Integrating Reading and Writing into the Context of CLIL Classroom: Some Practical Solutions

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to explore the potential of integrated reading and writing activities within the CLIL classroom from the perspective of the students' linguistic achievements. The paper presents a case study of a 2 semester-long project involving 17 undergraduate students of International Relations, who were offered CLIL classes as an alternative to a traditional EFL course. These CLIL students were learning History of European Integration through English as an instructional medium. More importantly, systematic text-responsible writing assignments were incorporated into the framework of the CLIL formula, and it is assumed that such a variable contributed to the effectiveness of this course in terms of foreign language competence growth.

Keywords: reading, text-responsible writing, compare, contrast, effectiveness

Theoretical framework
Promoting reading comprehension and focusing on writing are considered highly important in CLIL methodology (Wolff, 2005, 16). In this paper we concentrate on the integration of reading and writing, as this approach has major implications for the CLIL classroom.

Integrated reading and writing activities brings benefits to the learner with respect to both content learning and language learning processes. As for language gains, processing information and constructing new texts based on prior reading helps students develop overall target language competence - in particular, it builds up reading and writing skills, as well as discourse skills and helps students expand their vocabulary.

The advantages of integrated reading and writing activities in reference to content learning are as follows: reading texts from a given discipline provides information that can be later used in written production, and therefore contributes to revision and consolidation of content material. Furthermore, the necessity of selecting information in the writing process helps students develop critical thinking skills.

There is also one important quality of these kind of activities – writing becomes text-responsible. Carson and Leki (1997, 41) define this category of a writing task as an assignment in which "the writers are responsible for demonstrating an understanding of the source text […], they must produce text-responsible prose based on content acquired primarily from text." The sources from which the students are expected to acquire and possibly display knowledge include books, articles, lectures, etc. The fact that content correctness of the produced text becomes evaluated is absolutely essential for content learning – text-responsible writing not only helps to revise material, but it also requires accuracy, precision and correctness. Carson and Leki (1997, 51) furthermore stress that there are disappointing consequences if writing is separated from text responsibility, especially on English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses where content is treated only as a material for practising some rhetorical skills, reasoning skills or problem-solving skills. In the CLIL classroom this condition can be easily fulfilled as there is a dual focus on both language and content learning, and as CLIL teachers usually have both content and language competences.

To sum up: text-responsible writing is beneficial for students in reference to content learning as well as language learning processes, and it may be assumed that the CLIL classroom provides excellent opportunities for such an integration of reading and writing tasks.
Comparing and contrasting – an example of text-responsible writing

One of the practical solutions of integrating reading and writing activities presented here is constructing comparison/contrast essays. Comparing and contrasting is a typical academic task and one of the popular rhetorical techniques found in academic texts (Scull, 1987, 129) that stimulates cognitive development (Dutro & Moran, 2003). An ability to compare and contrast ideas or topics is an essential part of students’ conceptual and metacognitive knowledge (Sitko, 1998).

A typical task of writing a comparison/contrast essay starts with students reading two descriptive source texts, then selecting the main ideas along with supporting details, and finally, comparing and contrasting those two topics with attention paid to similarities and differences. Englert et al. (1991, 353) define five basic qualities of a comparison/contrast essay:

- comparing and contrasting two ideas;
- explaining the similarities between ideas;
- explaining the differences between ideas;
- using such expressions as: alike, different, but etc. within the text;
- adjusting the text to the rhetorical structure of comparison/contrast essay (introduction, similarities, differences, conclusion, applying the rule of parallel construction).

Applying comparison/contrast in CLIL classroom

There are a number of benefits that students can get from writing comparison/contrast essays. First of all, organizing information according to similarities and differences may be one of the most effective learning strategies (Hammann, 2002). It is due to the fact that a structural organization of a given text influences the amount of information we remember after reading it (Meyer and Freedle, 1984). Similar findings are provided by the research made by Carrell (1987) in which she investigates the influence of various text organizational patterns on the effectiveness of information encoding and recall. In her experiment she asked some foreign EFL students to read a few texts that shared the same content but had different organizational patterns. Then she tested the amount of information that was remembered after the reading session. The results showed that in comparison to less organized text structure (e.g. description), higher level of organizing information (as in comparison/contrast or cause/effect structures) facilitated the process of memorizing information from the text. Therefore we may assume beneficial effects of this text structure upon the processes of information recall and encoding.

Apart from the above mentioned, comparing and contrasting develops critical thinking skills thanks to the necessity of selecting relevant information (Bransford, Sherwood, Vye i Rieser, 1986). Furthermore, competence in constructing the comparison/contrast structure may be transferred to other elements of the writing process, such as planning, organizing information or working with the source texts (Raphael and Englert, 1990).

We can also emphasize some practical advantages from applying the comparison-contrast rhetorical structure to the CLIL classroom. First, it is a fairly universal pattern that can be used with regard to various subjects, as well as a wide choice of ideas, topics, documents, etc. For example, this pattern was successfully used in the formula of content-based instruction in the case of American History (as described by Nelson and Burns, 2000) and also in the case of Engineering (Flowerdew, 2000).

Secondly, the comparison/contrast pattern allows the teacher to create some fresh perspectives on subjects that may stimulate students’ interests and lead to thought-provoking discussions and interesting conclusions. It thus enhances the students’ motivation and lowers the risk of acts of plagiarism.

Thirdly, the comparison/contrast pattern is very practical for the teacher with respect to class materials accessibility – for comparing and contrasting, it is sufficient to present the students with two descriptive passages.

And, finally, the comparison/contrast pattern is evaluated by researchers as the most difficult rhetorical pattern with reference to its organizational requirements (Hammann, 2002). It is therefore a challenge for the students and helps them develop good writing habits.
Research questions
Within the theoretical framework outlined above the following research question was posed: will the experimental (CLIL) group - characterized by systematic text-responsible writing of comparison/contrast essays - make significant progress in developing selected skills and grammatical competence in relation to the control group attending a traditional EFL course?

Participants and setting
Our research was conducted at the Academy of Technology and Humanities in Bielsko-Biała during the 2006/2007 academic year. The CLIL group (17 second-year undergraduate students of International Relations) was studying the History of European Integration in English. The time exposure variable regarding classes taught through English for the group was 90 minutes per week during 2 semesters (60 hours in total for the whole course).

The same number of contact hours was allocated to the control group (35 second-year undergraduate students of International Relations).

The participants from both experimental and control group were randomly selected out of a larger population of all the students enrolled at the second year of the studies. Both groups were comparable in terms of age and educational background: the students were generally 20-21 years old. They mostly came from one county and had attended the same secondary schools found in the local area. Furthermore, we may assume that they were on a comparable level of English language proficiency when starting their studies as they all had at least 6 years of obligatory English language training at the lower and higher secondary school (followed by a standardized national exam).

Materials
The CLIL group worked with a variety of course materials such as: academic textbooks1; Internet resources2; handouts prepared by the teacher with explicit instruction on academic writing (with reference to Leki, 1998); and selected grammar exercises. Furthermore, the experimental students’ work was organised into collaborative tasks and individual activities. Examples of students’ collaborative work would be the following: adapting texts from the Internet to the form of reading exercises (i.e. gap-filling, true or false statements, completing texts with missing words/paragraphs, comprehension questions); presenting viewpoints; class debates and discussions; preparing vocabulary quizzes, etc. The experimental students’ individual work included reading the texts assigned for each class (4-6 pages on average); writing summaries of original documents; and, as a systematic homework assignment, writing comparison/contrast essays (approximately 400 words). The list of the topics is provided below:

- Compare and contrast the results of the conference in the Hague in 1969 and the Paris summit in 1974.
- Compare and contrast the Bretton Woods system and the European Monetary System.
- Compare and contrast the customs union, free trade area and the single market.
- Compare and contrast trade in Europe before and after introducing the Euro currency.
- Compare and contrast the Maastricht (convergence) criteria and the Copenhagen criteria.
- Compare and contrast the European citizenship and the national citizenship.
- Compare and contrast the position of legal and illegal immigrants in the EU.
- Compare and contrast the British, French and German visions of the future of European Union.
- Compare and contrast two treaties: the Maastricht Treaty and the Constitutional Treaty.

1We worked with the following academic textbook: European Integration. From the Idea to Practice. (Buszello & Misztal, 2003)
2Complementary materials were prepared on the basis of texts from the following website: www.europa.eu
The CLIL group classes were generally organized according to the following stages:

1. Feedback:
   - discussing homework essays;
   - grammatical or lexical instruction as feedback to students' written production.
2. Presentation of the new topic:
   - presenting summaries of assigned reading passages by the students;
   - explaining new vocabulary.
3. Practice of content and language elements:
   - reading exercises (text linked with the content topic) along with language exercises prepared by the teacher or by the students;
   - practising new vocabulary in context.
4. Production:
   - discussing examples of criteria for comparison/contrast in class; writing essays based on texts from textbook and other sources – as homework.

At the beginning of the semester a few contact hours were devoted to explicit teaching of some elements of academic writing (with reference to Leki, 1998) as well as to explicit teaching of the structure of comparison/contrast essays (with reference to Hammann & Stevens, 2003).

The control group students were following an obligatory foreign language course, which was a part of their studies programme. In Poland, at BA level, such a course generally involves 120 contact hours in total; it is usually a traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or - in fewer cases – an English for special purposes (ESP) course, followed by a final exam. The course programme material is usually individually selected by a teacher. The control group students were attending an EFL course, which meant:

- systematic and thorough study of the following course books: *Think FCE* (Naunton, 1996) and *Fast Track to FCE* (Stanton, Stephens, 2001). Examples of reading exercises would be the following: gap-filling, true or false statements, comprehension questions, multiple choice questions, etc.
- strong emphasis on practising grammatical structures, which mostly involved working with tests, such as *Use of English*.

There was also an extended writing component. The control group students were expected to produce a selection of 10 essays (mostly narratives or opinion essays on general topics) during their course.

**Data collection**

The aim of this stage was to assess the students' achievement and progress in selected English language skills. The instruments used to measure students' academic reading and academic writing skills were the standard tests from respective sections of Cambridge ESOL exam, IELTS\(^3\). The development of grammatical competence was evaluated through the results of the *Use of English* test of Certificate of Advanced English. The testing was carried out in two sessions: at the beginning and at the end of the course.

\(^3\)For more information see: www.ielts.org
Results

When comparing the pre-testing and post-testing results of the experimental group and control group, the students achieved the following test results (see Table 1).

Table 1. Pre- and post-testing results: the experimental group and the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>group</th>
<th>Academic reading pre-test results</th>
<th>Academic reading post-test results</th>
<th>Academic writing pre-test results</th>
<th>Academic writing post-test results</th>
<th>Use of English pre-test results</th>
<th>Use of English post-test results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The experimental CLIL group</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The control group</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Progress made by the experimental group and the control group is seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Progress made by the experimental group and the control group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>group</th>
<th>Progress in Academic Reading</th>
<th>Progress in Academic Writing</th>
<th>Progress in Use of English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The mean of experimental groups</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mean of control group</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data collected suggests the following experiment results. The experimental (CLIL) group has made significant progress in the case of Academic Reading test 21%; in the Academic Writing test 24% and finally, in the Use of English test 18%. The control group’s results show minimal progress as those students’ results seem to be very low: only 1% in case of the Academic Reading test; -1% in case of the Academic Writing component and 4% in case of the Use of English test.
Conclusions

One of the rationales behind the implementation of CLIL is to provide opportunities for specific forms of target language usage and development. One of the CLIL objectives viewed as leading to forms of added value is the Language Dimension (see Marsh et al. 2001.) Here CLIL is aimed at improving overall English language competence. This results of the experiment suggest that systematic text-responsible writing contributed to the effectiveness of the course attended by the experimental (CLIL) group in relation to target language competence gains - the students who attended CLIL classes for 2 semesters (60 hours in total) made significant progress in development of academic reading and writing skills, and grammatical competence.

It is highly probable that the following factors contributed to the effectiveness of this method:

1. In-depth processing of information resulting from text-responsible writing: To write an essay the students had to select and summarise relevant information from other texts, which may have supported the process of encoding of new lexical items, grammatical structures, etc.

2. Organizing and restructuring information: The students had to organize the selected information according to the structural requirements of the new text. Texts transformation processes may have helped the students acquire and practise new lexical items and grammatical structures.

3. Productivity in the written form: Concentrating upon written instead of spoken production helped to make the classes more effective with regard to the linguistic gains. Written production not only makes students process the information both semantically and syntactically, but it also allows enough time for better concentration and thus invites accuracy, reflectivity and independence, which supports effective learning.

4. Thematically-coherent writing and reading activities: Meaningful textual content helped the students develop cognitive structures, accumulate knowledge and engage in systematic practice which helped develop discourse skills and acquire specific vocabulary.

Furthermore, when analyzing the outcome of our research, the results of the control group students whose systematic writing was neither text-responsible nor thematically coherent do not match the achievements made by the CLIL group. The progress made by the control group is clearly lower in spite of the same time exposure as well as comparable amount of written production (10 texts per the whole course). We may assume that it is the writing of text-responsible essays (based on textual transformations and in-depth processing) that particularly contributes to the effective language learning.

To sum up, the results of our project suggest that incorporating systematic text-responsible writing practice into the CLIL programme may enhance the effectiveness of this innovative approach with regard to development of such linguistic skills as reading and writing, as well as the development of grammatical competence in the target language. We may stress that the CLIL formula provides a very suitable educational context for a natural integration of thematically-coherent and text-responsible writing.

Although we have not assessed the content learning results, we may assume on the basis of the theoretical framework that the comparison/contrast pattern facilitated content acquisition. We may also suggest other rhetorical patterns to be incorporated in CLIL classroom (vide: Reppen, 1994).
References


Carrell, P.: 1987, Content and formal schemata in ESL reading, TESOL Quarterly 21(3), 461-481.


