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Classroom-based and External Assessment in CLIL

1. Introduction

CLIL learners usually live in a big city, they are very good students as CLIL classrooms are typically the best class units in schools and boast the strictest enrolment criteria. They are diligent, hard-working and success-oriented. CLIL learners differ from typical students educated in a traditional classroom as they undergo different teaching and learning processes both in the language and the content subject lessons. “In CLIL, the learner’s role as a foreign language learner and as a content learner merge” (Wolff 2007: 19). It means that the learner acquires content subject and a new language at the same time. CLIL is an approach to education that assumes that language is both the content and the medium of instruction. Language instruction in content subjects differs from the one in a traditional language classroom: content teachers focus on language to ensure the understanding of specific concepts and terminology of the content subject. In the case of assessment, the teacher has to pay attention to both foreign language and the content of the field discipline. There is a necessity for developing in-class and external assessment methods, appropriate for CLIL methodology that would reflect and support the learning process of a CLIL learner. It must be remembered that neither traditional language tests nor content-specific achievement elicitation techniques address the notion of integrating language and content. The article will focus on presenting assessment techniques used in CLIL classrooms and also external examinations administered in Poland (i.e. *Lower Secondary School* and *Matura Examinations*). Furthermore, a number of practical implications for improving the quality of assessment in bilingual classes will be suggested.

2. Classroom assessment

Taking into consideration CLIL, one very crucial issue should be pointed out here, namely, the notion of separating content and language mastery, which is problematic. The teacher has to evaluate both foreign language and the content of the field discipline. This means that “assessment must be structured in such a way that there remain no doubts as to whether missing elements, or errors are linguistic-oriented or content-related” (Serragiotto 2007: 271). Experienced CLIL teachers report that “language mistakes do not affect the assessment of content” (Marsh and Marsland 1999: 75). Language mistakes, such as grammar or pronunciation mistakes can be ignored in assessment. However, one biology teacher reports that in scientific subjects even a minor linguistic mistake, e.g. replacing one preposition with another, can affect content learning (Marsh and Marsland 1999: 76). When a linguistic mistake has an effect on content learning it may be very difficult for the teacher to make a distinction between a language and content mistake. According to Marsh and Marsland (1999: 77), teachers who are linguistically better and who show interest in the linguistic matters of CLIL are often those who raise issues relating to assessment.

The following methods of assessment were observed while carrying out a PhD research and while gathering data for the project called “Profile Report – Bilingual Education in Poland”:

- *Written assessment* – most of the CLIL teachers administered tests a few times during the whole school year (usually after a certain part of material was covered). The tests were partly in English and partly in Polish. The first part (descriptive part) was usually in English, e.g. the CLIL learners were asked to describe the way the Alps emerged and the second part was both in Polish and in English (the CLIL learners were asked to translate certain words from Polish into English or vice versa). Some of the tests instead of descriptive questions consisted of multiple choice or gap-filling questions. While assessing the learners’ written work, the CLIL teachers did not pay attention to language errors made by the learners, the most important was content. This strategy does not seem to be very good as content and language should be treated equally and the CLIL learners who do not make any language errors should be awarded.

- *Oral assessment.* In the case of the oral assessment, most of the CLIL learners were given five questions and they could choose between answering in English or in Polish. In the case of answering in Polish they were given a lower mark. This method was very effective as it was motivating for the CLIL learners and, what is more, both content and language was evaluated. One more thing which is worth mentioning here is the system of ‘pluses.’ The CLIL learners received a plus as a reward for active participation during the lesson. Through collecting five pluses they could receive a very good mark. This system of assessment was very effective and it stimulated the CLIL learners to be active during the lessons.

– *Projects*. The CLIL learners were given projects which they were asked to work on in groups, e.g. they were asked to build a model of a cell (a variety of techniques and resources were allowed). Then the CLIL learners were asked to present their projects and on the basis of their presentation they were assessed. Projects had a very good impact on content and language as they facilitated learning and, what is more, stimulated cooperation.

However, a lot of the observed and interviewed CLIL teachers had problems with assessing content and language separately. Most of them concentrated on content only as they considered it more important. If CLIL is to be considered as an integrated language and content-based learning method, then an integrated evaluation of language and content is needed. According to Wolff (1997: 51–64) it is important to have an adaptable testing format which would consist of linguistic and content elements. A possible solution is an assessment rubric in which content and language are shown separately (ibid.). In addition, the testing format should respect the characteristics of the discipline. What is very important when constructing such a rubric is to find a method which would allow one to distinguish the linguistic aspects from the disciplinary content. Short (1993: 627–656) provides a model in which language aspects are separated from content aspects in assessment phase:

- *Problem solving*: learners show skills in problem solving (e.g. classifying, dividing, drawing diagrams, etc.);
- *Content knowledge*: learners must demonstrate abilities regarding content or subject matter (e.g. identifying the elements of a cell, describing the planets, etc.);
- *Conceptual elaboration*: learners show an understanding or knowledge of concepts regarding the content under question and where and when to apply this knowledge (e.g. representing information in graph form, etc.);
- *Language use*: learners are tested on their ability to use ESP (e.g. using technical vocabulary, etc.);
- *Communication skills*: learners must give information on work they have completed (e.g. explaining ideas, sharing and supporting opinions, etc.);
- *Group work*: learners display communicative and social skills and are able to complete group-oriented tasks (e.g. working in groups, explaining concepts, etc.);
- *Attitude and behaviour*: learners' attitude towards the subject is also the object of testing (e.g. feeling at ease, displaying confidence, etc.).

This model can be used in the CLIL classroom as a checklist. A purpose-designed rubric could be created which would encompass the above-mentioned categories.

The most common tests used in the CLIL classroom are a matching test and a cloze test. The former is usually structured in the following way: vocabulary terms are presented on the left side of the page, while the answers or definitions are given on the right side (Serragiotto 2007: 275). The task for the learners is to join the terms with the correct answers. The cloze test consists of blank spaces where words have been deleted and which must be filled in by learners. In the CLIL

classroom, it is also very important to introduce performance-based and authentic tasks, which would allow to observe the learners' progress but also the process of learning.

To present the acquired skills in the context, the CLIL learners can be asked to prepare reports, papers or project descriptions, which can be presented in an oral or written form. The tasks may be completed at home or during the CLIL lesson. Moreover, as Short (1993) suggests, classroom assessment could be based on anecdotal records and observations conducted on the ongoing basis by the teachers. Additionally, self-assessment and portfolios could be also used in the CLIL classroom. They both reflect true activities carried out by the individual. The emphasis is placed on the educational processes rather than their outcome. Self-assessment may be conducted in various situations by means of different techniques, e.g. self-correcting dictation, fill-in exercises, etc. The most important thing is to make the learners aware of their own mistakes as well as of their own language level. It is worth remembering that in CLIL, the learners are at the centre of learning and this is why self-assessment is very crucial. It would be also useful to think of a portfolio which would not only reflect linguistic abilities but also special discipline skills. An attempt to create such a portfolio has already been made in Italy (Serragiotto 2007: 279). This portfolio refers to different levels based on standards shown in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and also provides subject-specific descriptors. The portfolio is also a self-evaluation tool which encourages the learners to reflect on their learning process. What is more, the portfolio becomes a document which shows the learners' skills and abilities during the educational process. It can also serve as an overview of how much the learners have learned in terms of content and language.

It must be remembered that in CLIL assessment should reflect the activities presented during the lessons which means that in some cases language and content should be separated and in others integrated. All in all, assessment in the CLIL classroom should be treated differently from assessment in a language classroom. It is crucial to establish assessment tools which would be used in a subject-specific CLIL classroom and embrace different aspect of this form of education.

3. External examination

Due to the backwash effect, external examination exerts a considerable impact on the teaching and learning process. Therefore, the following section will present the structure of external examinations for CLIL streams and pinpoint certain problems which should be taken into account in the process of reforming CLIL education in Poland.

The external examination system is prepared and organized by the Central Examination Board in cooperation with eight Regional Examination Boards.

The Central Examination Board is responsible for preparing and presenting syllabi containing description and the scope of the examinations, sample questions, tasks, tests, as well as assessment criteria. CLIL education in Poland is affected by two external exams, namely the Lower Secondary School Exam and Matura.

3.1. The Lower Secondary School Examination

The Lower Secondary School Examination is an obligatory written exam which takes place in the final months of lower secondary school. It is a cross-subject exam consisting of three parts: humanities, science and, starting from the 2008/09 school year, a foreign language. Irrespective of the type of lower secondary school, the exam in content subjects is conducted in Polish only. It can be concluded that the Lower Secondary School Exam does not accommodate the needs of CLIL schools. Despite putting a lot of effort into studying content subjects in English, CLIL students do not receive any additional gain in the final exam as the content part does not contain any additional tasks in a foreign language.

In the case of the new foreign language exam, students take it in the foreign language which is taught at school. The exam is compatible with the Core Curriculum defining language learning in lower secondary school and reflects A2+ level of competence. No additional exams or tasks are prepared for bilingual students. Meanwhile, in order to be accepted to a CLIL programme, candidates undergo a comprehensive selection procedure in the form of a test checking their language aptitude or proficiency level. Consequently, they start language learning in lower secondary schools at a very high level, often exceeding the level of the final examination. Still, they are forced to take the same final exam in a foreign language, with the same tasks and on the same level of difficulty as students attending regular classes. It must be noted that this exam is a decisive factor in the enrolment process in secondary schools, therefore, it would seem advisable to award the double work of CLIL students, who often need to cover the entire material both in Polish and in English, by introducing the content part also in a foreign language or at least preparing foreign language exam on differentiated levels.

3.2. The Matura Exam

The Matura Exam is obligatory for all graduates of secondary schools who wish to continue their education at universities or other institutions of higher education. The structure and the content of the exam are uniform throughout the country as Matura replaced the entrance exam and constitutes the basis for university entry.

CLIL learners can take all content subjects in Polish or, alternatively, they can decide to take such subjects as Biology, History, Chemistry, Physics and Astronomy, Geography, and Mathematics both in Polish and in a foreign language.

The bilingual Matura Exam in content subjects is set on the standard level and it follows the attainment requirements applying to Polish-medium Matura Exam.

The bilingual Matura Exam in English as a foreign language is based on the Core Curriculum for CLIL classes and is much more advanced than the extended version of the exam for regular students. Apart from the level, there are also differences in the use of elicitation techniques both in the written and oral part, e.g. in the oral exam, instead of presenting visual prompts and giving a presentation on a given subject, CLIL students need to read a selected text, present its content and structure, and finally discuss it in a question-answer session with the examiners. Language proficiency as well as communicative competence and the ability to formulate own thoughts and opinions are subject to assessment. The written part comprises reading and listening comprehension tasks, guided writing, i.e. preparing a written response (in form of a formal letter, an opinion, a speech, or a report), and formulating a longer piece of writing (an argumentative essay, a short narrative or a review). The majority of the written tasks require the learners to use formal style of English. Unlike in the extended Matura, there are open-ended questions checking reading and listening comprehension.

Analysing the regulations and implementation of Matura in CLIL schools, several problems can be observed. Firstly, the information network concerning bilingual Matura is not sufficient, and due to very limited access to information about this exam, CLIL teachers are often forced to base their teaching on their own intuition only. The Central Examination Board publishes Matura exam sets from the previous years. However, in the case of the bilingual Matura, only the exam in English as a foreign language is provided. Neither the teachers nor the students have access to the exam sets in content subjects. They base their knowledge about the structure and task types on one sample set presented in the information booklet provided by CKE. Moreover, the information about standards and attainment requirements concerning bilingual exams is not adequate. The information booklet contains only a short description of task types and suggested assessment scheme just for the tasks included in the sample paper. It does not supply, however, general assessment criteria that could be related to all future exams, and the description of each content exam is limited to a few very general statements.

Matura in content subjects is claimed to be based on the requirements of Polish-medium exam. Still, the principles of CLIL imply different approaches and methods of teaching and learning process. As mentioned in the previous section, classroom assessment should be adjusted to the unique features of CLIL teaching. Also external exams should accommodate this distinctiveness and designing an exam set should not consist only in translating the tasks into a foreign language, but also in finding ways of integrating language with content. Therefore, there seems to be a need for establishing clear requirements, assessment criteria and elicitation techniques accommodating the distinctiveness of CLIL instruction.

Another problem, voiced by teachers and learners alike, was the limited choice of content exam level. Content Matura in Polish is prepared at two levels: standard

and extended. However, bilingual Matura exam in content subjects is only at the standard level which makes it impossible for the students to test their full linguistic competence in a given subject.

Every year the Central Examination Board arranges mock Matura exams in all subjects. However, mock Bilingual Matura is not always prepared (neither in English as a foreign language nor content subjects). Consequently, the learners are rejected the right to test their knowledge and practice examination skills before taking the real exam.

Finally, there is a problem of accommodating bilingual Matura Exam in the university enrolment process. Matura has replaced the entrance exams to universities and the results the students obtain are instrumental in the enrolment process. The bilingual Matura in English as a foreign language is more difficult than the extended Matura, still, at times students are not granted extra recruitment points. As a result, students sometimes give up taking bilingual Matura and prefer to take the easier version that would guarantee them a better final score. Moreover, the bilingual Matura in content subjects hardly ever gives any credit in university enrolment process.

4. Conclusion

Being aware of the inefficiency and high costs of bilingual Matura system, in 2008 the Ministry of Education decided to eradicate this examination. Due to a wave of protests on the part of headmasters and students of CLIL schools in Poland, the Ministry of Education bowed to popular pressure and decided to follow the present system for another four years. It also appointed working groups consisting of representatives of CLIL schools and the Ministry. Their task is to develop solutions for improvement of CLIL education and examination in Poland. The fact that CLIL education has been included in the new Core Curriculum is promising and allows to hope that the efforts of many teachers into developing this form of education will not be wasted.

We live in the era of international commerce, globalization and constant mobility, in which good knowledge of a foreign language is indispensable. CLIL is gaining popularity among schools in most countries in Europe and in the rest of the world. There are more and more CLIL language learners who have great language learning potential and who are willing to gain proper qualifications. In such a situation, the utmost attention should be paid to classroom assessment, which is a significant element of every educational process. Despite being subject to severe criticism for focusing on numeric results and the product of learning, tests play an important role in the classrooms. Still, their content and elicitation tasks should reflect the distinctiveness of CLIL learning. Moreover, there is a need to add variety to assessment of learners' performance by introducing process-oriented methods, such as

projects or portfolio, which can be easily incorporated in the classroom practice and constitute a part of ordinary classroom procedure. Moreover, projects involve collaborative work, which helps learners to develop the skill of negotiation and mutual decision-making. Finally, it must be remembered that a good learner is essentially equipped with a set of learning strategies that help in planning, implementing and evaluating the learning process. Apart from focusing on the learners' language or content subject competence, self-assessment can contribute to the development of learning strategies and the ability to self-reflect on own learning process.

Despite the financial costs and logistic problems connected with preparation and distribution of bilingual external exams, educational authorities should also notice the benefits of maintaining such exams. CLIL schools follow the Council of Europe's policy of encouraging language education, pluriculturalism and plurilingualism. Adequately designed external assessment can serve as a factor encouraging the talented and success-oriented learners to attend school units with CLIL programmes and undertake the burden of studying content subjects both in Polish and in a foreign language.

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