicative situations, bolsters learner self-confidence and autonomy through interactive and collaborative activities, advances language proficiency by providing increased exposure to the target language, stimulates creativity and innovation in problem solving and critical analysis, and hones intercultural understanding. McDougald (2018) notes that students are given an opportunity to generate meaningful content in L2, which results in its faster and more spontaneous acquisition.

3. Previous research on students' experiences with CLIL

The investigation of CLIL provides insights into its practices, benefits and areas for improvement to adhere to students' needs, and sheds light on CLIL's effectiveness in terms of learning language and content. Previous research indicates that students are mostly satisfied with CLIL and their language proficiency improvement due to CLIL.

Coyle et al. (2010) show that students have positive attitudes towards CLIL, as being engaged in stimulating and authentic activities such as debates and discussions help them enhance their productive skills in the foreign language. Also, they consider CLIL classes to be more motivating and fun, as well as more cognitively challenging. Prieto-Arranz et al. (2015) point out that CLIL students generally outperform non-CLIL students in most tests. The authors also acknowledge the positive impact of CLIL on students' receptive skills, especially reading comprehension, and vocabulary range. Gallardo del Puerto and Gómez Lacabex (2013) note that CLIL students praise CLIL for developing better fluency, vocabulary range and grammar knowledge. Oxbrow (2018) and Fernández-Agüero and Hidalgo-McCabe (2022) describe students' appraisal of CLIL in terms of their language proficiency improvement and motivation for language and content learning. Additionally, the students laud their teachers' language proficiency. In Lasagabaster and Doiz's (2016) study, the participants report the development of all four language skills, as well as lexis and grammar.

Arribas (2016), on the other hand, points out that students recognise that CLIL has contributed to their listening and speaking skills development, but overall do not see CLIL subjects as more effective and motivating than non-CLIL classes. Vodopija-Krstanović and Badurina (2020) note that teachers report difficulties with assessment, finding adequate teaching materials and correlating CLIL curriculum with the National Curriculum Framework. They also complain that they lack training, coaching and supervision, as well as more collaboration and information exchange with other CLIL teachers.

In terms of language use in CLIL, Zanoni (2018) reports that students prefer when their teachers speak only or mainly English. However, code-switching to L1 is welcomed when dealing with complex concepts or vocabulary.

4. Methodology

The following subsections address the aim of the study and its research questions. They also provide the description of the research method, the participants and the context under study.

4.1. Aim and research questions

The aim of this study was to investigate high school students' experiences, perceptions and satisfaction related to CLIL. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students' experiences with CLIL and are they satisfied with it?
2. What are students' observations on language use in CLIL?
3. What are students' perceptions of teachers' and students' English language proficiency?
4. Do students think that teachers should focus more on the English language?
5. What do students consider to be the benefits and challenges of CLIL and what suggestions they have regarding its improvement?

4.2. Research method

The data were collected by means of a questionnaire which was designed in Google Forms in Croatian and had two parts. It was distributed to the participants through their e-classrooms, and they accessed it using their mobile phones. The time of completion was around 15 minutes. In the first part of the questionnaire the students were asked to enumerate their CLIL subjects and self-assess their English language competence.

The second part consisted of 25 closed- and open-ended questions looking into the participants' experiences, perceptions and satisfaction concerning CLIL. Specifically, the usefulness of CLIL classes, students' motivation, language proficiency of teachers and students, development of language skills, language use and teacher explicit reference to language were explored. Closed-ended questions were Likert scale, frequency, multiple-choice and yes/no questions. Some open-ended questions were independent, asking the participants to describe the advantages, challenges and suggestions related to CLIL, while others served to probe into the responses to closed-ended questions.

A pilot-study was conducted with several former students to check whether they understood the questions the way they were expected to. Consequently, one question was clarified.

The quantitative results were analysed using descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data were manually coded identifying recurring themes (Saldaña

2016). The relevant excerpts from the students' responses were cited in the analysis of results. The authors translated the participants' responses into English verbatim.

4.3. Participants and context

Sixty students enrolled in all four years of the Andrija Ljudevit Adamić private grammar school in Rijeka, Croatia, participated in the study. Half of them estimated their level of English proficiency to be excellent (5), 31% marked it with a 4, 14% with a 3, and 5% opted for a 2. Their CLIL subjects were Art, History, Geography, Informatics, Ethics, European civil society, Politics and economics, Psychology and Sociology.

The school was established in 2005, and CLIL was introduced in 2014 as part of the European project "Multilingual education – improving language learning and intercultural skills." Initially, CLIL classes were held in English, German and Italian. As of 2021, all CLIL subjects are in English.

5. Analysis of results

Students' experience with CLIL on a scale from 1 (bad) to 5 (excellent) was rated 3.9. Regarding the usefulness of CLIL classes, on a scale ranging from 1 (I completely disagree) to 5 (I completely agree), the mean was 4.02, indicating that around 70% of the participants agreed with the statement that CLIL classes were useful and would prefer more CLIL classes. Around 80% of the participants agreed that CLIL classes largely contributed to the development of their language skills (mean = 4.28). The mean for the statement that they were more motivated for CLIL than for non-CLIL classes was 2.78, suggesting that the majority of the respondents were either neutral or disagreed with it.

Most participants (67%) are satisfied with the extent to which English is used in CLIL classes (mean = 3.98) because they like the language, perceive it as very useful for functioning in today's world and see CLIL as a good way to master it. One of the participants said that "the amount of foreign language in CLIL classes is quite sufficient. The identity and the importance of the mother tongue were not lost, and the foreign language was acquired" (S42). Regarding the use of the Croatian language, the participants explained that the teachers used it when something needed further explanation, which most students approved (mean = 3.85) because the combination of the two languages led to better communication flow and understanding, and it favoured the students with weaker language proficiency. S34 noticed that "there are people who don't really understand what is being talked about, so it is better that every now and then Croatian is used for explanation", and S43 observed that "when teachers constantly speak English, sometimes it sounds forced or they seem absent, and

then it is beneficial to switch to Croatian to maintain contact with students or to explain something in a more logical way". Twenty per cent of the participants were not sure what position to take regarding translanguaging in class and 13% disagreed with it. S14 explained: "If the goal is to speak the foreign language as much as possible, then I am not satisfied with the use of Croatian. It makes no sense to partially use the English language in class". Along the same lines, S44 said: "Teachers usually switch to our mother tongue when dealing with more complex issues, to avoid struggling in communication. I think that's exactly when they should try to continue explaining in English, so that we are faced with a challenge and in that way actually learn something by stepping out of our comfort zone".

As to the frequency of the use of English and Croatian, on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), the listed activities/situations scored the following means: class participation (English 3.25; Croatian 3.15), communication with teachers (3.08; 3.27), communication with peers (2.2; 3.83), pair/group work (2.5; 3.68), oral presentation (3.7; 2.8), oral assignment/examination (3.58; 2.68) and written assignments/examination (3.98; 2.48). Concerning the teachers, on the same frequency scale the students regarded their use of English as 3.93, while for Croatian the mean was 3.38. Most participants mentioned that teachers were rather flexible when it came to language use. As there is no explicit language policy that stipulates language use, decisions about the course of action are left to the discretion of a particular teacher. Consequently, "some teachers allow code-switching when language becomes a stumbling block, some also when this is not the case, and some award a lower mark to the students who give presentations in Croatian" (S10).

As for the teachers' English language proficiency, the majority (77%) deem their teachers sufficiently proficient (mean = 4.12). Some students mentioned the teachers' occasional difficulties with explanations in English, grammar and pronunciation, and some complained about the mediocre level of English spoken by some teachers. Regarding other students' language command, 46% regarded their co-students as English proficient, while 40% were not sure (mean = 3.4). The participants explained that the students' language competence greatly varied, from those with native-like proficiency to those whose skills did not seem to be up to the task. S8 commented that "some even refuse to use the English language because they feel uncomfortable". S57 took a comparative perspective and said that "in most cases students speak even better than teachers because of globalisation and the spread of English in day-to-day social media. Of course, there are exceptions".

The participants were also asked if they thought that the teachers should focus more on the English language. Half was not sure, and the other half was divided in their stance. Those in favour advocated a balance between content and language and explained that by paying more attention to English, teachers could help students develop better skills. S50 even added that "the whole point

of CLIL classes is to use a foreign language, which is why it should be the focal point of a lesson". Those against did not consider it necessary because "English is students' good side" (S33) or did not think that all teachers had the necessary knowledge to deal with language matters and teach language. Regarding language feedback, it was reported that some teachers corrected students' language mistakes without taking off a mark.

Among the benefits of CLIL, what came to the fore was advancing English language skills and vocabulary range in a communicative language-learning environment resembling real-life interaction. Another benefit was that CLIL classes were perceived as easier, more fun and interesting. S37 mentioned "greater self-confidence, breaking boundaries and overcoming fear of speaking in front of an audience". Mention was also made that "more materials are available in English and are of better quality" (S25). Finally, the participants argued that for some subjects, such as Informatics, English is a more suitable medium of instruction.

Twenty-seven per cent of the students reported facing challenges when expressing themselves in English, learning new words and understanding what was said or written, which led to them being "less active in class and experiencing language anxiety" (S11). S23 added that "certain teachers make students feel uncomfortable and create tension, which they should relieve". Also, the students are worried about the fact that their school-leaving examination is in Croatian for all the subjects.

At the end, the participants were prompted to offer some suggestions for improving CLIL classes. They emphasised the importance of making sure that every student understood what was said. Additionally, they called for more classroom interaction in English. S35 suggested "involving students more actively in the classroom by eliciting examples from them, organising quizzes and stimulating discussions", while S6 proposed "making greater use of digital tools". Some students mentioned that their teachers should be additionally educated for CLIL in terms of their language proficiency, teaching skills and making content more accessible to students.

6. Concluding remarks

The findings of this study indicate that high school students have mostly positive experiences with CLIL, would like to have more CLIL subjects and are satisfied with its impact on their English language proficiency, which is in line with previous research (Gallardo del Puerto – Gómez Lacabex 2013; Oxbrow 2018). However, they are not more motivated for CLIL subjects than for subjects in Croatian, which is in contrast with Coyle et al.' (2010) research, where the participants expressed a higher level of motivation for their CLIL classes. Our participants perceive CLIL as beneficial, fun, interesting and

positively challenging, and the strengths attributed to CLIL largely outnumber its weaknesses. What is singled out as the main difficulty is using English for educational purposes. Although the development of language competence is the main reason for enrolling on CLIL (Drljača Margić – Vodopija-Krstanović 2017), and students report that CLIL fulfils their expectations in that sense, our results show that for some students English as a medium of instruction causes anxiety, inhibits their participation in class, limits their possibilities to express themselves in an oral and written form, and has an adverse impact on content comprehension. These problems come from the fact that there is usually no explicit language policy that would stipulate language levels necessary to effectively undertake CLIL (see also Galloway – Rose 2021). It can be rightfully argued that prospective CLIL students should have a solid basis in English already at the beginning of their CLIL education in order to reap its benefits and further develop language skills (see also Dalton-Puffer 2011). Furthermore, the absence of the explicit language policy results in mixed-level classrooms, which leads to two problems: first, linguistically stronger students dominate classroom activities, and second, it is harder and more time-consuming for teachers to manage such a class. Also, students themselves tend to be critical of their peers' language insufficiency (see also Nuñez Asomoza 2015) because while some students struggle with English and need constant translanguaging, the others wish for more English. In other words, what seems to be a benefit for one group, for the other is a difficulty.

The students' satisfaction also extends to their teachers, the majority of whom they regard as skilled in English and supportive during their learning process, which corroborates the findings of Nuñez Asomoza (2015) and Oxbrow (2018). Nevertheless, they point out that it would be beneficial for some teachers to receive additional language and pedagogical training to avoid struggling with language when explaining complex content and to assist students' content comprehension with content- and language-related scaffolding. Along the same lines, Zanoni (2018) concludes that the success of CLIL greatly depends on the teachers' language and pedagogical knowledge. The majority of the students appreciate their teachers translanguaging from English to Croatian to help them grasp the subtleties of the argument, as well as the fact that teachers allow them to code-switch when necessary (see also Bauer-Marschallinger et al. 2023). Translanguaging is a usual practice in CLIL and it is believed to aid students' learning and prompt their active participation (see also Zanoni 2018). Care should be taken, however, that translanguaging is employed consciously in order not to interfere with student expectations of language immersion, which is regarded to be highly conducive to language learning. A number of our participants, like the participants in Oxbrow's (2018) study, would like their teachers to use more English and to stimulate activities and discussions in class that would increase student interaction in English. This does not come as a surprise given that the present findings suggest that students utilise Croatian regularly,

not only in communication with peers, which is common and comes naturally, but also in discussion in class, oral presentations and oral and written assignments, with a mean value of 3.12, while a mean value for English is 3.18. Similarly, a mean value for teachers using Croatian is 3.38, whereas for English it is 3.93. In addition, the students believe that exposing weaker students to as much English as possible and spurring them to speak English in class would help develop their language proficiency through learning by doing. Similarly, Fernández-Agüero and Hidalgo-McCabe (2022) state that high exposure to language leads to ease and control in communication. Regarding the teachers' explicit focus on the English language, the students' division in opinions on the topic confirms that the language aspect in CLIL, in terms of language teaching, feedback and learning outcomes, is a source of debate. On one hand, students expect their teachers to reflect on language and give constructive feedback. On the other, teachers do not feel responsible or competent to deal with language issues (see also Drljača Margić – Vodopija-Krstanović 2017).

Although confined to one high school context, this study yields a deeper insight into CLIL from a students' perspective and addresses a research gap. We hope that the present enquiry into linguistic aspects of CLIL extends knowledge of content and language integration, and will motivate further research into language policy, language use and language learning.

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ИНТЕГРИРАНО УЧЕЊЕ САДРЖАЈА И ЈЕЗИКА: ИСКУСТВА, ЗАПАЖАЊА И ЗАДОВОЉСТВО УЧЕНИКА

Резиме

Циљ је ове студије био истражити искуства, запажања и задовољство средњошколских ученика интегрираним учењем садржаја и језика (CLIL). Запажања ученика била су усмјерена на употребу енглеског и хрватског језика у овако организованој настави, језичко умијеће наставника и ученика као и експлицитни осврт наставника на енглески језик. Узорак испитаника чинило је шездесет ученика који похађају приватну гимназију. Њихови су одговори прикупљени методом мрежног упитника који се састојао од питања отвореног и затвореног типа те су добијени подаци квантитативно и квалитативно анализирани. Резултати упућују на задовољство већине ученика интегрираним учењем садржаја и језика, наставницима, као и развојем језичких вјештина захваљујући образовању на енглеском језику. Са сврхом побољшања образовног искуства препоручује се додатно професионално усавршавање наставника, пажљиво промишљање језичке употребе и пребацивања језичких кодова у настави те увођење експлицитне језичке политике.

Кључне ријечи: интегрирано учење садржаја и језика, средњошколски ученици, искуства, запажања, језичка употреба, језичко умијеће, подучавање језика