

Quality Survey of Slovak Teachers' Personal Views on Content-Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

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Abstract

In Slovakia, content language integrated learning (henceforth referred to as CLIL), as one of several bilingual education methods, is widely promoted by the Slovak bodies of education policy (undoubtedly inspired by the official European policy of developing plurilingualism and multiculturalism). The aim of this paper is to explore and analyse the personal views and experience of the Slovak teachers who apply the CLIL method in mainstream primary schools.

The focus of the paper is in providing partial results of an 'in-progress' national research on views, teaching procedures and possible stereotypes of teachers who apply CLIL (project KEGA 036UKF-4/2013 funded by the Slovak Ministry of Education). The data were obtained through a qualitative survey method and the results are interpreted in the context of both international and national (Slovak) CLIL research conducted lately in Slovakia. The results point to generally positive attitudes from CLIL teachers towards the method, however, they also reveal some obstacles and drawbacks of CLIL that Slovak teachers need to deal with.

Keywords: bilingual education, CLIL, teacher, qualitative survey

1. Introduction

As Pajares has it, attention to the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates (including, I would like to add, their pedagogical views, opinions, attitudes and experience as well) "should be a focus of educational research and can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot" (1992, p. 307).

Compared to student-centred or language-centred CLIL research, it might seem that research focused on CLIL teachers is less frequently conducted; however, it is not the case. In the last decade, a larger range of research studies have been published worldwide, directed mostly on CLIL teachers' performance, their specific professional characteristics and competences (e.g. Alonso, Grisalena, & Campo, 2008; Banfi & Rettaroli, 2008, Butler, 2005, and others), on teachers' opinions, beliefs, attitudes, experience, and concerns (Cammarata, 2009; Coonan, 2007; Hunt, 2011; Pavón Vázquez & Rubio, 2010; Pena Díaz & Porto

Requejo, 2008, and others), and on the need of professional development and training (Banegas, 2012; Hillyard, 2011; Hunt, Neofitou, & Redford, 2009; Pistorio, 2009, and others).

Similarly, rapid progress may be observed in Slovak teacher-centred CLIL research. A year ago, while summarizing the state of CLIL research in Slovakia, there were no completed research projects which would study any aspect of teacher's performance in CLIL lessons (Pokrivčáková, 2012, p. 235-244). Nowadays, it seems that the teacher-oriented CLIL research is the most extensive field of CLIL research in Slovakia. As part of a 4-year national experimental project (Menzlová, 2012), 21 participating teachers were surveyed (through a questionnaire) regarding their evaluation of CLIL method. The most extensive part of the questionnaire was focused on the scale of the CLIL teaching materials used, as well as on teachers' personal suggestions of how to enhance the application of CLIL in Slovak primary schools.

Very recently, three doctoral theses falling into the teacher-oriented CLIL research category have been published. Hurajová (2013) explored whether (and how exactly, if yes) pedagogical competences of CLIL teachers differ from those of non-CLIL teachers. The CLIL teachers' competences were studied also by Sepešiová (2013), who focused on expectations and competencies of primary teachers from Eastern Slovakia (Presov region). Králiková (2013), as part of her doctoral thesis, was observing the dominant types of teacher's interaction with students in CLIL classrooms.

In connection to the results that had previously been published on Slovak CLIL teachers attitudes and opinions (Pokrivčáková, 2013), the present paper offers the second set of results of their progress national research on views, teaching procedures and possible stereotypes of teachers who apply CLIL (project KEGA 036UKF-4/2013). At its completion, the research will triangulate data gained by survey techniques, lesson observations and both quantitative and qualitative content analysis of over one thousand lesson plans and accompanying teaching materials produced by Slovak teachers for CLIL lessons. The complete research results will be published by the end of 2013.

2. Research objectives

The objectives of the research presented were to find out:

- how CLIL teachers formulate their initial impressions related to their performance while applying CLIL in their classrooms,
- whether and how (if yes) their opinions and attitudes have changed over the years of their CLIL teaching practice,
- what is their contemporary view of CLIL (by asking the following indirect question: whether they would, if the decision were entirely theirs, continue to apply CLIL),
- how the teachers that had been interviewed, evaluated CLIL by giving their personal opinion on its strengths and weaknesses.

3. Research method and respondents

To achieve the defined objectives, the method of a **qualitative survey** was selected since it is recommended as an effective research method to explore meanings, attitudes and experience of subjects (c.f. Fink, 2003). The principle of qualitative survey is "not to count the frequencies of categories/values, but to search for the empirical diversity in the properties of members" (Jansen, 2010, p. 3). "This type of survey does not count the number of people with the same characteristics (value of variable) but it establishes the meaningful variation (relevant dimensions and values) within that population. In short, the qualitative survey is the study of diversity (not distribution) in a population" (Jansen, 2010, p. 2).

Instead of more frequently used pre-structured qualitative survey (when the diversity of topics, dimensions and categories is defined beforehand), we opted for exploring the views and attitudes of participants as

expressed in their own words. Every research question was transformed into an individual question asking about participants' experience, opinions or attitudes. These questions were then integrated into a complex questionnaire designed for the project the KEGA.

The questionnaire (Attachment 1) consisted of 20 items, 16 of which were items with an open response, 3 items with a combined response, and 1 five-level Likert scale with 17 sub-items. After filling in the questionnaires, a target group of teachers were interviewed (follow-up interviews) to explain or complete their answers, if necessary.

In this study, only items 2, 3, 4, 10a, 10b, and 11 (all with an open response) are analysed and interpreted.

Sampling

The target population was defined as teachers who teach at mainstream primary schools in Slovakia and apply CLIL method in their teaching practice. By mainstream schools, it is meant schools that draw on the general national curriculum, as defined by the Ministry of Education (mainstream schools do not include bilingual schools, special and alternative schools). Questionnaires were distributed from January to March 2013 to 35 teachers (21 primary and 14 lower secondary teachers) who have been applying CLIL in their classes at 18 elementary schools all around Slovakia.

Since "a qualitative sample should represent the diversity of the phenomenon under study within the target population" (Jansen, 2010, p. 6), the sample was designed to cover "all existing relevant varieties of the phenomenon (*saturation*)" (Jansen, 2010, p. 6). The group of respondents consisted of teachers of both genders, all age groups and with various lengths of teaching practice (ranging from 2 to 32 years, most of them have been teaching for 6-10 years: 11 teachers).

In their CLIL lessons, they integrate either English (26 teachers) or German (6) in 9 content subjects: biology (29), maths (25), geography (11), fine arts (8), music (6), physical education (6), informatics (3), ethics (3), and history (2).

In the survey, the teachers were treated as a set of 'loose entities' that stand as individual units of data collection, based on methodological individualism as defined by Bryman (1988, p. 38-40).

4. Data analysis

As required by the qualitative survey research method, the teachers' responses (interview data) for each question of the interview were compared, their diversity summarized, and consequently justified by quotations from the interviews (similar to the technique used by Wegner, 2012).

A. First impression and experience

Survey item 2: How would you evaluate your first impression and experience (first year with CLIL)?

While some teachers said that they were attracted to CLIL and eager to use it from the very first moment ("Very positive, it was motivating from the very beginning and I enjoyed it"; "First impressions very generally positive. It was a learning through teaching"), some said they were reluctant ("I was afraid to use a foreign language. I did not trust myself. I was afraid, it seemed to be demanding for preparation"). Some teachers were aware of possible obstacles (I found it interesting, but difficult for learners with special educational needs) or even hostile ("Not a big deal. CLIL = chaos").

Many teachers felt unprepared and uninformed: "something entirely new"; "I can compare my first impression to a non-swimmer thrown into a river. I've worked with CLIL for just 6 months. I am gradually gaining some experience through training, advice from colleagues and from the internet"; "I had very little information about CLIL, I was mostly just trying whether it was going to work. And I was very glad that the lesson came out well and the students learned something new"; "It was very difficult to work with it. There

was no one to advise me on that, to determine whether I was working well or not”; “My impressions were confused. I was not sure whether it was a contribution for children and what contribution. I did not know what to evaluate at the lesson, what kind of knowledge (either in Slovak or English)”; “It was difficult for me. I got help from my colleagues who showed me their preparation for their lesson. I had read some articles about it and began to work on the preparation myself – first by minutes, later on whole hours”; “non-compact information, confusion, what is the practical application of CLIL in teaching and what is my position as an English teacher”; “First I was afraid, but gradually I began to like this way of teaching, especially in the 1st and 2nd grade through play”; “Little information on CLIL, I did not know how to choose a suitable language. I was moving in an area foreign to me”.

One of the teachers mentioned that parents felt the same: “Not even the parents knew exactly what CLIL was. Therefore, they were interested in learning about it at registration to the first grade”.

For many of them, the first experience with CLIL was connected with a lot of extra-workload and preparations: “A lot of work”; “Learning about something “new”, comparing it with the previous”; First moments could be characterised as blundering, “searching for myself” and then gradual improvement”; “Demanding in the selection of themes and preparation of methodological sheets. That gradually receded”.

However, many teachers pointed to the fact that while for them CLIL was very demanding, time and energy-consuming, their learners were attracted almost immediately: “The CLIL methodology was immediately very interesting for learners, they were very active. However, for me it was very demanding”; “Demanding for the teacher; motivating and funny for learners”. “Children accepted CLIL lessons very positively, especially enjoying the filling out of worksheets, inquiring also about other words, not only the ones we learned (especially when dealing with the topic of animals). They responded spontaneously in English”; “time consuming for the teacher, but learners learned very quickly”.

B. Changes in opinions and attitudes

Item 3: Has your attitude to CLIL changed in any way over the years? If yes, in what ways? (for the better or for the worse)?

The teachers’ attitudes towards CLIL have remained either positive (“I always consider it to be a plus”. “No, I always find it an interesting method”) or have improved: “It has changed for the better, due to a positive feedback from the learners”; “More experience, more available literature”; “Yes, for the better. I have acquired an overview of what makes sense to teach children, which thematic units in CLIL. I have realised that it is not necessary to teach things in a complicated way, but rather in a simpler way, with constant reviewing”; “I have elaborated a system”; For the better, since the dominant position is occupied by the mother tongue anyway and I can decide when to use CLIL and how much time to devote to it”. “I have acquired practice, working faster and more efficient”. “Definitely yes. Now I prepare my materials routinely and without difficulties”; “It has changed in the fact that now I approach it in a more flexible way. I try to ‘tailor it’ for the classroom in which I teach”; “For the better, since over the years one can see how much the children have learned and know how to use it in life”; “Yes, for the better. Especially when I realised that the amount of CLIL which I put into a lesson could be determined by the teacher and it is not a strict given (it does not have to be 70%)”; “Yes, because I am more informed and experienced”; “For the better. I am more confident”; “From the beginning, distrust, then verification that it works and children accept it”; “It has changed and I use it more often”; “I have a better understanding of CLIL, though, in any case, my attitude is not important since I have to respect the policy of my school”. Based on teachers’ answers, it appears that the key factors leading to teachers’ improved attitudes towards CLIL are: more experience, professional training, forming teacher’s own style (or “system” of teaching), positive feedback from learners.

C. Current personal attitude

Item 4: If it were up to you to decide, would you use the CLIL methodology to teach these days? Why or why not?

The teachers answers oscillated from neutral (“I do not know.”) to positive, giving many reasons: “Yes, diversification, and children are interested in it”; “..., children learn to think in a foreign language”; “..., CLIL is more effective. Motivating method, makes one get rid of fear”; “..., I see that CLIL significantly helped to increase the effectiveness of the language preparation of our learners and there has been nothing better so far”; “..., the teaching is better for learners, language is simpler and more fun for them”; “..., because a foreign language is not a bogey”; “Yes, definitely, children enjoy it, and I am fascinated how they quickly remember all from their plays”; “Yes, the learners feel that they use a foreign language, not just learning it without any sense”; “Yes, unstrained way of learning a language”.

“Yes. It has enriched me as well”.

One teacher implicitly expressed that he does not believe that CLIL is compatible with the (one lesson = one-subject) organization of teaching at Slovak schools: “I would teach it only if it was arranged according to thematic blocks (e. g. Science during the whole week)”.

D. Teachers’ personal evaluation of CLIL

Item 10a: Give your personal opinion about strengths of CLIL

Teachers mostly repeated their answers from items 2 and 3, though some new responses could be found as well: “Learners have more confidence in using a foreign language”; “Learners like it, they enjoy their study”; “As a language teacher, I can see an improvement in the language”; “They learn the language for practical life”; “A better attitude to language”; “Non-stressing out language learning”; “Natural language learning”; “Unconscious widening of vocabulary”; “Diversification in teaching”; “possibility to think in a foreign language”; “connection with real life”; “development of communicative skills”; “grammar is learned automatically”; “wider vocabulary”; “children lose fear of a foreign language”.

Some answers contradicted those obtained in previous items, namely as regards the application of CLIL to failing learners or learners with special educational needs: “Involvement of all learners”; “All learners are successful at lessons, not blocked”; “A wonderful method for all children (even the ones with learning disabilities as well as lower confidence)”.

Item 10b: Give your personal opinion about weaknesses of CLIL

Teachers’ answers reflected the 5 most frequent drawbacks of CLIL: a) higher demands on teachers (“Demanding for a teacher’s command of language”; “Time consuming preparation”; “A problem to choose suitable terms used in Science”); b) higher demands on learners and even unsuitability of CLIL for some groups of learners (“More difficult to express oneself in a foreign language at lessons such as mathematics and civics; “Sometimes it is exhausting, if there is too much foreign language”; “More demanding for children”; “More demanding for children with SEN and failing ones, they do not understand and are bored”; “CLIL is an absolute loss for socially weak learners and foreigners who speak neither Slovak nor English”; “Sometimes it happens that with more demanding topics, weaker students lose interest”; c) lack of suitable CLIL materials (“Poor availability of authentic study materials”; “Lack of materials”) and d) the struggle to find a balance between language and content objectives so that the content is not “neglected” and learners, in fact, don’t learn less (“Necessity to eliminate the content”; “Be careful, so that it is not at the expense of content”; “The subject-matter cannot be covered in a required extent”; “Sometimes, because of a foreign language, I fail to cover the required amount of subject matter”).

Item 11: Do you plan to keep using the CLIL methodology in the next years as well?

The 11th item of the interview was designed as a cross-check to item 3. The teachers' answers ranged from very positive to neutral. Except for one, all of the teachers there had been interviewed expressed their willingness to continue using CLIL. The reasons they gave ranged from very personal ("Yes, I enjoy it ☺"), through student-centred ("Yes, learners are more successful in their transition to secondary schools"), to professional-driven ("Yes, it is required by the school management"). Here are some examples of teachers responses: "Yes, it is fun"; "... children look forward to my lessons and I always have to study"; "...it is a contribution for myself as well as for learners"; "Definitely yes, I see good results"; "...It gives more credit to me as well as to the school"; "...It suits to me as well as to learners"; "... if parents are interested in German language"; "... it is the school's policy which I respect". One respondent answered neutrally: "Yes/No". None of the teachers plans to abandon CLIL in their teaching.

5. Research conclusions and discussion

The research analysed CLIL teachers' views on their experience with (and attitudes to) CLIL in the following areas: initial impression, stability/dynamics in perceptions of CLIL, teachers' contemporary attitudes to CLIL, and teachers' personal evaluation of CLIL strengths and weaknesses.

The teachers that had been interviewed offered a wide range of **their initial impressions on CLIL**: from very positive through neutral to negative. An entirely 'rejecting' sentiment was missing. The majority of CLIL teachers mentioned they felt "lost", unprepared, and lacked any information. These results are in accord with Banegas' conclusions (2012, p. 47) that "teachers sometimes do not know what is expected of them". While looking for information, Slovak teachers relied on their own experience, as well as that of their colleagues' and on continual self-learning, which corresponds with the results published by Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo (2008) who studied opinions and attitudes of Spanish teachers.

Contrary to Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo's results (2008), Slovak teachers were not concerned about their level of target-language proficiency. None of the teachers mentioned this problem.

Many teachers pointed to what might be called "CLIL controversy": while it is rather usual that CLIL teachers (not only) initially complain about the demands of CLIL (mostly because of extra work load and necessary extra preparation), but they also usually noted that their learners were attracted by CLIL almost immediately and that the teachers do not recall any negative response from learners. Similar conclusions were formulated by Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo (2008) who found that Spanish CLIL teachers felt motivated, or even "unanimously astonished" by their students' progress and quick adaptation to the new method.

Considering the **stability or dynamics** of teachers' attitudes to CLIL over time, two stances were identified: either a stable positive attitude, or an improved shift in opinions and attitudes - caused mostly by acquiring practice, a positive response of learners, and a positive impact of CLIL on learner's outcomes.

The teachers' answers regarding their **contemporary attitudes to CLIL** oscillated from neutral to positive. Slovak teachers generally consider CLIL both professionally challenging and personally satisfying, which is in accord with results of other researches (Coonan, 2007; Infante, Benvenuto, & Lastrucci, 2009). None of the Slovak teachers expressed a univocally negative attitude.

While **evaluating CLIL strengths**, teachers named 51 appreciable traits or benefits of CLIL. They mostly mentioned their answers from items 2 and 3, adding some new aspects such as that CLIL provides less stressful learning, "natural" learning of a foreign language", learning connected to a real life. They think that learners in CLIL lessons are more active and communicative, which is again in accordance with Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo's findings (2008, p. 159). Some teachers considered CLIL suitable for weak and special

educational needs learners, while other teachers expressed their opinion that CLIL is not effective for these groups of learners. The same aspect was addressed by Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo (2008, p. 159) who found that Spanish teachers do not consider CLIL suitable for learners with learning disabilities and special educational needs since “they have different needs that should be dealt with before handling learning a second language, let alone bilingualism”.

While defining the **weaknesses of CLIL**, teachers' answers reflected 4 very frequently mentioned drawbacks of CLIL: a) higher demands on teachers; b) higher demands on learners and even unsuitability of CLIL for some groups of learners; c) lack of suitable CLIL materials and d) the struggle to find a balance between language and content objectives so that the content was not “neglected” so that learners, in fact, don't learn less. These results proved what many authors (Alonso, Grisalena, & Campo, 2008; Banegas, 2012; Cammarata, 2009; Coonan, 2007; Infante, Benvenuto, Lastrucci, 2009; Pavón Vázquez, & Rubio, 2010; Pena Díaz & Porto Requejo, 2008, and others) concluded before: that the lack of materials and work overload are the major drawbacks of CLIL as seen by CLIL teachers.

The difficulties CLIL teachers named in the last analysed item of the questionnaire (effective time management, balancing the use of mother and target languages to fulfil the objectives, defining and fulfilling both language and content objectives of CLIL lessons, and how to design teaching materials) should be addressed in both initial and in-practice teacher training courses. Therefore, because of that, the results presented here might be extremely interesting for the designers of such teacher training courses. They can also be a good starting point for further research.

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Attachment 1: A CLIL Survey (project KEGA 036UKF-4/2013)

A. Basic data

- Length of teaching practice (in years):
- Length of the teaching of CLIL methodology (in years):
- Subjects in which you use CLIL:

B. Your education

- Highest education in your field of study, year of completion:
- Type of continual pedagogical education, year of completion:
- Foreign language in which you apply CLIL:
- Your language education in this foreign language
- School leaving exam, year:
- Basic state exam, year:
- General state exam, year:

State bachelor's exam, year:

State master's exam, year:

International certificate, type, year:

Other:

Do you plan in the future to take any training in a foreign language? What?

C. CLIL

1. Your first information on CLIL was acquired from:

from	Yes, when and how?	No
school management		
heads of school subject sections		
colleagues		
teacher-training centres		
college/university		
internet		
media		
State Pedagogical Institute		
Ministry of Education		

2. How would you evaluate your first impression and experience (first year with CLIL)?

3. Has your attitude to CLIL changed in any way over the years? If yes, in what ways? (for the better or for the worse)?

4. If it were up to you to decide, would you use the CLIL methodology to teach these days? Why or why not?

5. Use grades to evaluate individual elements of your work as a teacher with CLIL (in the table mark the respective column with a cross):

1 = undemanding, non-burdening; 2 = easily manageable; 3 = manageable; 4 = demanding, burdening; 5 = very demanding and too burdening

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Preparation for lessons with CLIL					
Preserve one's foreign language skills					
Organisation of a lesson with CLIL					
Search for materials for lessons with CLIL					
Adjustment of materials for lessons with CLIL					
Preparation of worksheets for lessons with CLIL					
Motivate learners for CLIL					
Explain subject-matter in a foreign language					
Interaction with learners in a foreign language at CLIL lessons					
Inclusion of learners with special educational needs into CLIL lessons					
Work with weak learners at CLIL lessons					
Search for a correct proportion between a foreign and mother language					
Evaluation of learners outcomes after teaching with CLIL					

Self-valuation of my success as a teacher					
Cooperation with colleagues (language teachers, lecturers)					
Cooperation with school management					
Contact with parents					

6. Where do you find materials and inspiration for CLIL lessons? Mark the respective space with a cross.

Foreign textbooks of non-language subjects		Ready preparations for lessons from the internet		Films for children in a foreign language	
Selected topics from foreign language textbooks		Project materials of schools from the ESF and Comenius projects		Short films for children from youtube.com	
Teachers handbooks published abroad		Teachers handbooks published in Slovakia		Internet blogs	
Websites for teachers		Documentary films in a foreign language		Educational CDs for children in a foreign language	
Materials prepared by other teachers abroad		Scholarly monographs		Professional handbooks	
Materials prepared by other Slovak teachers		Home TV programs for children		Other (specify):	
Fairy tales (printed and animated) in a foreign language		Foreign TV programs for children		Other (specify):	

7. Have you taken part in an event (workshop, seminar, training, conference) of further education on CLIL methodology? If yes, when, where, and what kind of event?
8. Have you actively contributed to some of these events with your experience with the CLIL methodology (workshop, poster, published methodological sheets)?
9. Does school management support you in your further education in the field of CLIL? If yes, how?
10. Give your personal opinion about:
- strengths of CLIL methodology
 - weaknesses of CLIL methodology
 - Can you see direct evidence of a positive influence of CLIL on the quality of teaching at your school? describe
 - Can you see direct evidence of a negative influence of CLIL on the quality of teaching at your school?
11. Do you plan to keep using the CLIL methodology in the next years as well?
- yes (say why)
 - no (say why)
12. In general, how would you evaluate learners' responses to lessons with CLIL methodology?
13. Did you notice any changes in the learners' grades in a foreign language and in other subjects after you had begun using CLIL at your lessons?
14. Did you notice any changes in the learners' attitude (motivation) to a foreign language after you had begun using CLIL at your lessons?

15. What steps would you recommend to take to extend the use of CLIL methodology at your school? Mark the respective space with a cross.

	equip school libraries with sufficient literature for teachers		equip school libraries with sufficient foreign textbooks for all subjects
	provide regular further education in the field of CLIL		equip school libraries with teacher handbooks
	create a financial advantage for teachers that teach through CLIL		equip school libraries with sufficient dictionaries and encyclopaedias
	establish a specialised classroom for CLIL		organise a school competition with CLIL tasks
	better promote the CLIL methodology to teachers and the public		present the learners' results (projects) on school websites
	change nothing		Other:

16. Do you think that our interview covered all relevant fields? Would you like to add anything?
Thank you very much!