

VII International Forum on Teacher Education

CLIL from the Perspective of Distance Education

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Abstract

A shift toward the digital distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic puts new demands on the teachers, and requires revision of traditional teaching methods. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is not a new topic in pedagogy. It is represented in numerous studies of foreign researchers. In Russian pedagogy CLIL was explored mainly in the context of face-to-face education. Considering that distance learning is being implemented into the educational process, the use of CLIL in distance education provides new opportunities and difficulties both for teachers and students.

The aim of this study is to reveal positive effect of implementation CLIL in distance learning, to conduct a comparative analysis of the CLIL efficiency in face-to-face learning and distance learning.

The study based on the theoretical and empirical methods: analysis of the foreign and Russian scientific literature, observation, modeling and monitoring of pedagogical experiment.

The results of pedagogical experiment allow us to conclude that the use of CLIL in distance learning improves both the language competencies of the students and their professional knowledge, and as a result to achieve a high level of foreign-language professional communicative competence. Finally, the study draws conclusions concerning advantages of CLIL implementation in distance education comparing with its use in face-to-face education, also the paper notes initial requirements for teachers and students to be involved in CLIL distance learning.

Keywords: CLIL, distance learning, foreign language teaching, competence.

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Published by Kazan federal university and peer-reviewed under responsibility of IFTE-2021 (VII International Forum on Teacher Education)

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Introduction

The conceptual basis for reforming Russian educational system is a competence-based approach which implies desire to achieve a balance between learning and self-education, to impart relevant knowledge to learners, to develop skills and abilities which are in demand at the labor market and real life. In the competence-based approach, learning in institutions of higher education is aimed at developing a set of universal (cultural) and special (professional) competences of students. Globalization and internationalization of society have also raised the significance of universal competence, particularly graduates' foreign language knowledge. Graduates are expected to have such a high level of foreign (more often English) language knowledge so they could be full members of international scientific, professional and cultural society. However, even good foreign language skills for everyday communication are not enough for free orientation of specialists in the sectoral market information, professional literature, and effective communication with foreign business partners. Only foreign language learning for professional purposes can give university graduate an opportunity to take part in professional intercultural communication. It is a key factor of developing professional and communicative competencies, and in general to become a socially successful and competitive person. An effective method providing for the development of professional and foreign language competence is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which is one of the ways how to integrate foreign language and subject interdisciplinary.

The usage of CLIL has extended significantly in the past two decades, mainly in Europe. This approach is used in primary and secondary education, as well as in higher education (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Knapp & Aguado, 2015).

CLIL is not a new topic in pedagogy (Brown, 2013; Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010). It is widely interpreted and has a great number of definitions in scientific and methodological literature. It has become an umbrella term for different kind of methods and approaches aimed at teaching of (content) subject through the medium of a foreign language. Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010) described CLIL as a dual focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language.

Considering that distance learning is being implemented into the educational process, the use of CLIL in distance education provides new opportunities and difficulties both for teachers and students. Distance learning itself was widely examined in numerous studies (Devedžić, 2006; Khan, 2006; Nurieva & Garaeva, 2020).

Purpose and objectives of the study

There have been a great number of researchers on the use of CLIL in teaching. However, there is a lack of studies on the use of CLIL in distance learning. This research has been drawn up to describe and analyze implementation of CLIL in the distance learning mode.

The aim of this study is to examine CLIL peculiarities in distance learning, reveal effect of its implementation and conduct a comparative analysis of the CLIL efficiency in face-to-face learning and distance learning. The present research tries to contribute to broadening the knowledge about CLIL in the context of distance learning.

Literature review

CLIL is based on the usage of foreign language as a tool to transmit the non-linguistic content aiming to produce realistic communicative environment in the foreign language (Coyle et al., 2010). CLIL is often presented as the “4 Cs” framework which consists of content, communication, culture and cognition (Coyle et al., 2010). Content reflects the theme of a non-linguistic subject, communication focuses on the language which is used to learn the content, cognition consists on developing thinking skills in order to connect concepts (content) and the target language, culture is used to give students opportunity to learn culture of the target language. The 4Cs framework was developed to help teachers in planning and teaching their lessons. This framework was widely described in the studies of European and Asian researchers (Coyle et al., 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Hunt, 2011; Lasagabaster, 2011). On the basis of 4Cs, the framework was extended to 5Cs. The fifth element is Competence that implies the use of “Can-do” statements describing the results of the lesson (Montalto, Walter, Theodorou, & Chrysanthou, 2015).

Despite CLIL occurred for improving foreign language competence of European citizens, now multi-lingual programmes are identifiable as pedagogical practices including translanguaging, curriculum implementation, the use of significant tasks and projects (San Isidro, 2017). CLIL can be adapted to the European language diversity through different models and practices. However, its implementation led to constant debate relating to:

- distinction between CLIL and other bilingual approaches such as CBI, EMI, ESP (Aguilar, 2017; Pérez Cañado, 2012);
- its conceptual uncertainty;
- teachers and students’ perceptions on CLIL (Aguilar & Rodríguez, 2012).

One of the most popular approaches in teaching foreign languages along with CLIL are ESP (English for Specific Purposes), EMI (English as Medium for Instructions), CBI (Content-based Instruction). Each of them focuses on learning foreign language on the basis of professional content. The difference between them is based on the degree of linguistic integrity.

CLIL and ESP are generally treated as separate linguistic approaches. However, they have similarities, as well as differences. Some researchers note that the only objective of ESP is learning foreign language, while CLIL has dual objectives: learning both language and content (Fortanet-Gómez & Bellés-Fortuño, 2008). Poręcka (2011) pointed out that distinction between CLIL and ESP is not obvious, therefore teachers should strike a balance between professional subject content and target foreign language culture. Liew and Khor (2014) note that despite being separate bilingual approaches ESP is moving closer to CLIL because students in HE expect professional content knowledge in language lessons. Riley (2013) states that ESP can be transformed into CLIL only if content and foreign language teachers interact.

Some scholars state that CLIL and ESP are strongly connected because both approaches focus on students' needs and their motivation to communicate (González Ardeo, 2013; Suwannoppharat & Chinokul, 2015). Fernández (2009) treated CLIL as a general concept including a myriad of notions, among them ESP. Tarnopolsky (2013) pointed out that CLIL and ESP have common characteristic – integration of professional content learning and foreign language learning, however CLIL has a greater scope, whereas ESP is typically treated as a language learning course. Taking into account that these bilingual approaches are similar, CLIL and ESP teachers should collaborate to balance professional content and foreign language learning and prepare highly skilled professionals. Thus, ESP and CLIL are two separate bilingual approaches but having significant common features, such as integration difficulties, teachers' qualifications, and students' motivation.

One more popular linguistic approach is English as a Medium of Instruction. EMI involves the use of English language for teaching general and professional subjects in the countries where English is not the first language for the majority of the population. The main objective of EMI is content learning, but not English language learning. English language is used here for academic purposes to obtain (through reading and listening) and transfer information (through writing and speaking). Such skills give students and teachers more information about the language and more opportunities to use it, which is the important requirement for second language learning. Conceptual difference between CLIL and EMI is the following:

- in EMI language of instruction is English, while in CLIL it can be any language, including language of a national minority,

- whereas CLIL has a clear aim - learning both language and content, EMI does not have such an objective. It focuses mainly on the content learning,

- EMI is often used in primary and secondary school, while CLIL is preferable in higher institution.

CLIL approach has similarities with Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Linguistic immersion significantly accelerates the process of foreign language learning. Moreover, content learning improves students' motivation. Besides, in both methods, CLIL and CBI, language teachers and subject teachers work together, focusing on common goals. Therefore, some researchers suppose that terms CLIL and CBI have similar content (Cenoz et al., 2014), while the other scientists point out the important difference between these approaches (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). So, CLIL is used in such classes where non-linguistic subject is learnt, whereas CBI is the method of foreign language learning on the basis of materials connected with a subject (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). In CBI language of instruction can be different, not only English, and this makes CBI similar to CLIL. The main advantages of CBI are the following: language is not learnt directly, but acquired unintentionally; students learn language simultaneously with the subject, therefore language learning process become more interesting and motivational; CBI helps students to develop cognitive skills.

Methodology

The study was based on the literature review, observation, modeling and monitoring of pedagogical experiment.

Pedagogical experiment was conducted in Kazan (Volga region) Federal University, particularly in its structural subdivision - the Institute of Management, Economics and Finance. Thirty-nine (39) students participated in the present research, among them twenty-one (21) students in the experimental group, eighteen (18) students in the control group. Participation in the pedagogical experiment was based on each student's voluntary choice and personal motivation.

The research consisted of four stages. Firstly, literature review was conducted. The methodology (the aim and methods) was settled. The outline of the study was formulated.

At the second stage of the present research, the CLIL programme was implemented into distance education and face-to-face education. The control group (CG) was enrolled in CLIL face-to-face learning. The students attended lessons in the university twice a week. In the experimental group (EG) CLIL lessons were carried out in the distance form. Students studied by using Microsoft Teams twice a week. The pedagogical experiment lasted four months.

At the third stage, after four months CLIL teaching we checked students learning skills in CG and EG with the help of oral and written tests.

Finally, at the fourth stage, results and received data were analyzed, peculiarities of CLIL in distance learning were identified. We summarized positive effects of the CLIL use in distance learning, comparing with the CLIL use in face-to-face learning.

Results

At the beginning of CLIL study students' level of English language in both groups, CG and EG, was the same. After four months CLIL teaching we examined English language skills in these group. For that, we conducted four tests examining such language skills as listening, reading, writing and speaking.

The results are given below (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Indicators of students' language level

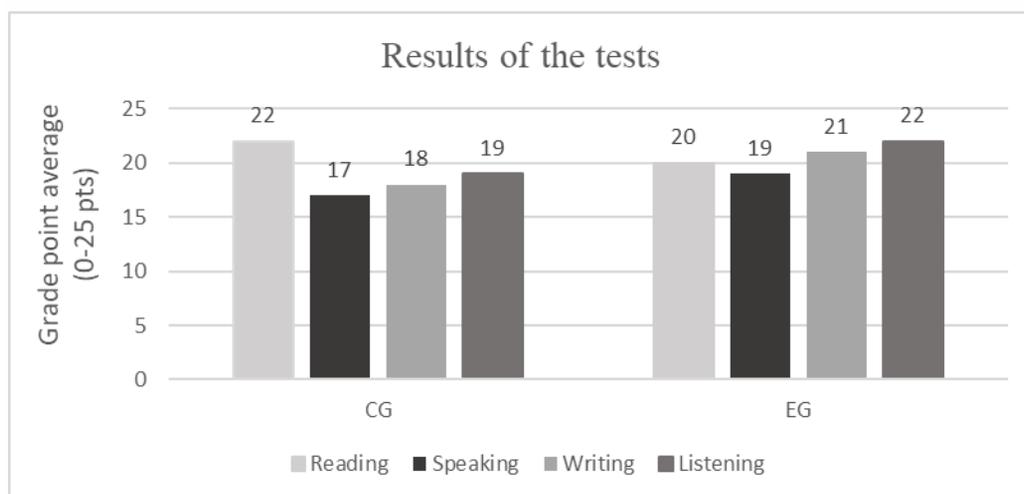
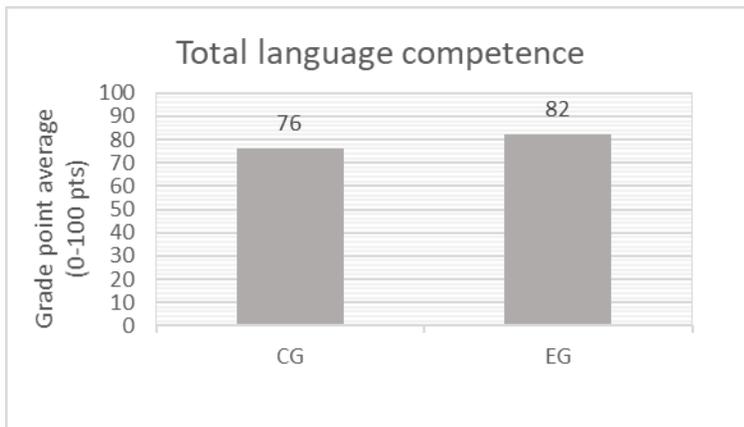


Figure 1 reflects the improvement of English language skills (writing, speaking, listening) in both CG and EG, but there is a slight decrease in reading skills of a group where CLIL lessons were carried out in the distance form.

On the basis of reading, writing, listening and speaking tests results we figured out grade point average of groups. For control group it was seventy-six (76) points, for experimental group – eighty-two (82) points (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Total language competence



The data obtained shows that both groups had language improvement. However, the experimental group with CLIL via distance learning showed a higher level of gained total language skills. It leads us to conclude that the implementation of CLIL programme by means of distance education can improve students' language competence.

During the research we noted peculiarities of CLIL use in the distance form comparing to CLIL use in face-to-face form. First of all, distance education gives teachers an opportunity to broaden methods of teaching: CLIL can be carried out with the help of web-quests, games, virtual laboratories, multimedia interactive tasks, videos. The use of these techniques in EG essentially impacted on the effective perception of learning materials, and as a result increased of the students' language skills level.

Secondly, content is the most significant component in the 4 Cs framework of CLIL, therefore much attention should be paid to the materials for teaching. Distance form of CLIL allows teachers to increase the number of authentic materials in the lessons. For improvement of listening skills TV shows, movies, interviews with famous people, songs, commercials, news can be used; for reading skills - company websites, newspapers, advertisements, original texts, restaurant menus; to improve speaking skills online meetings with native speakers can be organized. The authentic materials reflect the real use of language in the cultural context and significantly contribute to the language learning. Thus, authentic materials used in the distance form of CLIL (in EG) raised students' interest and increased their motivation.

Thirdly, distance form of CLIL provides full language immersion. Students feel that they are learning the real language which is not limited to their classroom. Students interact with content rather than a form.

Fourthly, during the CLIL study students in both groups, CG and EG, developed a positive attitude and a high level of motivation towards the language learning, however distance form of CLIL impacted on students' motivation to a greater extent as visual and audio perceptions were more vivid and learning process was more individual and creative.

The mentioned peculiarities of distance CLIL has advantages compared to face-to-face CLIL learning.

Discussion

One of the global trends in teaching English as a Foreign Language is CLIL. In spite of a wide dissemination of the term CLIL, debates over the essence of this term, search for its peculiarities in comparison with the other methods are still continuing (Brown, 2013; Cenoz et al., 2014; Coyle et al., 2010; Knapp & Aguado, 2015). Review of the scientific literature about usage CLIL in higher education allows us to conclude about its popularity mainly in face-to-face learning, nevertheless CLIL in distance education is a quite rich field of research too. In this study we focused on the usage of CLIL programmes in distance learning. Before the research we assumed that distance CLIL could have some differences in comparison with its face-to-face form, and we made an attempt to compare these two forms. The results of the research showed that distance CLIL can be an effective tool for improving students' language competence. However, in order that CLIL programmes in distance learning will be successful, we defined entry requirements for students and teachers.

Requirements for students. During the study of CLIL programmes students are expected to increase lexical and grammatical components of the target language on the basis of professional content. To prevent losing the students' interest and motivation they need to understand material they are learning. So, the level of English language (as a foreign language) students required to demonstrate before starting CLIL studies in distance form is B1 of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which corresponds to an intermediate level. Although it is difficult to recruit students with B1 language level (more often they have lower levels), CLIL should be implemented into the distance learning in accordance with students' needs and their English language level. In this case such components of CLIL as content, cognition and communication will be relevant.

Requirements for teachers. The main issue is professional qualification of teachers involved in distance CLIL programmes. Considering that CLIL has dual focused educational objectives – to learn professional content and at the same time foreign language – the level of linguistic and professional competence is expected to be sufficient to become a CLIL teacher. In that regard, there is a question of additional teacher training.

There are two ways of dealing with the issue. If language teachers are supposed to teach CLIL, they should be retrained according to the professional content of the subject as they are not proficient in the subject (content) knowledge. As for the subject teachers, they are more often monolingual. And if they are involved in teaching CLIL programmes, they need to improve their language level. The level of linguistic competence sufficient to become a CLIL teacher is C1 of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which corresponds to an advanced level. Native language speakers can also be involved in teaching CLIL programmes.

Conclusion

A shift toward the digital distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic puts new demands on the teachers, and requires revision of traditional teaching methods. This study attempted to examine CLIL implementation by means of distance learning, to explore the difference between CLIL use in the face-to-face form and its use in the distance form, to determine entry requirements for teachers to teach CLIL programmes and for students to be enrolled in these courses. On the basis of the results obtained in the present research we can conclude that CLIL study leads to improving both the students' language competence and their professional knowledge, but the data of the pedagogical experiment demonstrate that distance use of CLIL allows achieving a higher level of language competence comparing to face-to face learning. However certain conditions should be taken into account. Firstly, the initial language level of students should be B1 (intermediate). Secondly, teachers' level of linguistic and professional competence should be sufficient to teach CLIL programmes. Furthermore, we revealed peculiarities of distance CLIL comparing to its face-to-face form: it brings such advantages as broadening methods of teaching, increasing the number of authentic materials used in the lessons, developing a positive attitude and a higher level of students' motivation, providing the full language immersion. Therefore, CLIL, being not a new teaching method, has a great pedagogical potential in distance learning.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgements

This paper has been supported by the Kazan Federal University Strategic Academic Leadership Program.

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