

Teacher interdisciplinary cooperation – approach to set an English learning-teaching environment.

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Abstract

To set an English learning-teaching environment can enhance the process of internationalization of higher education. This might be done by interdisciplinary cooperation between ESP and disciplinary teachers. The paper introduces a Visegrad+ project dealing with the internationalization of higher education by applying CLIL approach at 6 different universities from V4 countries and two Western Balkan countries. The project outcomes are presented and some cases of internationalizing higher education are described. Finally, the paper deals with some recommendations for setting an English learning-teaching environment based on teacher cooperation.

Keywords:

Internationalization
Branch didactics
ESP teachers
Disciplinary teachers
CLIL teachers
CLIL in higher education
Interdisciplinary cooperation

1 Introduction

Education system on all levels has been under the pressure of the quickly changing world and the current requirements on the graduates coming to the labour market. Higher education should reflect them and contribute to the world of technologies, artificial intelligence, industrial industry 4.0. by building a creative and open learning-teaching environment based on team / project work using design thinking approach to deploy various specialists to sort out the issues of these days such as: climate change and its impact on the environment, waste industry, robotisation, competencies needed in 21st century etc. I believe, we live the period of close and wide cooperation among diverse specializations. For running projects and teams of those projects successfully besides other things and effective communication channel and language must be ensured. In academia, English seems to be that language mostly used within international teams to work on research issues, on pedagogical and didactics issues, on dissemination of research results, good practice etc.

Students and teachers are the main stakeholders in higher education who should be continuously developed in their professional fields to be able to participate in teams both on local/national and international levels. The EU has been enhancing international team work in higher education by unifying the education systems regarding the criteria which must be met to get particular degrees (credit system), establishing and supporting student and teacher mobility within ERASMUS+ programme, running other European project funds to support international research, mutual scientific cooperation (Horizon 2020, COST, etc.).

In 2013 the European Commission launched its internationalisation strategy “European higher education in the world”. In this document it is noted that: “While several Member States and many HEIs already have higher

education internationalisation strategies in place, these are often centred mainly on student mobility: international academic cooperation is often still fragmented, based on the initiative of individual academics or research teams, and not necessarily linked to an institutional or national strategy." (European Commission, 2013: p. 3). The same document states that "a comprehensive internationalisation strategy should cover key areas grouped into the following three categories: international student and staff mobility; the internationalisation and improvement of curricula and digital learning; and strategic cooperation, partnerships and capacity building. These categories should not be seen as isolated but as integrated elements of a comprehensive strategy." European Commission, 2013: p. 4). What reality do the most HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) in EU face?

2 Setting English learning-teaching environment

Fostering internationalization process within HEIs is a complex support which should not be based just on student and teacher mobility. "However, mobility will always be limited to a relatively small percentage of the student and staff population: higher education policies must increasingly focus on the integration of a global dimension in the design and content of all curricula and teaching/learning processes (sometimes called "internationalisation at home"), to ensure that the large majority of learners, the 80-90% who are not internationally mobile for either degree or credit mobility, are nonetheless able to acquire the international skills required in a globalised world." (European Commission, 2013: p. 6).

Developing and establishing an internationalization strategy needs a complex preparation with the main aim to set English learning-teaching environment for students and teachers within HEIs in other words to internationalise home institution. It can lead to open the institution in all aspects for international cooperation and might accelerate the internationalisation process itself. The preparation process should consider readiness and preparedness of the main stakeholders (students, teachers) and also the HEIs management. How to set up "artificial" international environment in HEIs smoothly and effectively?

2.1 Disciplinary teachers

As far as setting English learning-teaching environment in non-philological HEIs is concerned, the main burden is on the shoulder of disciplinary (content) teachers. Primarily they are responsible for designing their disciplinary courses in official language of HEIs (state language) for students whose mother tongue is not English. They are also requested to participate in research and project work on international level as their professional promotion within academia is associated with increasing their respect in international environment (publishing in current journals, citation index). Should disciplinary teachers accept ascending requirements regarding the education process?

"In fact, the profile of the content teacher is another area that deserves closer attention because in the end it is the teacher who has to conduct the lessons and lead the students into the learning of the content material" (Marsh, Mehisto, Wolff and Frigols, 2010:p.5; Pavón and Ellison, 2013:p.70). "Content teachers must be prepared to juggle three distinct competences: knowledge of the discipline; a competent use of the foreign language; and the utilisation of appropriate methodological strategies" (Pavón, 2014:p.14).

As it was stated above, disciplinary teachers are requested to develop and improve new competencies/skills to set up an effective English learning-teaching environment for their students. In other words, they should be aware of English Didactics, Bilingual pedagogy or in CLIL (content and language integrated learning) methodology and its dual principle of learning.

Have HEIs prepared special conditions for those disciplinary teachers who are willing to teach their discipline in English? Does any kind of support exist for them?

2.2 ESP teachers

ESP as the term English for specific purposes is closely bind to non-philological study programmes and non-philologically oriented HEIs where students' English development should be based on academic language improvement and extending specific register of the professional field they are studying. ESP experts are usually EFL (English Foreign language) teachers with qualification in English linguistics and English Didactics. Currently position and role of ESP teachers in HEIs is changing and HEIs are searching for the new effective forms of utilizing ESP expertise. Chmelíková & Hurajová (2013) state, that despite the Bologna Process conclusions and

CEFR intentions, particularly in terms of declaring the EU inhabitants should be able to speak two foreign languages plus the language of the neighbouring country; the situation at Slovak HEIs in the field of English for Specific Purposes is not very encouraging. Many universities or other higher institutions – due to “financial reasons” – are closing their language centres or departments or decreasing the load of English lessons despite the quality elaborated syllabus, remarkable experience of English language practitioners, or excellent implementation of students with good study results and English language competence. Situation in Finland is described by Räsänen (2008) the most frequently taught foreign language is English and the courses are provided for students of non-philological fields by Language centres. Räsänen (2008) also mentions that the statutory aims state „that graduates are to have a foreign language competence which enables them to update their theoretical knowledge and expertise across their work careers and to cope with international work environments.”

ESP experts has been facing one essential issue – lack of the unified ESP course materials for particular professional fields. So, they must be able to design their own studying materials for their students and they should be generally aware of the field their students are studying. The ESP experts are supposed to study a lot to manage material preparation for various study programmes and those materials should also meet the requirements based on needs analysis ESP expert did before the beginning of the course. This materials preparation can be time consuming and very demanding for ESP teachers. It seems that close cooperation between the ESP experts and the disciplinary teachers might be the way that can assist ESP experts while they are preparing their Lesson Plans. Furthermore, we can consider the new roles for ESP experts – professional intensive language preparation based on EAP of students for being taught in English and professional intensive preparation of disciplinary teachers from linguistic and didactics perspectives.

2.3 Students

Finally, we can have look at students’ readiness and preparedness for being taught in English. As the students’ level of English is not examined and it is not the requirement for being accepted for non-philological study programmes by HEIs, we can just anticipated their level of English according to CEFR. In Slovakia, students graduated from High School are supposed to have English competence between B1 and B2 level.

Concerning students’ willingness to study in English surveys should be conducted to get relevant data. All students accepted by HEIs for the study programmes provided in state language might be confused in case they will be asked to start studying the courses in English to get the degree. It would not be fair for them. The question is how to motivate those students for English learning-teaching environment and how to set it up.

3 MTF STU and internationalization process

Our faculty belong to the group of HEIs that provide most often the study programmes in Slovak and some courses also in English. Students’ interest in enrolling on the courses taught in English is low and almost all students are studying in Slovak. Our faculty has got less than 10 ERASMUS+ mobility students every term and nearly the same amount of our students participate in mobility program. There is no foreign lecturer in our pedagogical staff delivering lectures, or seminars in English and there is lack of foreign researchers too. We have not established English learning-teaching environment in education so far to attract more foreign students, lecturers and researchers to come and cooperate closely with our faculty.

In 2017 the ESP experts from the Centre of foreign languages, Humanities and Academic Sport initiated the process of analysis to gain data for the internationalization process within the faculty. They have been focusing on two main stakeholders (students/ teachers) and approach/methodology that can be applied for setting English learning-teaching environment. They have started institutional and international projects for this purpose.

3.1 Institutional projects at MTF STU

The first institutional project called INTER MTF I was kicked off in 2017 with the main aims at gaining the data on disciplinary teachers’ preparedness from linguistic and didactics aspects and at studying their attitude to teaching their subjects in English. Two tools were used to get the data – a questionnaire and a standard Cambridge language test. 209 disciplinary teachers of our faculty were addressed, however, just 100 of them were willing to participate in the questionnaire and from this cohort we got results from the standard

diagnostic language test done by 74 disciplinary teachers. We have not processed all the gained data so far, so we can not interpret the complex results. However, we can provide some partial findings. We have found that more than 50% of our disciplinary teachers – respondents of the questionnaire declare their willingness to set English learning-teaching environment within their discipline courses despite the fact they have not had any relevant experience with teaching in English systematically.

The second institutional project INTER MTF II focusing on students and their readiness for being taught in English we just started. By a questionnaire we are planning to find their attitude to English learning-teaching environment, their preferences for the form and for the subjects being taught in English and we also searching for how they perceive their level of English. The real level of English of the students will be tested by an Oxford standard replacement test. Some correlation will be searched for from the gained data. After processing the data of INTER MTF I and II they will be interpreted and the suitable form for establishing English learning-teaching environment will be identified.

Our hypothesis is: CLIL approach can be applicable in higher education. The subject taught in English partially will be preferred by both stakeholders of education process in HEIs.

3.2 International project Visegrad+

To test effectivity of CLIL application into higher education by utilizing close interdisciplinary cooperation mainly between ESP experts and disciplinary teachers on institutional and international level we are leading and running Visegrad+ project CLIL-HET (CLIL – Higher Education Teacher). MTF STU and 5 other HEIs from Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Serbia and Albania are working on project outputs:

- open source digital platform www.clil-het.eu with training, network and community functions (building a professional international communities of ESP experts and disciplinary teachers)
- identifying linguistic weakness of disciplinary teachers from all countries (result report)
- a seminar “ESP and CLIL – current drivers of HEI internationalisation”
- didactic programme on CLIL application in higher education for disciplinary teachers
- bank of lesson plans of CLIL lessons on different disciplines (close cooperation between ESP and disciplinary teachers)

In international team we are working on CLIL application in higher education and effectivity of close cooperation between ESP and disciplinary teachers. The main project aim is to enhance internationalisation process in higher education by CLIL. We will study if CLIL implementation can lower disciplinary teachers’ and students’ weaknesses or their natural fear from setting English learning-teaching environment within HEIs where has not been established an active English learning-teaching environment so far. The running project time is from June 2019 to November 2020.

3.3 Cooperation dimensions

Concerning establishing English learning-teaching environment in higher education and enhancing internationalisation process within HEIs by CLIL application it is clear that cooperation has very important role. It can be provided in different dimensions:

- ESP experts – ESP experts (sharing professional practice, designing didactics and linguistic training programmes)
- disciplinary teachers – disciplinary teachers (sharing CLIL lesson materials on certain professional domains)
- ESP/CLIL teachers - disciplinary teachers (assisting CLIL application, helping CLIL Lesson plans design)

on institutional, regional, national, international level. It can be done both face to face and online.

4 Teachers’ responsibilities in English learning – teaching environment

To establish “artificial” international education environment in HEIs where students’ mother tongue is not English requires also establishing new roles for teachers in higher education. Mainly to set close cooperation between ESP experts and disciplinary teachers to design CLIL Lesson Plans for teaching subjects in English either partially or fully. The smooth CLIL implementation into education can soften potential negative impact of English learning-teaching environment on students and disciplinary teachers. The scheme of close cooperation ESP-DTs (ESP teachers-disciplinary teachers) and the teachers’ responsibilities within setting up English Educational Environment (EEE) is shown in the figure 1 below.

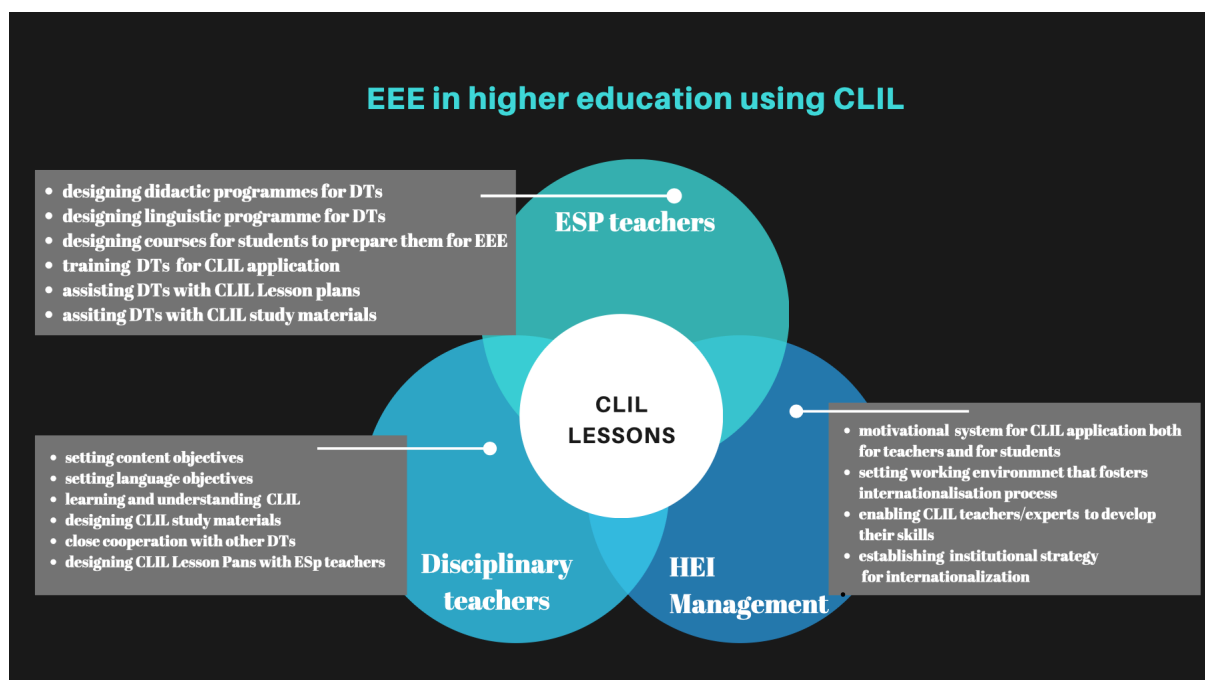


Figure 1. The scheme of ESP-DTs cooperation and their responsibilities within setting EEE.

ESP teachers should be involved in designing trainings for DTs (disciplinary teachers), in designing preparation courses for students and in co-designing CLIL Lesson plans with DTs. Close cooperation between ESP and DTs must be fostered by HEI management. Its main role is building and setting supportive environment for ESP and DTs, also for students to motivate them to set up “artificial “ EEE.

4.1 CLIL didactics

CLIL might be a potential approach to improve the process of internationalisation of higher education. When applying CLIL the key feature that must be followed is the dual principle of learning which means to learn subject content at the same time with the language development.

What should be considered while working on CLIL Lesson Plan is illustrated in the figure 2. CLIL teachers or disciplinary teachers utilising CLIL for setting EEE are supposed to differ between aims and procedure and to have answers to the questions WHAT and HOW from the scheme to manage to design a CLIL Lesson plan.

CLIL didactics consist of two separate branches didactics – subject didactics and foreign language didactics. Disciplinary teachers are aware of teaching their subjects in Slovak, however, how to teach them in English with the dual CLIL education principle is a part of trainings. To keep the dual principle of learning is crucial for DTs to understand English didactics which means just to know how to improve and develop all language skills (reading, listening, writing, speaking). “When planning a lesson, ‘the ideal English lesson’ should cover development of all the skills in order to work on communicative competence of the learners” (Kováčiková and Gajdáčová Veselá, 2016).

To assist learners to understand the content and the language, we sometimes use the technique called “scaffolding”. It is a technique applied for better understanding. Scaffolding often uses the visual aids to make the content easier.

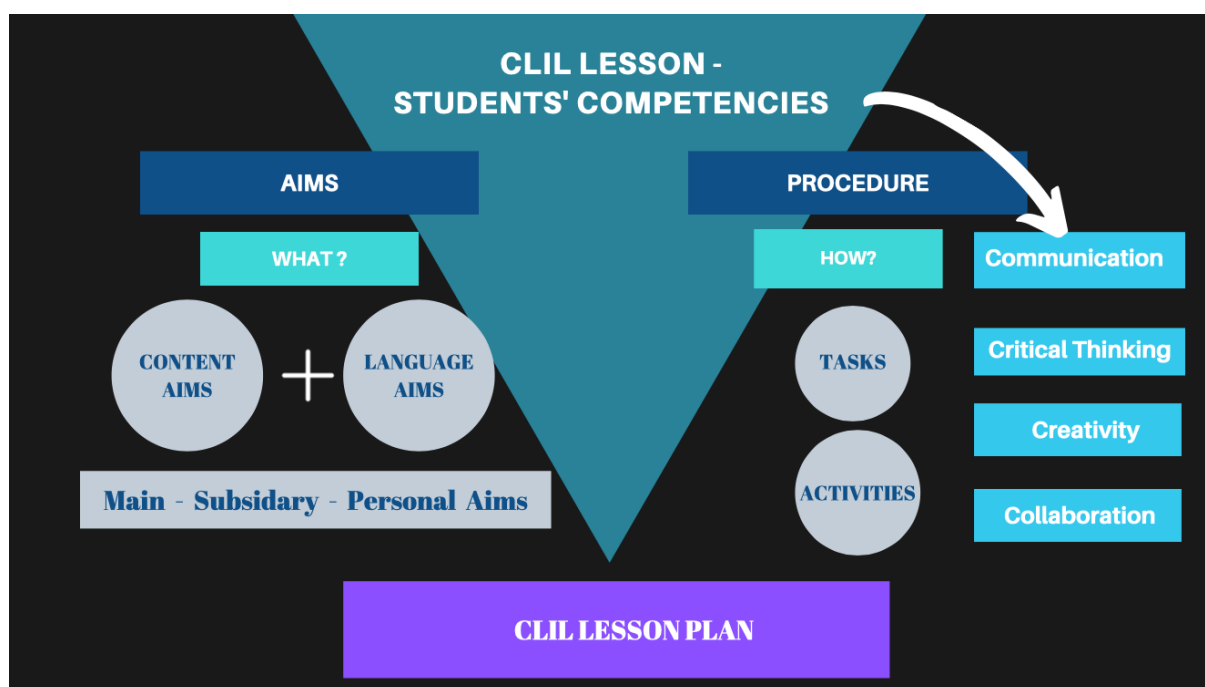


Figure 2. The scheme illustrates how to prepare CLIL lesson plan to help DTs prepare effective EEE.

4.2 CLIL in higher education

The implementation of CLIL requires a careful screening of the linguistic and methodological competence of the human resources available. It should clearly state the timing of the programme (initiation and time-span), and also the number and type of the subjects must be chosen taking into consideration the degree of difficulty and cognitive demands (Vázquez, 2014, p.117).

Mcdougald (2018) indicates, that putting together a CLIL curriculum requires a coordinated and unified effort amongst all the involved personnel. Issues that must be considered in concert include the number of hours to be taught in the vehicular language, teacher profiles, subjects to be taught, and evaluation and assessment practices. Design and implementation teams be constituted coherently, with periodic meetings in which responsibilities can be assigned and plans put into place. Such teams are ultimately responsible for issues such as language management, language education, and language and content integration.

CLIL application into higher education is a complex process requiring the close cooperation between teachers (ESP – DTs) and preparedness of all main stakeholders. (students, teachers, management). Before starting and setting English learning-teaching environment several aspects must be considered, however, first of all the main goal and strategy of internationalisation should be set by management of HEIs. Smooth CLIL application might lead to study programmes fully taught in English. In that case, setting the requirement system is needed. The criteria for disciplinary teachers and as well as for students regarding the level of English.

5 Conclusion

Teacher interdisciplinary cooperation might be beneficial for enhancing internationalisation process of higher education. The term “internationalisation” has not been a new term. The EU has been supporting the idea of internationalisation and globalization processes of HEIs by providing different project funds for establishing international teams dealing for example with research issues, teaching issues and innovation. Setting EEE (English Educational Environment) requires close cooperation between ESP experts, disciplinary experts and HEI’s management. CLIL approach has got several forms of its application – which is the most suitable for enhancing the internationalisation within HEI depends on the context of the particular HEI. To start CLIL implementation successfully, sufficient number of ESP teachers, motivated students and enough disciplinary teachers willing to teach in English are requested. HEIs are under the pressure to meet EU requirements regarding the process of internationalisation so they need to search for the right form used to set EEE. The new

situation brings new challenges especially for teachers' responsibilities and roles within education. The new responsibilities of teachers come out from their close cooperation. ESP experts could become core assistance providing the service for students and for disciplinary teachers- their colleagues. CLIL approach seems to be an easy and smooth way for establishing EEE. It might lower the natural fear of both students and teachers from EEE.

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