TEACHING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION THROUGH THE CLIL METHOD: A TOOL OF INTER-DISCIPLINARY APPROACH AND OF EMPOWERMENT OF COGNITIVE SKILLS

Xanthi Albanaki, Kyriaki Vassilou

Experimental Senior High School of University of Macedonia,
Proin Stratopedo Strempenioti, Neapoli P.C. 56701, Thessaloniki, Greece

Abstract

The paper in question presents the pilot application of the teaching method C.L.I.L. (Content and Language Integrated learning) in the subjects of Religious Education and English Language in an Experimental High School. The C.L.I.L. method is a widespread practice among the educational systems of Europe and refers to situations in which the individuals are taught subjects through a foreign language with a double aim: content and foreign language learning (though the C.L.I.L. method is not synonymous with foreign language learning). A basic element of this activity has been the cooperation (team teaching) of two teachers of different subjects: Religious Education and English Language. The basic goal of the practice in question was to correlate the empirical data for the possibility of a teaching approach using the C.L.I.L. method with the arousal of the students' interest and the improvement of knowledge learning as well of the acquisition of skills, since the students often find it difficult to grasp abstract notions on a theoretical level. For the evaluation of the practice, the teachers have used the observation method through the observation sheets. The main conclusion can be epitomized in the positive reception of the particular method, the active involvement of the students in the learning process and the improvement of their grasp of religious notions and reading and listening comprehension in the English language.

Keywords: *C.L.I.L., Religious Education, English Language, strengthening, interdisciplinary approach*

1. INTRODUCTION

This proposal presents the pilot run of the C.L.I.L. method (Content and Language Integrating Learning), in the subject of Religious Education. The C.L.I.L method is a wide-spread practice in the educational systems of Europe and refers to situations in which students are taught through the target language with a dual purpose: content learning, and second language learning, even though the C.L.I.L method is not a language learning method (Marsh, 2013:17). In other words, it is a teaching method based on the following worldwide declaration: "All teachers are language teachers", and, consequently, all the fields of study, such as Religious Education, History, Mathematics, Science etc. can be taught in this particular way.

The C.L.I.L method emerged in the late decades of the 20th Century (Brown, 1994; Richards and Rodgers, 1991). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) defines it as a focused action for the accomplishment of a given objective (Council of Europe, 2001:10), a practice in which language is used for communicative purposes: "in order to achieve an outcome" (Candlin and Murphy, 1987:10; Willis, 1996:23).

Looking at the past, the forerunners of the method could be traced in the immersion models in North America and in the bilingual educational programmes, but also in the European international schools, where complementary teaching of the target language is provided when it is asked by parents or the schools. In the case of international schools, teaching takes place in English and help is provided in the target language during school hours, but this practice is not carried out effectively in all countries (Almpanaki, 2015:30).

For instance, language acquisition in the immersion programmes of Canada (optional or not), takes place mainly through the teaching of a 50% or a 100% of school subjects in the second language. In the case of immersion programmes in the USA, language learning aims at English language

competence acquisition and cultural awareness, providing at the same time students with an exceptional opportunity to reach high levels of academic success. The immersion education is based on the assumption that a human acquires the first language unconsciously and only at a later time does he or she perceive language as a system (Baker, 2001:490-495).

The immigration in those countries propelled cultural plurality and functioned as a starting point for the redevelopment of the educational systems. In reality, it constituted an effort to deal with the high percentages of school failure that children from minority groups usually present (Almpanaki, 2015: 10-11). In the case of Europe, equivalent practices were structured for the handling of the educational problems (Androusou, 1996: 44). In Greece, the C.L.I.L. method is not applied systematically (Eurydice 2012), even though it is implemented by the 3rd Model Experimental Primary School of Evosmos, under the supervision of the School of English (AUTH)..

Some of the basic principles of the C.L.I.L method are the following: a) language is used in the teaching process in order for students to learn how to communicate; b) the school subject defines the language which must be taught, c) language is linked to real life. The large number of bibliography that has been produced tends more and more to a european approach aiming at a bilingual education through the content and language integrated learning (C.L.I.L). Researches that have been conducted so far have registered positive results in favor of the second language but not at the expense of the content taught (Coyle, 2007, Perez-Canado & Maria Luisa 2012).

In this particular practice, students are engaged in the subject of Religious Education in a language different to their mother tongue (Greek), while in the school subject of English issues related to religion are discussed. The main objective of this practice was to link empirical facts with the knowledge that is already known through the bibliography created for the potentiality of this didactic approach in schools. Concerning the objectives of this practice we can mention the following: a) Cultivation of the students' language skills, emphasizing the language teaching through content, b) Interaction with students and with groups, c) Opportunity for the negotiation of a concept and its form, d) Activation of basic knowledge, e) Cultivation of the students' critical thinking, which is an essential prerequisite for their involvement in complex societies (Tsatsaroni, Kourou, 2007:61-77), f) Exposure of students to linguistic stimuli that are understood and interesting.

2. PEDAGOGICAL CONTEXT

For the educational system to be adapted to the linguistic and cultural pluralism, the abandonment of the traditional character of education, that is, educating students about a specific culture and in a specific language is required (Gkovaris, 2001:11). In order for cultural conscience and historical knowledge to be cultivated among students, each school should combine a variety of pedagogical and educational activities which would illustrate the functional role of the school, allowing the students to express themselves and coexist (Almpanaki, 2013:249). One should not forget that one of the aims of religious education in general is cultivating mutual tolerance and accepting the differences among people, something which the subject of Religious Education and any other subject can offer (Maghioros, 2012:155-179).

It is important to note that through the subject of Religious Education, a variety of religious, pedagogical and Christian values are touched upon. The students are invited to indulge in the wealth of Orthodox Christian Tradition, especially at a time when certain attitudes, behaviors and values cannot be grasped without the background of religious Education.

As far as the subject of Religious Education is concerned, there is a difficult scientific parlance, while the texts in the school textbooks are long and dense. Moreover, students have difficulty in the oral representation of the symbols and in explaining and justifying their views orally and in paper.

The planning of the teaching approach followed Vygotsky's principles of Social Constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development, making good use of the model of cooperative learning. This model promotes knowledge acquisition even more, because of the interaction taking place among the students (Tudge, 1993:169). Its architectural structure is based on inquiry-based, guided learning,

within the framework of the theoretical model of Constructivism, as well as the principles of inquiry-based, experiential, interactive and cooperative learning, and also on the utilization of new technologies.

2.1 Utilizing the C.L.I.L method in Religious Education

The implementation of this pilot program took place in an Experimental High School in the Second grade and it lasted for six months during the academic year 2017. It required the cooperation (team-teaching) of the teachers of Religious Education and English Language, during which the teachers, after having divided activities, taught all the students simultaneously (Wendy, Murawski, Dieker, 2011).

According to the teaching objectives in each case, various forms of teaching were implemented; a) collaborative teaching, in which the teachers present the subject simultaneously, b) supportive team teaching, in which one teacher does the teaching and the other supports him/her and c) monitoring teaching, in which one teacher presents the subject and the other teacher monitors the process of teaching by wandering around the groups of students (Education Services, 2013). During the activities, the principle of the "accessible" was applied, that is, the transition from the known to the unknown, from the simple task to the more complex one, from the easy task to the hard one and from the specific to the general.

The emphasis during teaching with the C.L.I.L. method was drawn to the 4Cs framework of C.L.I.L. as proposed by Coyle (Do Coyle, 2008). The 4Cs are: a) Content, that is, gradual learning of content and sharpening the skills related to the specific fields of the curriculum, b) Communication, which means using the language as a means and tool for learning, c) Cognition, that is, development of metacognitive skills and d) Culture, which relates to the mutual and deep understanding of others and to the integration of students in a multilingual and multicultural environment, like the one of Europe.

The C.L.I.L. method within the 4Cs framework can be proven effective as long as the following factors coexist: gradual acquisition of knowledge, gradual sharpening of skills and understanding of the subject, involvement in metacognitive processes, interaction in a communicative framework and acquisition of intercultural sensitivities through knowing yourself as well as the other. This means that through the C.L.I.L. method students learn to use the language correctly while utilizing the language to support effective learning. The 4Cs framework is a tool for planning the C.L.I.L. activities, but also a tool for maximizing the results of every model in all levels and age (Do Coyle, 2008).

During teaching through C.L.I.L. the students were divided in groups and they were stimulated by various elements which motivated students to become active during the lesson. This practice aimed at the creation of a learning environment in which students would be actively, cognitively and emotionally involved. What is more, worksheets were being used for writing and speaking. The educators were coordinators, facilitators, and yet responsible for all the activities to be designed according to the cognitive, emotional and physical needs of the students, their age, their interests and their already acquired knowledge (Schunk 2010:288-96).

The educators focused on the comprehension and production of various types of texts and through both oral and written assignments on both education fields on the sharpening of all the students' skills (speaking and writing comprehension and production, communicative competence, sociolinguistic ability). Before each lesson, the aims and learning objectives, the communicative/linguistic goals and the necessary linguistic means were located and documented. Finally, the teaching procedure was organized in phases (Zaga, 2014).

Before each unit, the students studied various materials, such as pictures, charts and maps. Moreover, they watched English videos related to the topics in the lesson's content. During this practice, the students studied the units related to the characteristics of orthodox tradition, the differences between Christianity and Roman Catholicism, fanaticism and religious tolerance, religion and science and human rights. During the English lesson, the same topics were discussed and the students watched excerpts of the following movies:

1. Kingdom of Heaven (2005).
2. The Crucible (1996). This movie is set in Salem in 1692, where a company of innocent girls is being accused of witchcraft.
3. Queen Margot (1994), focusing on the scenes regarding St. Bartholomew's night.
4. Luther (2003), a historical and biographical movie about Martin Luther.
5. Agora (2009), a historical, epic and philosophy drama. Its topic is the conflict between science and religion in post-roman Alexandria.
6. Malcolm X (1992), the autobiography of the worldwide known Muslim radical and visionary, who was to change the sociopolitical background of America forever.
7. Timbuktu (2014), a cry for Human Rights. Based on real events, a critical view towards the terror in every absolute and zealously religious regime.

After watching these excerpts of the movies and dealing with the educational material, comprehension questions were asked in English in order to motivate the students' critical thinking (Sample questions: What is the difference between… and…?, Explain why…, What would happen, if…, What's another example of…?, How could… be used to…?, What is the counter argument for…?, What are the causes of…?, How do you know?). Moreover, there were activities that developed students' linguistic competence (a. Naming words: Familiar objects, new names (synonyms), new objects and new names. B. Process words: Capable of ostensible definition (e.g. being shown) Not capable of ostensible definition c. Concept words: Derived from experience (sensory concepts, with dual meanings, i.e. every day and scientific: for example 'work', Theoretical constructs (total abstractions, idealizations and postulated entities) (Wellington & Osborne 2001:20). The students then had to choose a topic and create and present a project in English on it during the subject of Religious Education with the English teacher present.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The particular research aims at the evaluation of the adoption of a different approach (C.L.I.L) in the process of teaching the subjects of Religious Education and English Language in relation to the increased participation of the students and their improved academic performance.

3.1 Research hypothesis

The research case was based on the following research topics:

- Through the traditional teacher-centered way of teaching, students have difficulty in understanding abstract religious concepts and terminology.
- Interdisciplinary teaching enhances the strengthening of the class and the students' critical thinking.
- Teaching language in context improves students' language competence.
- The C.L.I.L. method stimulates students' interest, improves linguistic and communicative competence and sharpens students' mental skills

3.2 Participants

The sample consisted of 52 students of the second grade of Senior High school, 26 girls and 26 boys, with ages ranging from 16 to 17 years. Their English language level, as defined by their English teacher, was B2-C1. Most of the students had English lessons at private English schools, while there were also students of C2 level (Proficient in English). The students in question were from various municipal districts of Thessaloniki.

3.3 Instrument

For the realization of this research, reflective techniques were implemented. What is more, the method of observation of teaching by both teachers using key observations. During key observation, the students' response (positive, negative and neutral) to the following was documented at each teaching stage: active participation, interest, content understanding and absorbing, speaking and writing comprehension, speaking production and mental skills. After the activities there was discussion and evaluation of the practices during the teaching procedure, so that the effect of the variables on our students could be measured gradually (McDrury & Alterio, 2002:25).

The teachers involved kept a working calendar, in which they outlined in advance the activities, the time and the expected learning outcomes, something that proved to be extremely useful and effective, since it led to the next steps and facilitated the learning process.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this unit, what is attempted is a general presentation and interpretation of the research findings. These particular activities were planned for the school subject of Religious Education. Students had an active role in the learning process, while this different approach of religious terms seems to have encouraged their active involvement. The main conclusions could be summarized in the positive approval of the method. During as well as at the end of the practice, moral values were also cultivated (respect for others, association with the orthodox tradition and spirituality).

Based on the data of the key observation and the research hypothesis, it was revealed that:

- The understanding of the religious concepts and terminology was upgraded on a theoretical level through a teacher-centered teaching, too.
- Interdisciplinary teaching reinforces the class and strengthens students' critical thinking.
- Teaching which focuses on language learning through content boosts the cultivation of language skills.
- The C.L.I.L method raises students' interest, fortifies the language-communicative skills and cultivates students' mental abilities.
- The cooperation of teachers during the teaching process was crucial for the development of the learning process, as it is also mentioned by researchers (Robinson & Schaible, 1995:57-59).

5. CONCLUSION

The present study attempted to evaluate a particular teaching practice which took place in a Senior High School of Thessaloniki during the lessons of Religious Education through C.l.I.L method. The issue of grasping religious notions is one that has particularly concerned researchers and, because of this, several similar researches were conducted in the past (Perselis, 1998:51-60). It has been observed that, in order for the students to be able to approach and value the wealth of Orthodox Tradition and to understand the symbolic language of Theology, the teacher needs to handle the issue with a certain dexterity.

During the planning of the practice, a serious effort was made so that several school subjects (Religious Education, English language, History, Information Technology, Philosophy, etc.) could be correlated. This way, the students could obtain a global understanding and holistic learning. Through selected topics, the teachers attempted to horizontally relate the various subjects, using an interdisciplinary and cross-curricular approach, in order to reinforce collaborative teaching. The students developed cognitive skills such as the ability to describe, narrate, interpret, compare, argue etc. as well as linguistic skills (expressing their opinion about action, character building, plot and expressing gratification or dislike) (Zaga, 2014).

During the evaluation of the practice, the teacher came to the realization that the students: a) managed to successfully process and reformulate the information provided through the subjects of Religious Education, English Language and other disciplines b) they developed their decision-making ability c) they became familiar with modern technology and finally d) their active involvement was reinforced. The students' participation in all activities was particularly satisfactory and served as an evaluation criterion for the practice.

It was observed that the approach in question managed to capture the students' interest in the subject of Religious Education as well in the subject of English Language, with most students being actively involved in the lesson.

The implementation of a different teaching approach as C.L.I.L which teaching is not based on traditional ways of organizing and transferring learning material proved to be extremely effective in the teaching process, since it managed to spark the students' imagination (Albanaki & Gioura, 2016:305-312).

Approaching religious studies in Greek school has gone a long way, shifting from the teacher's authority, catechism and "ex cathedra" teaching (in a dogmatic manner) to a whole new outlook. Nowadays, Religious Education takes into consideration various pedagogical, psychological and theological criteria and has transformed itself into a contemporary educational process, placing emphasis on the religious as well as the moral development of a child (Perselis, 1994:33-37, 134).

The way of teaching in the school of the 21st century can be significantly enriched through the adoption of strategies and methods as C.L.I.L which will enable the students to become partakers not only of information and skills but also of cultural and religious notions and values. After all, what is sought out at school is for the teachers to introduce new ways of mediation, so that the students can be rendered prepared to apply their knowledge to new situations through cooperative activities (Moll, 1993:13; Tsitouridou & Vryzas, 2003:241).

REFERENCES

Almpanaki X. (2015). Intercultural Education in action/Educational policies of European Nations, basic principles, legislation (e-book). Selected digital publication: 24grammata.com.

Almpanaki X. Gioura Ch. (2016) "Digital mapping as a teaching tool in Religious Education", 4th Panhellenic Educational Conference of Central Macedonia, Thessaloniki pp. 305-312.

Androusou A. (1996). Intercultural dimension in educational practice. In the book of Evangelou, O. (2007), *Intercultural Curricula*, Athens: Dardanos publications.

Baker, C. (2001). *Introduction to Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*, (introduction and aditing by M. Damanakis), Athens, Gutenberg, pp. 490-495.

Brown, H. Douglas (1994). *Principles of language learning and teaching.* 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, p. 299.

Govaris Ch. (2001). *Introduction to Intercultural Education*, Athens, Atrapos Publications.

Candlin, C.N. and Murphy, D.F. (eds.) (1987). Language Learning Tasks. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall International.

Damanakis, M. (2002). The Education of Repatriated Immigrants and Foreigners in Greece, Athens, Gutenberg. Education Services, Monitoring of Teaching and learning.

Coyle, D. (2008). CLIL – a pedagogical approach. In N. Van Deusen-Scholl, & N. Hornberger, *Encyclopedia of Language and Education, 2nd edition* (pp. 97-111). Springer.

Eurydice, available on: http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/strategic-framework/documents/key-data-2012_en.pdf, retrieved on 18/1/2016.

Zaga, El. (2014). "Content-based language instruction as a basic innovation in the New Curricula of Modern Greek Language for Lower Secondary School". In: Angeliki Psaltou-Joycey, Marina Mattheoudakis, and Eleni Agathopoulou (επιμ.), *Cross-curricular Approaches to Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishers.

Maghioros, N. (2012). "European Religious Education in the light of the Folgero decision and the Toledo Guiding Principles". In: *Education of love and freedom, a Tribute to emeritus professor Christos Vassilopoulos, pp.155-179.*

McDrury, J. & Alterio, M. (2002). *Learning Through Storytelling: Using Reflection and Experience in Higher Education Contexts.* New Zealand: The Dunmore Press Limited.

Marsh, D. (2013). The CLIL Trajectory: Educational Innovation for the 21st Century iGeneration. Córdoba: University of Cordoba Academic Press.

Moll, L. & Whitemore, K. (1999). "Moving from individual transmission to social transaction". In: *Learning relations in the classroom* (translated by Pavlogeorgatou, A.). Patra: Hellenic Open University, pp.155-182.

Perez- Cañado, M. L. (2012). CLIL Research in Europe: Past, Present, and Future, *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, v15 n3 p315-341 2012.

Perselis, E. (1998). *Christian Religious Education and the School Curriculum*, Athens: Gregoris Publications.

Perselis, E. (1994). *Christian Religious Education and the Modern World, Athens*: Armos Publications.

Richards J. & Rodgers, T. (1991). *Approaches and methods in language teaching: a description and analysis.* Cabridge: C.U.P.

Robinson, B. & Schaible, R. (1995). "Collaborative teaching: reaping the benefits", College Teaching, Spring, 57-59.

Schunk, D.H. (2009). *Learning Theories. An educational Perspective (translated by E. Ekkekaki). Athens*: Metaicmio Publications.

Tsatsaroni, A., Kourou, M. (2007). "Curricula-Creative and Critical Thinking: Terms and conditions". In: Koulaidis V.(editor), *Contemporary teaching approaches for the Development of Critical-Creative thought for Primary Education,* pp. 61-77, Athens: ΟΕΠΕΚ.

Tsitouridou M. & Vryzas K. (2003). Early Childhood Teachers' attitudes towards Computer and Information Technology. The case of Greece. *Information Technology in Childhood Education Annual (ITCE),* pp. 241-251, Athens: Tziolas Publications.

Tudge, J. (1993). «Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development, and peer-collaboration: Implications for classroom practice». In: Moll, L. (ed) *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology,* Cambridge University Press, USA, 154-174.

Willis, J. (1996). *A Framework for Task-based Learning*. London: Longman.

Wellington J. & Osborne J. (2001). *Language and literacy in science education, Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data,* Open University Press Buckingham Philadelphia.