Taking a CLIL step forward: Teaching and assessing History in English online

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Abstract

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is a contextualized learning approach (Kofou & Philippides, 2017), which underpins communication and skill development, supports the teaching of a curriculum subject in a foreign language (Perez-Vidal, 2007), and develops learners' language skills and strategies, higher-order thinking skills and multiliteracies. Based on Coyle's (2002) framework of the four key principles of CLIL, the present study presents the implementation of History lessons in the English language in the 1st grade of the 2nd Model Senior High School of Thessaloniki during the school year 2020-2021, through the Webex platform. To that end, a padlet for the teaching material was created, and several digital tools were employed. Apart from the learners' excellent response to the activities, the results of the questionnaire administered to them reveal not only the development of cognitive and language skills, but also the enhancement of communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, creativity, motivation and digital literacy.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), History in English, distance learning, digital tools, alternative assessment.

Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has gained ground in Europe (Eurydice, 2006) as a teaching and learning practice which offers an authentic communicative framework of learning that motivates learners and improves foreign language competence (Mattheoudakis, Alexiou & Laskaridou, 2011). Originally, it was implemented at all levels of education under the umbrella of bilingual education in the 90s, after the successful implementation of immersion programs in Canada and Content-based Language Teaching in the United States (Cummins & Swain, 1986; Brinton et al., 1989). It is actually based on task-based learning and integrates social-cultural and constructivist theories (loannou-Georgiou, 2012).

CLIL supports the teaching of a curriculum subject in a foreign or second language, giving emphasis to both the content of the subject and the language (Perez-Vidal, 2007), requires teachers' collaboration, and promotes innovation and research in the classroom (Craen et al., 2007; Perez-Vidal, 2007).

A variety of models, approaches, and methods of CLIL, such as collaborative and experiential learning, have been implemented all over Europe, with the students working on a topic and developing thinking and study skills (Crandall, 1992, 1994), and supported by researchers (Banegas, 2012; Calviño, 2012; Lasagabaster, 2008). Thus CLIL is a mainstream practice in Primary and Secondary Education in Europe (Eurydice, 2006) but limited in Greece, where CLIL has been or is implemented in a few schools, mainly experimental or model schools (see Kofou & Philippides, 2017; Kofou, Philippides & Gavriilidou, 2016). In that view, CLIL serves the educational and linguistic objectives, not only of a country but of a particular school (Eurydice, 2006).



CLIL is based on Coyle's triptych (2007), language of learning vocabulary and phrases to access the content, language for learning to enable students to perform the tasks and language through learning, namely language resulting from the cognitive process, and presupposes a framework of four principles (4 Cs) (Coyle, 1999, 2002), in order to be successfully implemented: Content (subject matter, cross-curricular approaches), Communication (language for learning and learning of language use), Cognition (development of cognitive and thinking skills) and Culture (awareness of self and otherness) (Darn, 2006). Therefore, CLIL does not only promote cognition, but also communication and cultural awareness (Darn, 2006). In a CLIL, non-typical class (Katarzyna, 2011), dealing with an interesting subject matter, students learn the foreign language better (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2000, in Banegas, 2012), and teachers develop strategies and skills to cope with diversified learners' needs, abilities and learning styles (Perez-Vidal, 2007). The former also acquire a positive view to language learning, get knowledge, develop communicative and cultural skills (Calviño, 2012), increase their motivation, confidence, selfmanagement, and self-esteem (Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2017), whereas the latter develop good practices, use a different approach to the curriculum, employ innovative methods and alternative resources – besides the linguistic ones – to make the content comprehensible, use digital tools and finally develop professionally (Calviño, 2012; Lasagabaster, 2008; Mattheoudakis & Alexiou, 2017; Smit & Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

Since there is no common practice that can be adopted by all school teachers, CLIL needs to be adapted each time to the local context, needs, and objectives, depending on the stakeholders, goals, and methods. So teachers need to think about three major stages, planning, implementation, and assessment. This means that they have to take into account the class they are going to teach, the subject matter they are going to focus on, and the objectives they are going to set. Then they have to select the content, plan the tasks, according to the emphasis they want to place on the language skills, and finally select the assessment forms, i.e. traditional tests or alternative assessment forms, or both.

All the above reveal a demand for effective teachers, able to plan lessons accordingly, use the foreign language proficiently, and integrate technology and alternative assessment forms. Teachers' collaboration and understanding could possibly be the factors that will help them overcome any problems that may arise throughout the CLIL practice (Calviño, 2012), which also emerged in Mattheoudakis & Alexiou's research (2017), so that both language and subject teachers acquire the expertise to become CLIL instructors.

The research

The present study is a qualitative case study of a school class, whose data can be generalised for classes with similar features (Cohen et al., 2007), but it is also action research to improve and reform practice based on relevant research (Hopkins, 1985; McNiff, 2002). To that end, it can be seen as a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on the practice (Kofou, 2020).

Based on Coyle's framework of the four key principles of CLIL (4 Cs), content, cognition, communication, and culture (Coyle, 2002), the present study, which took place in three synchronous, 40-minute teaching periods held exclusively online through the Webex platform, is concerned with the implementation of History courses in the English language in the 1st grade of the 2nd Model Senior High School of Thessaloniki during the school year 2020-2021. More specifically, the aim was to observe the development of all language skills while teaching History in English, but also the students' literacies, engagement, and motivation.

The research sample

The research sample consisted of two classes of the 1st grade, which were both used as the experimental group, while no control group was used in the present study as the English and History teachers wanted all their students to experience CLIL. Thus, fifty-two 1st graders



participated in the practice, whose English proficiency according to the C.E.F.R. (Common European Framework of Reference) (2001) was between B2 and C2 level, as recorded in the diagnostic test the specific students had taken at the beginning of the school year.

The research tools

The entire implementation took place on the Webex platform assigned by the Ministry of Education for classes of both Primary and Secondary Education during the closure of schools because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

created The teachers **Padlet** to upload classroom material а (https://padlet.com/ikofou/rgjvpzcy3hoo9214) (Fig. 1), and allow students to communicate, collaborate, upload and reflect on their work . Padlet is considered a digital social-networking tool whose virtual wall can be used for real-time participation, collaboration and assessment, and does not require any special technological knowledge (Deni & Zainal, 2015; Fuchs, 2014). It can be used for uploading documents, links, photos, videos, and any multimodal material, sharing information, reacting, and adding comments (Susanti & Ayuni, 2018). The choice of the Padlet platform was considered advantageous because it allows teachers and students easy and instant access to the material, tools, activities, and student responses, as well as synchronous, less conventional ways of providing feedback.



Fig. 1. The Padlet

Apart from the Padlet, on which both the teaching material and the learning activities were uploaded all aiming at developing language skills, several other digital tools were employed, such as Edpuzzle, Preceden, quizzes, and Google forms, the use of which is going to be described in the implementation of the practice below.

In terms of the lesson content, the unit of the Peloponnesian War was selected and enriched with activities that addressed not only language development but also soft skills. There was also a Padlet guide to guide the students through the activities.

Implementation

The implementation of the entire practice included warm-up activities, the practice of all language skills, and an individual and group assessment as well as an attitude questionnaire, as presented below.

Warm-up activities (20 min.)

To familiarize themselves with the concept of civil war and look back at similar instances in modern Greek history, the students were asked to watch an extract from Victoria Hislop's interview about her recently-published novel "Those who are loved", which deals with the traumatic past of modern Greece (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_cVIvqUFMc) and read the book review (https://www.victoriahislop.com/those-who-are-lover). A brief discussion was then initiated, based on the following questions:

- What inspired Hislop to write the book?
- What is the historical background of the book?
- How far back does Greece's traumatic past go?
- Do you know of any other civil wars in Greece's history?



- Where is Makronissos and what was it used for?
- Why were the communists transferred there?

At the same time, the students were encouraged to use Google Maps "Street view" tool and digitally explore the ruins of the ancient temple of Poseidon at Sounion, one of the dramatic landscapes in the novel.

Listening (10 min.)

The students were assigned to watch an interactive 6-minute video about the Peloponnesian War uploaded on the Edpuzzle tool (https://edpuzzle.com/media/602a929d66f61a426bb18059) (Fig. 2). The tool offers the opportunity to unlock the potential of videos through simple editing tools and amazing student data by processing a video, adding questions and assigning them to the class. In this way, the teachers can monitor them as they progress and hold them accountable for their learning. In fact , the video was paused at certain points and six questions were added which were uploaded directly to the Padlet with immediate feedback.

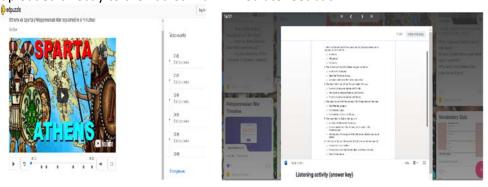


Fig. 2. Interactive video on the Edpuzzle tool Fig. 3. Answer key to the listening activity

The key to the questions was also uploaded to the Padlet by the teachers in case the students wanted to repeat the task and check their answers (Fig. 3).

Reading and Vocabulary (30 min.)

As regards reading, authentic material about the Peloponnesian War was used (https://www.history.com/topics/ancient-history/peloponnesian-war). Students were divided into groups by using the breakout sessions of the Webex, read part of the text, answered a relevant question (Fig. 4) and filled in the most important dates and events on the timeline designed with the Preceden tool (https://www.preceden.com/timelines/703407) (Fig. 5). The answers were discussed in class and all groups received feedback.



Fig. 4. Reading groups



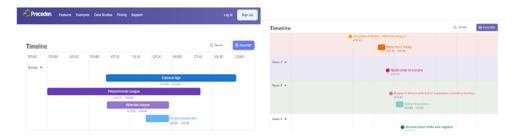


Fig. 5. Timeline on the Preceden tool

Key vocabulary was discussed in class and a list of unknown or difficult words with their meanings was provided so that students could do the vocabulary Google quiz in the following lesson (https://forms.gle/KooJqnTQftYKji927). The Google quiz provided immediate feedback to both students and teachers and also allowed the former to retake the quiz as many times as they wished .

Speaking (20 min.)

The students were again divided into groups in the breakout sessions and were assigned the following topics to discuss, one for each group, which they had to present to the assembly: (a) represent Sparta and develop arguments against the war, (b) represent Athens and refuse to cease fire, (c) mediate to avoid the war, (d) sum up the arguments developed by both sides (Fig. 6).

The aim was for the students to develop not only their oral competency, but also their soft skills, such as communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (4 Cs).

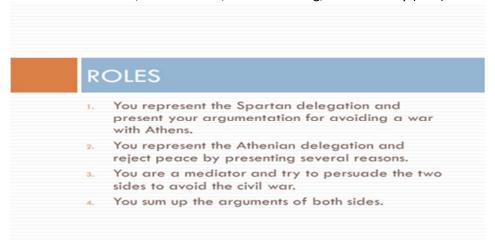


Fig. 6. Speaking roles

Writing (40 min.)

Regarding writing, for the reasons mentioned above, the students chose to work in teams to produce a short text of different genres, which they had to upload to the Padlet for their classmates to see and respond to, and for their teachers to provide some feedback. The students were asked to work in groups on a Google document, cooperating to construct a writing product, as part of collaborative learning (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012), focusing on the writing process (Zhang, 2018), but also interacting with each other in a social process (Vygotsky, 1978). To that end, the topics they had to work on concerned the following: (a) an email to the leaders of the city-states to avoid war, (b) a letter from an Athenian soldier to his mother describing the situation in the camp, (c) a letter from an Athenian mother to her captive son,



(d) an account of Athens' defeat, (e) a diary entry from a Spartan soldier about Athens' surrender (Fig. 7).

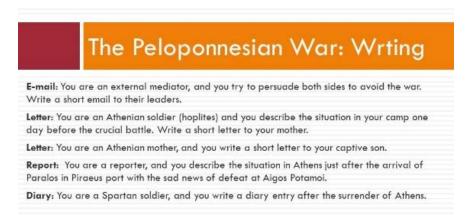


Fig. 7. Writing activities

The students had to assume different roles, empathize with the characters and produce a collaborative text which was to be assessed on specific criteria set forth in a rubric, i.e. those of content and task achievement, organization and structure, language and style (Fig. 8).

A. Content				
Does the text achieve its communicative role? (persuasiveness, argumentation, documentation)	1	2	3	4
2. Does the text correspond to its communication context? (purpose in the topic sentence, logical and semantic relevance / unity between the topic sentence and the supporting details)	1	2	3	4
 Does the text meet the specifications of the text genre, subject and number of words? (completeness / sufficient development of the topic sentence, sufficient information for the basic idea) 	1	2	3	4
B. Organization/Structure				
1. Are paragraphs semantically and visually functional?	1	2	3	4
2. Is the content of each paragraph consistent and appropriate?	1	2	3	4
3. Are the paragraphs logically sequenced?	1	2	3	4
4. Is the text structure appropriate for the requested text genre?	1	2	3	4
C. Language/Style				
1. Are paragraphs semantically and visually functional?	1	2	3	4
2. Is grammar/syntax used correctly?	1	2	3	4
3. Does the vocabulary correspond to the requested style?	1	2	3	4
4. Are spelling and punctuation used correctly?	1	2	3	4

Fig. 8. Writing rubric

Assessment

Apart from the feedback provided and the marks allocated to the students, a final 5-point Likert scale questionnaire on a Google form (https://forms.gle/SW9CXZd7rB75nMYC9) was administered to evaluate overall CLIL practice, which was structured according to the 4 Cs of CLIL (content, cognition, communication, culture), based on a reliable tool used in other CLIL lessons (see Kofou & Phillipides, 2017; Kofou, Phillippides & Gavriilidou, 2016).

Findings

The findings presented below relate to student response and attitude to the lessons, and they constitute valuable data for teacher reflection and future research.

In terms of language skills, the participating students seem to have responded satisfactorily to the reading and listening comprehension tasks as evidenced by their presentations in class and their uploaded answers on the Padlet (Fig. 9).



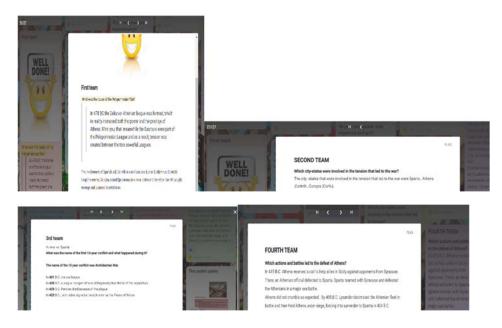


Fig. 9. Sample answers to the reading activity

On the vocabulary quiz, apart from some cases (14-16/20), the majority of the students did very well (18-20/20), with an average score of 18.9 out of 20 (Fig. 10).

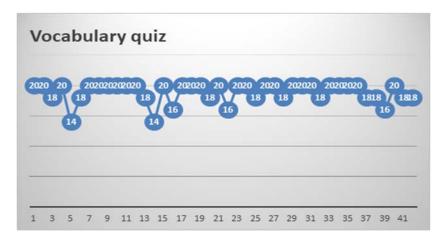
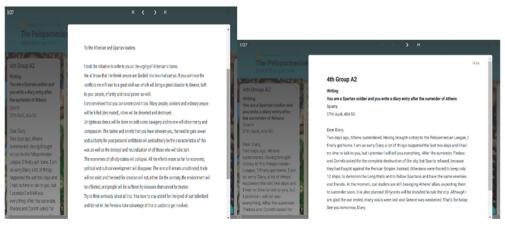


Fig. 10. Results of the vocabulary quiz

As for the speaking and writing tasks, the communicative aim was achieved and the texts produced were excellent according to the rubric criteria (Fig. 11).





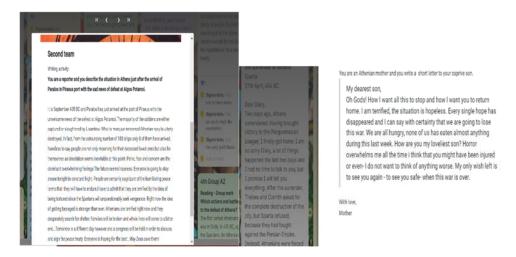


Fig. 11. Sample answers to the writing activity

Questionnaire

As mentioned above, the questionnaire was based on the 4 Cs of CLIL and included 5-point Likert questions on the content, cognition, communication and culture based on relevant literature and adapted for the present practice. The questionnaire was answered by 46 out of 52 participating students. 54.3% of them were girls and 45.7% boys. More than 70% were at C1-C2 level in English and the rest were at B2 level.

Regarding the topic and content of the CLIL lessons, 80-85% understood them without difficulty, and almost half or more of them learnt new words and used them in their tasks (Fig. 12). Similarly, the students indicated that they participated to a high degree in all language activities (Fig. 13).

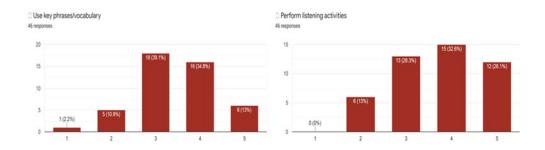


Figure 12. Use of vocabulary Fig. 13. Participation in listening

As far as communication during breakout sessions and in class is concerned, about 70% of them communicated with both their classmates and teachers to a great extent (Fig. 14).

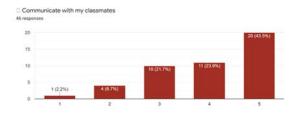


Fig. 14. Questionnaire results on communication



As for cognition, the skills that were developed to a great extent by 7-8 out of 10 students according to their answers included collaboration, creativity and innovation, digital literacy, critical thinking, and application of new concepts (Fig. 15). To a lesser extent (about 50-60%), the students reported developing language skills and strategies -probably because of the high level they already had, problem-solving and decision-making skills, probably because of the nature of the subject matter, and motivation (Fig. 16).

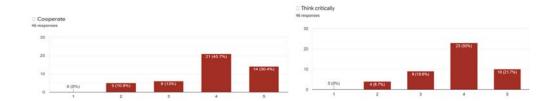


Figure 15. Collaboration

Fig. 16. Critical thinking

It seems that the students developed a positive attitude to both subjects, with a higher attitude for English than for History (about 70% and 58% respectively) (Fig. 17).

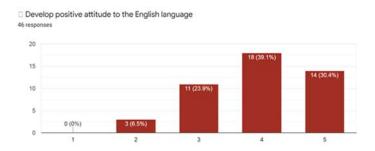


Fig. 17. Questionnaire results on attitudes to the English language

About 7 out of 10 students managed to understand authentic material and do collaborative work with their classmates, while their self-confidence in working with people from other countries or functioning in culturally diverse environments was increased to a percentage of 50%, probably because the practice was limited to their class and did not involve any students from a different context (Fig. 18).

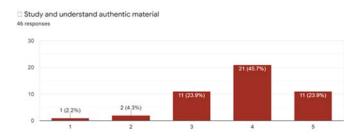


Fig. 18. Use of authentic material



Discussion of the results

First of all, it should be mentioned that the participating students responded to the CLIL practice at hand in an excellent way. The teachers' collaboration was also excellent as they shared a similar mindset, worked together on shared documents, links and tools, and took decisions very quickly. The choice of the Padlet as the basic CLIL tool proved perfect as everybody could upload, share, comment, review, collaborate, communicate and provide feedback.

Regardless of the answers to the questionnaire on developing language skills and strategies and motivation, it was evident from the very beginning that the participants were highly motivated and committed to the tasks. They collaborated perfectly in the breakout sessions attended by both teachers, and their response to the activities was direct. Thus, it seems that online CLIL teaching through the Webex platform did not hinder the learning process. On the contrary, synchronous and asynchronous online learning provided many opportunities for communication, collaboration and the use of a range of digital tools, many of which could not be used in real classes, at least not by all students or in an active way.

Teacher observation and student answers to the questionnaire showed that the latter had multiple benefits regarding their language learning, cognitive, and cultural development. In particular, they developed higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking (convergent and divergent), creativity and digital literacy through carefully assessed tasks and a variety of tools. In addition, through a different, interdisciplinary and intercultural perspective, they were 'pushed' to actively participate, acquired positive attitudes towards the English language, improved their self-image, and finally developed a sense of belonging to a community by communicating and working together in a non-competitive learning environment.

It is thus proved that CLIL offers a lot of benefits to students, on condition that it is carefully planned, the content, tasks and tools are appropriate, motivating and learner-friendly, and teachers work together in a non-competitive way for the benefit of their students. It is also evident that regardless of the time allocated to CLIL, it can be a valuable experience for the students involved, and highly engaging even if they do not like the subject matter in their mother tongue right away.

By following the steps suggested in the theoretical part, i.e. planning, implementing and assessing, CLIL can be the key to engage students in curriculum-related interesting tasks and motivating techniques and tools, and leading teachers to assume the roles of material creators, collaborators, learning assistants and innovators.

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