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PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH CLIL CLASSES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, we present a CLIL module that combines teaching of English and content related to environmental and geosciences. This is an experimental CLIL module devised and implemented at the Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade with the second-year students of the Environmental Sciences Department and Geography Department. The organization and development of the module was conditioned by the students' needs, motivation and interests, their foreign language proficiency and their prior education. The main objective of the module was to promote learner autonomy. Students themselves selected the topics they wanted to study. The general themes were climate change, environmental devastation and water scarcity. Students had to find information on these issues and come up with possible solutions, which they presented to their classmates. They were assigned to write an essay on a selected topic and prepare a presentation for the class. Unlike teacher-centered environments in which students are given grades, in this CLIL module the assessment was performed by the students themselves. They evaluated their own learning, monitored their progress and assessed the achievement together with their classmates.

Key words: Learner autonomy, CLIL, higher education, geosciences, environmental sciences

INTRODUCTION

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is a learner-centered approach that is increasingly being encouraged in higher education in many countries, including Serbia. Both research and teaching experience show that CLIL promotes learner autonomy. By taking responsibility for their learning, students become aware of the learning objectives and consequently decide on the learning techniques, materials and tasks. Also, they engage in monitoring their own progress and evaluating achievements (Little, 1999, pp. 82-86). In a traditional classroom, the emphasis is on instructor's teaching rather than on students' learning. Students passively acquire knowledge and do not take responsibility for their own learning, whereas teachers set the pace and establish the conditions of learning, regulate the flow of classroom communication and assess students' achievements. On the contrary, in a learner-centered classroom teachers are no longer providers of information, but facilitators of learning. Their goal is to transform students into "autonomous, self-directed and self-regulating learners" (Weimer, 2002, p. xx).

CONTENT and LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL)

CLIL refers to every form of learning and teaching when a foreign language, which functions as a medium for learning content, is taught simultaneously with content of a curricular subject. Various CLIL approaches are organized at all levels of education - primary, secondary and tertiary. Research has shown that students who participate in CLIL often outperform their peers who attend regular foreign language classes on tests in reading, writing and listening because CLIL presents the most natural way of developing foreign language skills (Prnjat, 2015, p. 172). Integrated learning, being learner-centered, allows students to develop metalinguistic awareness that helps them compare the languages more easily and accurately, guess the meaning of words from context and

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improve productive language skills. Generally, CLIL students demonstrate higher foreign language fluency than students who attend traditional foreign language courses (Cummins 1984, Marsh 2002, ICF Report, 2014). Unlike a traditional foreign language classroom, within a CLIL setting a foreign language is not taught but promoted (Serragioto, 2003, p. 3, Seradjoto, Prnjat & Guljelmi, 2008, p. 41), since it has the role of the vehicular language. Students use both their foreign language skills and previously acquired content knowledge to learn new content.

CLIL as a Learner-centered Environment

Many educationists and language teachers support the idea that the constructivist learning theory forms the basis for learner-centered environments (Fosnot 1996, Nunan 1988), in which teachers are no longer considered as exclusive content experts. Instead, they encourage students to discover content through problem-based learning. Students find the content that explains or resolves the problem. In most cases, they do this work in pairs or small groups. In a traditional teacher-directed classroom, interaction between students is under teacher's control, whereas in learner-centered approaches, students are in charge of interactions. They make decisions with whom they will work, and how. They decide upon the preferred learning techniques, select materials and design tasks. Furthermore, apart from developing and enhancing students' linguistic and general academic skills, CLIL approaches contribute to development of their cognitive abilities as well. Students become better in remembering, understanding, reasoning, comparing, judging, problem solving, etc. When they analyze data, they consider different perspectives and perceptions; they explore and generate possibilities; they generate own hypotheses and devise plans (Fosnot, 1996, p. 29). Also, studies have shown that integrated learning improves the ability to learn and study. It promotes learner autonomy and responsibility, strengthens confidence and motivation, and provides "a holistic educational experience" (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010, p. 1). One of the major benefits of learner-centered education includes increased intrinsic motivation, which leads to higher achievement and greater satisfaction with the course of study. Research has shown that personal involvement and commitment to solving a problem, confidence in one's abilities to succeed, and a perception of control over the learning process lead to more efficient learning and higher achievements (Nunan, 1988, p. 3). Unlike teacher-directed approaches in which extrinsic motivators such as grades or degrees motivate students to learn, in learner-centered approaches, students are presented with issues that are interesting enough to motivate them. In other words, students face the problems that are provoking and tempting enough to encourage them to seek solutions, thus making their actions purposeful and meaningful.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is particularly significant for integrated learning (Gardner 1993). Being cognitively demanding, CLIL tasks require implementation of several types of intelligence. In addition to verbal intelligence, which is prevalent in teaching of foreign languages, other intelligences that assist in processing of non-linguistic content of curricular subjects are also activated (Prnjat & Marković, 2014, p. 115). For example, interpersonal intelligence is dominant in discussions, cooperative learning, pair and group work; logical-mathematical intelligence is used in problem solving, hypothesizing, collecting and classifying data; spatial-visual intelligence prevails in interpreting and comparing charts and tables, etc.

Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has been first introduced by Henri Holec who defines it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (1981, p. 3). David Little (1999, pp. 82-86) distinguishes three fundamental pedagogical principles of learner autonomy in foreign language learning:

1. Enabling students to take control over the learning process – students are involved from the very beginning of the teaching process in determining learning objectives, planning, monitoring and evaluating teaching activities and learning outcomes.
2. Purposeful use of a foreign language – foreign language is used as the main language of instruction from the beginning of the teaching process.
3. The use of language as a cognitive instrument implies the use of written language.

Gradual transfer of control over the learning process from teachers to students requires their mutual cooperation in determining curricular activities and goals. Through joint planning of activities and evaluation of acquired knowledge, a teacher should help students to determine short-term and long-term objectives and the ways in which they can be achieved.

Educating students to use a foreign language in different contexts (academic, professional and social) is the main goal of teaching a foreign language for special purposes. Knowledge of a foreign language can be acquired only if it is used as the dominant language of teaching and for purposes of authentic communication. Therefore, a teacher should use only the foreign language when teaching, but in a way that is meaningful for students – with necessary simplifications and adjustments. Also, teachers should motivate their students to use a foreign

language as much as they can in authentic communication rather than in the form of established phrases and replies or memorized dialogues.

The principle of using a foreign language as a cognitive instrument implies the use of written language when curricula and objectives are determined, during the development of tasks and assignments and for the evaluation of teaching and learning achievements.

Learner Autonomy and Learning Styles

Research has shown (Dunn & Griggs, 2000) that each learner has a preferred method of processing information and that this preference is recognized as one's own learning style. By observing students' reactions to different activities and tasks, teachers may conclude which type of learners their students are, and customize their teaching materials and activities accordingly (Prnjat & Marković, 2014, p. 115). For example, if a majority of students are visual learners, teachers may try to use more often visual aids such as pictures, photos, graphs, diagrams, etc.

Likewise, students' motivation depends greatly on how meaningful they consider teaching materials and class activities to be. Therefore, foreign language teachers should try to vary tasks and activities so that all types of learning styles have an equal presence in the classroom. In particular, teachers who work with large mixed ability classes have to make sure that learners of all abilities find learning a foreign language motivating and rewarding (Ibid.).

THE CLIL MODULE

In this section, we present an experimental CLIL module that combines teaching of English and content related to environmental and geosciences. The module was devised and implemented with the second-year students of the Environmental Sciences Department and Geography Department at the Faculty of Geography, University of Belgrade. The main objective of the module was to promote learner autonomy. Students themselves selected the topics they wanted to study related to the general themes of climate change, environmental devastation and water scarcity. They were assigned to write an essay on a selected topic and prepare a presentation for the class explaining the issue and proposing the solutions. Unlike teacher-centered environments in which students are given grades, in this CLIL module the assessment was performed by the students themselves. They evaluated the progress and assessed the achievements together with their classmates.

The module lasted one month and was carried out as an extracurricular activity. The group consisted of 30 students, who had voluntarily enrolled on the module, and whose English language proficiency was at B1 – B2 level. Students themselves decided whether they were going to work individually, in pairs or in small groups. The linguistic objective of the module was to create an interactive teaching and learning environment in which authentic materials presented in English were used (e.g. brochures, reports and videos published by various UN agencies and news agencies). Learning new content related to the selected topics was a non-linguistic objective, whereas development of learner autonomy, cognitive and academic skills presented a shared objective that referred to both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of this CLIL module.

Students selected the following topics: the greenhouse phenomenon, consequences of climate change (global warming, melting of polar ice caps and glaciers, rising of sea levels, the phenomenon of extreme weather conditions, etc.), the problem of food and drinking water shortage, the problem of endangered plant and animal species, etc. They presented the issues in the class and discussed possible solutions with their classmates. Also, they conducted peer assessment, thus providing valuable feedback to the teacher and their classmates alike. The overall assessment of the progress and achievements was exceptionally positive. Students perceived learner autonomy as the most important factor for successful foreign language learning.

CONCLUSION

Results of numerous studies (ICF Report 2014, Marsh 2002) show that implementation of integrated teaching and learning at the tertiary level has positive gains for students in terms of foreign language acquisition, development of learner autonomy and promotion of academic and cognitive skills. Also, as roles of teachers and students are gradually changing, teachers cease to be primary providers of information and students passive recipients of knowledge. This process of gradual 'autonomisation' (Little 2003, Dam 1995) of students is best achieved through the use of a target (foreign) language as the preferred medium of teaching, development and acquisition of a set of useful learning techniques and activities, and ongoing evaluation of the learning process and outcomes, achieved by a combination of teacher, peer and self-assessment. In a learner-centred CLIL classroom, students and teachers work together in determining curricular materials, activities and goals. However, learner autonomy is best promoted when there is cooperation and support among students, which can be achieved through project work. By participating in project work, students learn from each other, share ideas,

plan and implement activities, analyze and evaluate the acquired knowledge and assess the learning outcomes. Furthermore, they develop metalinguistic functions that help them establish a connection between the 'academic' and 'practical' knowledge and become more proficient in and beyond the classroom, which is one of the main objectives of foreign language teaching.

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