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DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH COMPETENCIES AT THE PHD LEVEL

В данной статье обсуждается возможность использования педагогического подхода CLIL в программе подготовки аспирантов к сдаче кандидатского экзамена по английскому языку. Теоретически обосновывается целесообразность использования данного подхода в развитии англоязычной компетенции исследователей. Представлены практические результаты реализации подхода CLIL в российских академических институтах.

Ключевые слова: предметно-языковое интегрированное обучение CLIL, диалогическое обучение, аспиранты, преподавание английского для академических целей, преподавание английского как языка обучения, интеграции языка и содержания, инновационный педагогический подход в преподавании английского языка для аспирантов.

This paper discusses the possibility for the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to be integrated within the PhD programme syllabi. Some rationales behind the choice of CLIL as a teaching strategy are provided, along with some preliminary practical results of its realisation in PhD classrooms in Russian academic institutions.

Keywords: CLIL, dialogic teaching, PhD study, EMI, EAP, integration of language and content, innovative teaching approaches, teaching English to postgraduate students.

For various reasons, Russian science developed for years in partial isolation from the international research community. The USSR's isolationist approach permeated all social spheres, including the teaching of foreign languages. It was considered sufficient for the Soviet scientist to attain the stage of "the silent period", which means that a person is able to derive information from a written or spoken source, but is unable to use the target language productively [1]. The teaching approach that best suited this purpose was the grammar-translation method, which places

a primary focus on reading skills. Unfortunately, foreign languages are still being taught in Russian postgraduate programmes through the same old-fashioned lenses.

At a time when the migration of scientific knowledge is characterised by global social patterns, such productive foreign language competencies as writing and speaking have become essential for everyone involved in academic endeavours. However, fluency in English is still an issue for many Russian researchers. Therefore, new teaching approaches should be sought in order to shift the focus away from the development of receptive language skills towards the fostering of productive proficiencies.

In this paper, we argue that the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach can be successfully and efficiently realised within PhD programme syllabi. Some rationales behind the choice of CLIL as a teaching strategy are provided, along with some preliminary practical results of its realisation in PhD classrooms in Russia.

CLIL has received increased attention from language specialists over the last two decades [2] inasmuch as it claims a dual integrative focus on content and language, thus “aiming to kill two birds with one stone” [3]. CLIL is broadly defined as an educational approach in which subjects are taught through the medium of the target foreign language. According to [4], CLIL is a generic umbrella term for “any learning activity where language is used as a tool to develop new learning from a subject area or theme.” CLIL classes in which English is used as a language of instruction are currently being taught in various educational settings throughout the EU to promote language competences and strengthen “European cohesion and competitiveness” [5]. Although CLIL practices have shown significant educational potential, they remain uncommon in the Russian university system.

In order to assess the feasibility and applicability of the CLIL approach for the purposes of graduate student teaching, its intrinsic benefits and challenges should be carefully weighed.

One of the most attractive advantages that CLIL-based programmes offer is the possibility of exposure to the target language without requiring extra time in the curriculum. This is particularly important for graduate students who need to cope with such multiple demands of being a researcher as doing science, writing papers, going to seminars, reading the literature, giving lectures, etc. According to the Russian postgraduate education standards (FGOS), postgraduate students are expected to complete 240 credits within the PhD study, with

15–20 of them being earned in foreign language classes and 15–20 in philosophy classes. Therefore, the integration of at least two subjects may significantly reduce students' workloads and corresponding stress levels.

The predominant focus in CLIL classrooms is normally placed on meaning as opposed to form [3]. Thus, the foreign language in CLIL classes becomes more of a language of communication than the language of instruction. Given a sufficiently functionally rich language environment, with students being provided with a clear purpose for using the target language, such classes can significantly increase the motivation to communicate in this medium [6]. Since graduate students have a higher than average knowledge of their subject disciplines, they more readily produce communicative outputs in these settings.

Heine argued that CLIL might foster a deeper level of processing of semantic information due to students being exposed to language-related conceptual differences [7]. Such semantic differences as, e.g., political economy vs. economics, can initiate additional conceptual discussions, thus deepening content-related knowledge. This idea is supported by Surmont et al., who suggested that the need to switch between two languages and at the same time to comprehend complex notions may raise the metalinguistic capabilities of CLIL students, resulting in increased understanding of abstract concepts [6]. Moreover, as a "side effect", the awareness of both mother tongue and target language is raised.

The input hypothesis and interaction approach imply that language is best learned through the provision of a sufficient quantity of meaningful informational input [1; 8]. In this regard, students learn the target language similarly to native speakers. In CLIL practices, the level of authenticity is rather high: themes for discussion are defined by curricula, and the language serves merely as a mediator. In other words, CLIL creates nearly optimal conditions for naturalistic language learning, which, according to the natural approach, facilitates the process of foreign language acquisition [9].

Among other CLIL dimensions relevant to teaching research students are those of a cultural and social nature. During the PhD study period, future scientists are expected to acquire such important sociocultural competences and soft skills as, e.g., intercultural communication, plurilingual attitudes, compensatory behavioural strategies and other supporting work skills. Most importantly, because science cannot be restricted by national borders, young researchers should develop an

awareness of the specifics of the international academic contexts. CLIL programmes provide ample opportunities for the consolidation of all these personal competencies. If the CLIL lesson is organised not just as a lecture or a reading class, but also includes a variety of different production stimulating activities, an environment for the facilitation of creative thinking and the realisation of individual potential can be created. In addition, unlike standardised ESP programmes, CLIL permits the tailoring of classes to student-specific needs by taking into account their particular requirements, interests, learning styles and language competency levels.

Along with the aforementioned seemingly impressive perspectives, CLIL conceals inherent challenges, which may impede a widespread application of its practices. These pitfalls should certainly be taken into account when integrating CLIL classes into the study curricula.

A serious, obvious difficulty is the insufficient number of teachers who are both competent linguists and experts in the content subjects. Even across Europe, according to [10], “in very few countries do education authorities oblige teachers to have special qualifications to contribute to CLIL-type provision.” The situation is more dramatic in such non-speaking English countries as Russia: native English speakers are rare, the majority of subject teachers cannot speak it, and the competency level of English instructors frequently leaves much to be desired. However, teaching graduate students involves both an increased complexity in terms of the discussed concepts and a good command of higher linguistic registers. Moreover, PhD students are carriers of unique, highly specific knowledge and are unlikely to benefit intellectually from a lower than professorial teaching level. This is especially so if we are dealing with such fields as physics, maths or other hard sciences [11]. Therefore, as was justly mentioned in [12], “CLIL teachers are special in that they are willing to take on a considerable amount of extra work, which usually implies higher levels of motivation and pedagogic interest than teachers take more generally”.

Learning is always strongly influenced by such student characteristics as general cognitive abilities, prior achievements, motivation and personality types. These differences accrue throughout the educational process from primary to tertiary stages. In Russia, at later educational stages (Master’s and PhD), despite the unified entrance exams, language classes frequently host students with mixed target language competencies; this, therefore, raises the question of educational discrimination. In this connection, [13] provided substantial evidence

that CLIL may function as a social discriminator, because only those students who are academically motivated to succeed both in the foreign language and in content subjects are selected for these programmes. Given the abovementioned, it seems reasonable to suggest that CLIL should be used as an additional, optional educational model, but not as a substitute for foreign language classes.

Taking all the aforesaid into account, we propose the integration of CLIL concepts with PhD foreign language classes into a new approach in which postgraduate students take it in turns to perform the respective roles of the subject teacher over the duration of the course. According to this approach, in which the underlying methodology is referred to as Content and Language Dialogic Learning (CLDL), the role of the language instructor becomes the provision of linguistic and pedagogical support and the facilitation of classroom dialogue. The aim of this pilot course is the development by postgraduate students of a syllabus for their individual subjects in which the language of instruction is English. This is particularly significant given the obvious global trend towards transnational education. Such a triadic participation structure – language instructor, student teaching their subject and other students in the group (knowledge addressees) – is expected to produce positive educational outcomes in multiple terms, such as increased motivation (a syllabus is a valuable product with practical applications), improved teaching and sociocultural skills, deepened subject knowledge and enhanced target language competences.

In future research, we plan to investigate the theoretical and practical aspects of the proposed model. In addition, analytical instruments for measuring the educational outcomes will be developed, allowing a detailed analysis of the data to be presented together with recommendations for implementing the CLDL approach in Russia and other countries where English is not the first language. However, it should be mentioned that preliminary observations have already shown encouraging results.

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