

Teachers for the Knowledge Society

## The foreign language teacher's roles in response to the knowledge society requirements

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### Abstract

The knowledge society demands matching educational reforms to respond the students' needs of acquiring good performance skills. The study aims to produce evidence for stakeholders in education regarding the new roles foreign language teachers could play to fully answer these expectations. They should be supported by appropriate curricular changes to develop CLIL focused competences. The research takes stock of the current situation in Romanian non philological universities regarding the roles and perspectives of English teachers. Although more research is needed, findings confirm that formal teacher training programs should be created, as well as a sharing network of CLIL professionals.

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### 1. Stating the problem - contemporary challenges to education

The contemporary society has been subjected to changes along the economic, social, cultural and educational paradigms. There are studies that try to express the essence of the newly emerged *knowledge society*. Thus, Csorba (2008) shows that it is based no longer on facts, data and rules, like the previous – industrial - one, but on skills and competences, based on constructivist principles. Underlining that the knowledge society comprises three interconnected dimensions - political, operational and that related to the development of human beings, Udas (2009) emphasizes that the essence is a focus not only on creating new learning cultures and spaces, involving all the players of education in generating lifelong learning partnerships, but mainly on concentrating upon the development of people, seen as well defined beings and not mere labels such as 'end-users'. We are witnessing transformations in the teaching/learning proposals, which require adopting a new view of teacher's education.

Teacher training has become an important element within educational policies in the post Bologna/Prague/Lisbon documents Europe, in an effort to create a framework of principles as regards teacher competences and qualifications at high quality standards. As Furlong (2007) claims, school is preparing young people for 'learning in an uncertain world', which arises from the relation to the emerging technology and knowledge, the increasing mobility, a diversification of values and intercultural differences. Education must be reshaped to answer these challenges, with teachers learning to answer 'the contestability of knowledge'.

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The academia reply to such demands must include, we maintain, support in building up a coherent framework that should combine forms of training, personal research and learnedness. The focus should go on decentralizing, personalizing and rendering education flexible. Teachers should be ready to assume new roles and develop/facilitate strategic learning, emphasizing communication and technological abilities. They have to reshape their professional development *classical* path and identify means of improving it. This implies a process of de-monopolizing and diversifying the educational opportunities for university teachers. They should be encouraged to embark upon new career lines involving professional development, as they are expected to enlarge their strategic, content and methodological repertory of skills and competences that could enable them to become not only English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers, but also Content and Language Integrated learning (CLIL) type of educators. For this, appropriate curricular changes are mandatory, which should provide coherent comprehensive teacher training programs at national level for foreign language teachers.

## 2. Defining the rationale underlying the study - focus on CLIL

The notion of CLIL is a relatively new one. Therefore, if one tries to define it, one must assemble together a range of viewpoints. Thus, the Council of Europe document on education (North, 1998) includes teaching content in a foreign language, as ‘an improvement in both the foreign language and the non-language area competence’. According to the parent of the notion, Marsh (2002), the term refers to ‘any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and subject have a joint role’. As shown in the specialized online CLIL Compendium (2001), ‘CLIL refers to any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language ... is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content’. Literature on CLIL prefers to maintain that we should see it located along a *continuum* of the foreign language and the non-language content, with various views as regards their weighting. It covers all levels of education, taking various forms. Thus, in content-driven programs the key instructional force is represented by the content outcomes, while in language-driven ones, content is restricted to being a tool for promoting the language curricular objectives (Met, 1999).

Discussing the relevance of CLIL at European Union level, Coyle (2002) lists the major components required for a successful implementation of CLIL programs: subject matter (content), the language of and for learning (communication), the thinking integral to high quality learning (cognition) and the global citizenship agenda (culture) – all equally important in determining a really operational CLIL framework. He puts forward certain principles in practicing CLIL: content does not refer only to knowledge and skills acquisition, but mainly to the learner’s personalized effort to re-create them; in order to facilitate the learner to rebuild knowledge in a personal manner, content, which is related to cognition, should be analyzed from its linguistic perspective. Equally, thinking processes should be examined from the linguistic perspective, as well; interactivity and an attention to intercultural awareness are also important.

Fernandez (2009), referring to the long-lasting debate over the differences between CLIL and Content-Based instruction (CBI), ESP with all its derivations, and Language Across the Curriculum, respectively, considers they are mainly ontological and epistemological, although there are common assumptions underlying them all. Similarly, coordination between language and subject-matter learning is a must. Thus, Mohan (1986) describes three possible language (L) – content (C) combinations: (i) *L by C*; (ii) *L with C*; (iii) *L for C*. To them, Fernandez (op. cit.) adds *L through C* – which ‘aims to teach language, introduce new subsidiary subject-matter related topics and exemplify or expand, from a communicational perspective, subject-matter content’.

In the *language vs. content* relationship, as Creese (2005) correctly maintains, there has been a tendency in the literature that language work in the content classroom is given less status than content, although there are benefits to be obtained if content is integrated with language teaching objectives. This point of view is confirmed by Md Yassin et al. (2009), who underlines that CLIL is a ‘dual-focused educational approach’.

How CLIL – seen as ‘an innovative form of language-enhanced education’ – is actually implemented in various countries is, as Frigols (2007) shows, a matter of difference within the European Union and/or outside it, with English as the most common ‘vehicular’ language. Moreover, as Mehisto (2008) warns, there are certain factors that can negatively influence on CLIL implementation: difficulty teachers may have in applying ‘a multiple focus on content and language’, lack of knowledge about ‘CLIL-specific strategies and their impact on learning’, ‘teachers’ mindsets’, as well as ‘planning by teachers and ...authorities’ of the necessary curricular changes to accommodate

CLIL type courses. We consider such potential hindrances should be taken into consideration in our country as well, if we want to create a coherent framework of developing CLIL courses. One possible manner of removing obstacles is that provided by the University of Cambridge – ESOL Examinations (2009), which has developed the Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT). The TKT site lists precisely those elements that sum up our rationale for the attempt to highlight CLIL in relationship with the foreign language teachers' new roles: (i) it is an 'evolving approach to teaching and learning', involving 'best practice from a range of different educational contexts'; (ii) it requires teachers of CLIL to develop their competences in the 'practice of planning, teaching and assessing curriculum subjects taught in English'; (iii) 'it develops learners' skills and understanding'.

To conclude at this point, there is huge potential for CLIL for both teachers of other curriculum subjects who teach CLIL, as they will be able to 'add language teaching to their existing skills', which could be the key to better career opportunities. As far as language teachers are concerned, 'an understanding of how to teach a broader range of curricular subjects is a challenge for the 21st century'. It is precisely this challenge that the Romanian university teachers of English should be getting ready to take up, with curriculum makers operating the necessary teacher education framework for it.

### 3. The research project – instruments and findings

A research project has been initiated with a view to taking stock of the position of English university teachers in non philological universities all over the country as far as the new role as CLIL teachers they could assume is concerned. The data collected may also be of interest for stakeholders and policy makers in higher education, as certain curricular changes will have to be operated nationwide in a coherent comprehensive manner, if we wish to ensure the quality and criteria demanded by the current knowledge society standards. Another objective of this study is to contribute to developing a sharing network of CLIL professionals.

The working research question has been the correlation between the English teacher's profile and the specific educational context factors, as regards designing/teaching CLIL type courses. The research design included a *questionnaire* to English teachers in Romanian non philological universities, focused on types of CLIL courses designed/taught by them at all levels and on the teacher training opportunities they have had, the position of their university as regards CLIL, their reasons for embarking upon CLIL and the methodologies and materials used. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to 27 fellow teachers. Twelve answers were received - a relatively good response rate, considering the research scope and conditions. The respondents work in nine universities (five profiles - from two private centers and five state ones).

The questions were mostly of the open type, to allow respondents to express views freely. This type of qualitative data has proven really useful, as the answers are honest and insightful. Answers were triangulated by means of *interviews* with five teachers (face to face type, basically duplicating the questionnaire items), quantitative data collected by means of an *Internet search* and a personal *case study*.

Certainly we must be aware of the limitations of our research project, which refer to sample size, personal interpretation of the CLIL terminology used a.s.o., but which have not affected the instrument validity and reliability beyond a reasonably acceptable degree.

The most important findings are presented in what follows:

- (i) The *respondents* are mostly lecturers and/or associate professors (82%), some of them holding certain managerial positions (dean – 8%, head of department – 24%), which can be explained by the academic provision that only from the level of a lecturer and PhD is a teacher allowed to deliver courses in general. Only one teacher admits that one reason for embarking upon teaching CLIL was 'promoting in one's professional career';
- (ii) Teachers might not have a quite clear-cut image of *what exactly a CLIL course means*, as, with five exceptions, they list as CLIL type courses a range of ESP ones, such as: Business English, English for Information Technology. There are teachers (approx. 40%) who mention various forms of courses, all broadly focused on *communication*, for which it is really difficult to decide what the relationship between language and content is, for instance: Cross-cultural Communication, Business Communication in English, English for Professional Communication, Intra and Inter Company Communication in English, Scientific and Technical Communication in English. There are, though, mentions which can be more closely defined as being of the CLIL type proper: Business Administration, English Culture and Civilization;

- (iii) The *teacher training opportunities* they have had in order to become CLIL teachers subdivide the respondents into two categories: (a) those, with over 15 years of experience, exposed to the major training courses provided within the PROSPER project and similar ones organized by the British Council and other, and (b) the few younger ones, who mainly rely on personal effort, which may include (or not) their doctoral studies. In fact, the answers mainly cover reference to training in view of becoming ESP teachers, with no mention of formal opportunities for CLIL training;
- (iv) The *position of the respondents' universities as regards CLIL courses* ranges along a continuum from the blunt 'nobody is interested', 'they are not aware of it', through 'they do not get involved financially or as training', and up to labels such as 'positive', 'acceptance', 'encouragement' and, in only one case - 'optional courses have become compulsory and seminars were added'. One answer mentions that there has been an increased awareness of the university management of the pressures from (a) the enrollment of foreign students, and (b) multinational employers;
- (v) There have been various *reasons for the implementation of CLIL type courses*: better employment opportunities for the students, pressure from the employers, and for one teacher also: a clear need for contextualizing language knowledge in the academic environment, and teacher training focused on this area (as a result of an increase in the demand for such courses). Another teacher explains that the introduction of a CLIL type course was a modality of extending the weighting in the curriculum of an EST type of course, as there was evidence that it had really answered the society's demands;
- (vi) As regards the *methodological approach*, most answers (72%) mention the communicative one. There are no answers pointing out to specific CLIL methodology. There are multiple answers emphasizing the interactive character of the course. The materials are original ones for only 24% of the teachers, designed by them with a view to teaching a CLIL course, while one teacher combines her own materials with course books. The rest (approx. 68%) list a number of course books available (inter)nationally. Only one person uses transcripts of negotiations, the Internet and authentic company documents;
- (vii) Among the *difficulties* encountered in preparing and delivering CLIL type of courses, 56% mention lack of formal training in the field, 16% refer to mismatches between course book materials and their concrete educational context features. There are isolated mentions referring to: cultural barriers, marked heterogeneity of the trainees in terms of previous language level and content knowledge, low (or no) cooperation with content teachers, lack of financial support for the course from the university. Among the constraints teachers were forced to face were also time required for 'self made bibliography' and the permanent need to change due to the changing students' needs.

The *interview* data are along the same lines as those obtained by means of the questionnaire. The interviews had a semi-formal character, allowing the respondents to express their opinions sincerely. A recurrent finding was the need to better clarify the CLIL concept. All respondents manifested an open attitude towards professional development and an interest towards getting involved in teaching CLIL courses. Similarly, all of them resent the lack of formal training opportunities, as well as the relatively low support of their universities.

A *search on the Internet* to identify the universities that offer CLIL courses has revealed that there are at least eight academic institutions (in Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj, Craiova, Constanta, Galati, Iasi, Oradea) which provide them. Courses range from *Business Administration*, through *Naval Architecture* and to *Medicine*, most of them at master level. However, we were unable to identify the CLIL type courses taught by teachers of English. Data show there is demand at country level for CLIL professionals. This can be corroborated with the teachers' answers to the questionnaire and interviews, in establishing that the area of CLIL requires more attention from all the higher education system players, by giving it more scope in the curriculum for teacher education.

A *case study* based on the author's personal experience was equally devised. It provides one possible path towards becoming a CLIL teacher. The author belongs to the generation of experienced teachers (over 20 years), exposed to PROSPER and similar training, as well as to master and further doctoral studies on the pedagogy of English language. Her concrete educational context - a faculty of engineering in foreign languages, has also contributed in her developing a particular interest in CLIL pedagogy. Initially an ESP teacher, the author answered the demand of the academia and developed an originally-designed CLIL course entitled *Scientific and Technical Communication in English*, first delivered within an international program of doctoral studies and, after the necessary reshaping, included in two master programs. It was during the (re)designing stages of this course that the author began to reflect on the necessity that language teachers should embark upon teaching CLIL, on the ways and

means that could be conducive to attaining this aim and their implications for curriculum designers, as well as on the need for creating a network within which fellow teachers having to respond to the same challenges could share views and experiences.

#### 4. Open conclusions

It is hoped that the study will facilitate and/or initiate sharing positive experience, invite debate and ultimately support the idea of including CLIL courses pedagogy in the philological faculties' curriculum. It may be conducive to an evolution in the understanding of one's own development in a creative manner.

As Sherry and Gibson (2002) put it, teachers should play an increasingly important role in developing their own 'path to teacher leadership', covering in turns - but also simultaneously - the roles of *learner, adopter, colearner, reaffirmer or rejecter, leader*.

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