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Students' perception of CLIL in higher education Preliminary results of the CLIL HET project

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There has been a growing research interest into the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in higher education, however, limited research attention has been devoted to the investigation of the situation in the Visegrad countries. These countries have seen an increasing pressure on higher education institutions to provide courses taught through English in order to enhance teacher and student mobility, to share knowledge and to network. Still, disciplinary teachers are not always prepared for this task. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, it introduces the Visegrad 4+ Project CLIL-HET (Content and Language Integrated Learning – Higher Education Teacher). In the course of the project, a special platform for CLIL, ESP, and disciplinary teachers has been created. Disciplinary teachers can complete a course on CLIL methodology at the website, and the project also aims to assess the linguistic weaknesses of disciplinary teachers who teach their subject through English. The second aim is to report on international students' expectations on courses taught through English at the Hungarian partner institution of the project, the Faculty of Education of the University of Szeged.

Keywords: *CLIL, CLIL in higher education, CLIL HET project, EMI, students' expectations*

CLIL – An introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a term that was coined in the 1990s. It “*involves using a language that is not the students' native language second language as a medium of instruction and learning in primary, secondary and tertiary level subjects*” (Mehisto et al., 2008:11). CLIL, more precisely integration in CLIL, has a dual focus: focus on language and focus on content (Mehisto et al., 2008). Based on this, hard and soft CLIL can be differentiated (Ball, 2009; Bentley, 2010); in hard CLIL subject content in a subject class is taught through an L2, usually by a native speaker of the L1. In soft CLIL, content from any subject class is used in a language class (Ball, 2009; Bentley, 2010).

CLIL has become an umbrella term, including low- to high intensity exposure to teaching and learning through a second language in CLIL, for example immersion, bilingual education, local and international projects or

CLIL camps (Mehisto et al., 2008). Surmont and her colleagues list several benefits of the CLIL approach, for example seeing language as a tool to learn new content instead of just being an aim of the language class, implicit learning of the CLIL language, and other linguistic and cognitive benefits (Surmont et al., 2014).

CLIL in higher education

CLIL in higher education (HE) contexts is referred to as English medium instruction (EMI); while CLIL is a term used mostly in Europe, EMI is a term that is used all over the world (Macaro et al., 2018). Macaro and his colleagues (2018), in their systematic review of EMI in higher education, state that the growth of EMI in HE is evident in all geographical areas of the world, and that most of this growth is top-down policy driven. Empirical research in the field has been carried out on teacher and student beliefs, perceptions and attitudes. It is also claimed that the concept of proficiency to teach through English is underspecified both in empirical research and by institutional requirements. The review also highlights that there is a lack of preparation to teach through English and a lack of professional development opportunities (Macaro et al., 2018). In addition, it has to be noted that there are varying models of EMI in higher education, even within one HE institution. Sometimes the same institution offers complete study programmes through English, ESP courses, together with electives that are taught through English.

Research has also revealed a north-south divide (Hultgren et al., 2015) in EMI in European higher education. This means that Nordic and Baltic states have a higher proportion of English-medium master's programmes per 100,000 inhabitants than southern Europe. The authors also note that the numbers hide considerable differences between institutions and disciplines; EMI is most frequent in business and engineering, followed by social and natural sciences. In addition, EMI is found to be more frequent in master's programs than at undergraduate level (Hultgren et al., 2015).

Doiz and colleagues report on university lecturers' beliefs and practices in EMI in Spain (Doiz et al., 2019). Based on feedback from lecturers, three problem areas were identified: teaching through a foreign language, the impact of English on the development of the classes, and the students' language skills. Lecturers find it difficult to deal with language problems in class, and planning and teaching through English is seen as time-consuming and stressful, thus decreasing lecturers' self-confidence. As a consequence, Doiz et al. highlight the need for training lecturers in the most relevant EMI skills (2019).

A second problem identified by the team is the impact of English on the development of classes (Doiz et al., 2019:169): the students' command of English determines the quality and quantity of the material that can be taught in a course. And this leads to the third problem, that of the students' language skills. Low language skills can slow down the pace of the classes and might require frequent stops to rephrase or check understanding.

The CLIL HET project aims at addressing some of the issues raised in the higher education EMI literature, namely preparing higher education lecturers to teach through English by providing methodology assistance, and also by identifying linguistic weaknesses of the lecturers in order to lay the foundations of a future language enhancement program for higher education lecturers teaching their courses through English.

The CLIL HET project

Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in the Visegrad (V4) and West Balkan (WB) countries are pressured to provide courses taught through English to enhance students' and teachers' mobility within and outside the EU in order to share knowledge, to network and to do research. Most HEIs in the V4 countries provide study programs for their students in their mother tongue(s), together with ESP courses. However, in some cases, ESP courses for students have been cut or completely cancelled. This might be one of the factors which lead to lower level of student mobility to and from these countries.

The Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, Faculty of Materials Science and Technology in Trnava (MTF STU), the project grantee, conducted research focusing on the readiness of disciplinary teachers (DTs) to provide their courses through English. Approximately two thirds of the DTs were willing to teach through English, however, they stated that they would need didactic and/or linguistic support. According to a brief survey conducted at MTF STU, most students would prefer (partial) English integration into education. This led the project grantee to try the CLIL approach for establishing an English Educational Environment (EEE) in close cooperation with the project partners. There are five higher education institutes involved in the project: the MTF STU – the project grantee, the University of Szeged, Hungary, the State Higher Vocational School in Tarnow, Poland, the University of Pristina's Faculty of Philosophy in Kosovska Mitrovica, Serbia, and the EPOKA University in Albania.

The project aims at grouping ESP and CLIL experts to prepare an online platform for networking within the V4 and WB countries to support disciplinary teachers at higher education institutions to set up an English education environment. In the first phase of the project, project partners

compiled a Didactic material for DTs on the principles of CLIL methodology. In addition, a linguistic test was prepared for DTs to assess their language level.

During the second phase of the project, DTs (who have completed the Didactic material and the placement test) who teach their course totally or partially through English received tutoring from the ESP teachers involved in the project, and they discussed lesson plans prepared by the DTs. Then, video recordings were made of the classes taught by the DTs, and ESP teachers filled in class observation sheets. Student feedback was also asked for.

An integral part of the project is the online platform (www.clil-het.eu). There are two important parts of the platform: the Didactic Corner and the Research Corner. The CLIL-HET Didactic Corner is an online environment where DTs who are willing to start teaching their subject(s) through English can gain knowledge on how to start and how to follow the dual principle of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach while teaching. This section of the platform includes the Didactic Program for DTs, which consists of three chapters: Essentials of CLIL, English Didactics and Essentials of CLIL Lesson Planning. The Didactic Program is available in seven languages, including English. There are also Didactic Materials in this section. This is the practical part of the Didactic Corner, where didactic materials including the CLIL lesson plans from real CLIL lessons or CLIL activities conducted by DTs can be downloaded.

The Research Corner is an online space for the research part of the project. Here you can find the tools for meeting the objectives of the project outcome called ILWs – Identifying Language Weaknesses of DTs. It includes a non-standard placement test prepared by ESP experts involved in the project. Disciplinary teachers at each project partner have been asked to complete the test. Results will be processed and compared to the results achieved by observing courses taught either fully or partially through English by disciplinary teachers involved in the project and to the questionnaire results conducted by ESP experts. Based on the results, a report will be written including the recommendations for a language program to improve the level of English of DTs.

Material and methods

In order to receive feedback from international students, a questionnaire was prepared for international students, most of whom were Erasmus+ exchange students. The questionnaire was prepared through Google Forms (See Appendix 1.).

The questionnaire's first few questions aimed at mapping the students' language knowledge and CLIL background. These questions were followed by a list of thirteen expectations towards a teacher who is teaching his / her subject through English. Students were invited to rate the importance of these factors on a scale from 1 to 4 (1: not important at all, 2: less important, 3: important, 4: very important). The list was compiled based on literature on scaffolding in language education and CLIL (Gerakopolou, 2016; Gondová, 2014; Mehisto et al., 2018).

This section was followed by the following three open-ended questions:

- *What were the benefits of studying through English during your Erasmus stay?*
- *What problems have you faced related to studying through English during your Erasmus stay?*
- *Do you have any suggestions to solve these problems?*

This paper reports preliminary results based on the answers of six international students, data collection from Hungarian students studying elective lectures and seminars through English is in progress. Five out of six students have studied subjects through English at their home university, and they speak two foreign languages in addition to their mother tongue. They reported that language level was C1 (1 student) or B2 (5 students).

International students' expectations

Based on the questionnaire results, international students expect the following from lecturers teaching their subjects through English. Good interaction with students ranked highest, followed by good English skills of the lecturer. Clear explanations of technical terms and of logical links were also considered important.

Table 1 summarizes the most important expectations from HETs teaching a subject through English.

Table 1. The most important expectations

Expectation	Average perceived importance
Good interaction with students	4
Good English skills	3.83
Clear explanation of technical vocabulary	3.6
Clear explanation of logical links	3.6

The factors that had the lowest perceived importance among international students included the use of visuals, which is not necessarily in line with CLIL methodology literature, as the use of visuals and multimedia materials are considered as key elements of CLIL scaffolding. Pair and project work, student presentations and study materials also had low importance in the eyes of students. Table 2 summarizes the factors international students perceive as less or least important.

Table 2. The least important expectations

Expectation	Average perceived importance
Use of visuals	3
Pair work / project work	3
Well-written study materials	2.83
Use of multimedia materials	2.5
Student presentations	2.5

The first open-ended question concerned the benefits of studying through English. The first, and obvious answer is the improvement of their English skills, as can be seen from this comment: *“I improved my English skills, because I could only communicate in this language with my teachers and classmates.”* In addition to language skills, other benefits were mentioned. One of those is self-confidence: *“My self-confidence grew because I was able to understand everything.”* One of the international students, a teacher trainee, mentioned that studying through English might help in his / her future career as well: *“get into the heart of the language, being in contact with it every day. In my case it was very useful also to understand how I can teach it at school”*.

The second open-ended question concerned the problems international students faced during their studies. The only problem that was mentioned was the language level of the students. Most of the respondents found their own language level not advanced enough:

“...the only problem was not always understanding everything and having some difficulty in expressing my true thought.”

“At first I was barely fluent in the language but then I improved a lot.”

“The biggest problem was my English skill. I needed (I still need) to improve.”

“My own English skill. It was low.”

One of the students also reflected on the language level of Erasmus students in general: *“the level of English concerning the Erasmus students differs a lot. For me the English taught in classes with many Erasmus people was not challenging because I study English.”*

The third open-ended question asked for solutions to these problems. The respondents agreed that studying would be a possible solution, together with the *“offer of different levels”*. Another remark concerned the relationship between Hungarian and international students (who attend the same courses taught through English): *“Maybe to encourage the Hungarian students to speak more English with foreign students.”*

Summary

This paper had two aims. First, it introduced the CLIL HET project. The project aims at providing didactic and language assistance for higher education lecturers to teach their courses through English. Secondly, in a preliminary investigation, the expectations of international students towards lecturers teaching their course through English were surveyed. Our results show that students expect good interaction between students and lecturers, in addition to lecturers’ good English skills, clear explanation of technical vocabulary, and clear explanation of logical links. These expectations have implications for training these lecturers in EMI /CLIL methodology, and assisting them in acquiring the necessary level of English. This coincides with the goals of the CLIL HET project, where lecturers can get practice and confidence in explaining links and terms (see also Doiz et al, 2019). In addition, it has to be noted that currently there are no benchmarks or criteria concerning the language level of lecturers who would like to teach a course through English.

The problem of students’ language skills, raised by the students themselves, is in line with the issues described in the literature (Doiz et al., 2019). This raises the question of whether the B2 level for students is appropriate for EMI or not. In addition, lecturers play a major role in helping students with lower language skills to be able to acquire the relevant knowledge. This again highlights the need for didactic and linguistic preparation of lecturers in higher education who teach their courses through English.

Limitations of the present, preliminary, study also have to be noted. This was a small scale study with only six participants. In addition, no information was gathered on how well students acquired content during these classes.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire for Erasmus students

Hi, this is a questionnaire that we put together in order to improve our classes taught through English at the Faculty of Education of the University of Szeged. As a former student, we would be happy to hear your opinion.

Which Faculty / Faculties did you study at the University of Szeged?

Have you studied any subjects through English before coming to the University of Szeged?
yes / no

If yes, where?

- primary school
- secondary school
- home university

How many other languages do you speak in addition to your mother tongue?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- more than 3

What is your English level?

- A2
- B1
- B2
- C1

What do you expect from a teacher who is teaching his / her subjects through English?

	very important	important	less important	not important at all
good English skills				
good and effective interaction with students				
well-written study materials (handouts, slides)				
clear explanations of technical vocabulary				
clear explanations of grammar				
clear explanations of logical connections				
the use of visuals				
pair work or project work in class				
use of multimedia materials				
support for individual work				
student presentations in class				
feedback on / correction of grammar problems of students				
feedback on / correction of vocabulary problems of students				

What were the benefits of studying through English during your Erasmus stay?

What problems have you faced related to studying through English during your Erasmus stay?

Do you have any suggestions to solve these problems?

Thank you!