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Language Education and Cross-curricular Teaching in a Tertiary Setting

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Nikolina Tsvetkova

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

E-mail: ntsvetkova@phls.uni-sofia .bg

Abstract: The article looks at three related concepts – Cross-curricular Teaching (CCT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Given the importance of language learning and multilingualism in the context of the European Education Area (EEA) and the fact that Higher Education is considered both a dimension and a priority of the EEA (European Commission, 2022), an attempt is made to argue for the need to consider language teaching and learning at the university level as a complex phenomenon. More specifically, the article focuses on integrating (inter)disciplinary content and language at the tertiary level mentioning a pedagogical framework for teaching English for Communication at EU Institutions (ECEUI) as a case in point.

Keywords: European Education Area (EEA), Cross-curricular Teaching (CCT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), English for Communication at EU Institutions (ECEUI).

Introduction

The article aims at providing a brief overview of three concepts which are related to teaching and learning languages in modern European universities, namely Cross-curricular Teaching (CCT), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI). Other concepts that bear relevance to the issue, such as English as a Lingua Franca, Language / English for Specific Purposes are left out of the focus of the current discussion, however, looking at their interplay in combination might be a valuable research trend.

Given the importance of language learning and multilingualism in the context of the European Education Area (EEA) and the fact that Higher Education is considered both a dimension and a priority of the EEA (European Commission, 2022) [1], an attempt is made to argue for the need to consider language teaching and learning at the university level as a complex phenomenon.

Three concepts

Cross-curricular Teaching (CCT)

The idea that it is beneficial to teach and, respectively, learn academic disciplines and school subjects in an integrative manner rather than in isolation is not new and for the purposes of this article the following definition is adopted – “Cross-curricular teaching is instruction within a field in which subject boundaries are crossed and other subjects are integrated into the teaching (how and for whatever purpose or objective)”. (Beckmann, 2009). [2] The related literature mainly focuses on the secondary and primary level discussing specific cross-subject approaches and teaching solutions or looking at the school curriculum in a broader manner – “Cross-curricular teaching and learning in secondary education” (Savage, 2010). [3] “Cross-curricular teaching and learning in the secondary school... humanities: history, geography, religious studies and citizenship” (Harris, Harrison & McFahn, 2013) [4], “Cross-curricular teaching and learning in the secondary school... Mathematics” (Ward-Penny, 2010) [5], “Cross curricular teaching and learning in the secondary school... science” (Byrne & Brodie (2013) [6], “Moving beyond subject boundaries: Four case studies of cross-curricular pedagogy in secondary schools” (Savage, 2012) [7], “Cross-curricular teaching in the primary school: Planning and facilitating imaginative lessons” (Kerry, 2013) [8], “Cross-curricular approaches to teaching and learning” (Rowley & Cooper, 2009) [9] – to name but a few.

Some authors specifically consider communication and its place on the school curriculum thus bringing into focus the importance of language in this “across-the-curriculum” effort. Stevens (2010) [10] focuses on the “centrality of language in learning” bringing out relevant examples from the English national curriculum. Researchers Dannels & Housley Gaffney (2009) in their article “Communication Across the Curriculum and in the Disciplines: A Call for Scholarly Cross-curricular Advocacy” argue for the need to assist students in becoming not just “content specialists, but also coherent communicators” and call for conducting more empirical research which can inform theoretical approaches and also encourage teachers to practice “reflective scholarly partnerships” (Dannels & Housley Gaffney, 2009). [11]

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

The European language policy, outlined in the New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism (2005) mentions the affordances of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as an approach “increasingly used across Europe” and beneficial to promoting plurilingual competences and the importance that higher education institutions could have in “promoting multilingualism amongst students and staff, but also in the wider local community”. [12]

According to one of the established definitions of CLIL, the integrated study of a subject and a foreign language is a two-way educational approach in

which an additional language is used to study and teach a given subject and a (foreign) language in order to promote both the content and language proficiency to pre-levels (Maljers, Marsh, Wolff, Genesee, Frigols-Martin, Mehisto 2010). [13] CLIL is based on four principles called “the 4 Cs” - Content, Communication, Knowledge, Culture/Citizenship (Cognition, Content, Communication, Culture/Citizenship).

The first principle - Content - places the learning content and the acquisition of subject-specific knowledge and skills at the center of the learning process. The relationship between the subject-specific and linguistic knowledge is explained more in terms of learning “through a language” and not “in a language”.

The second principle – Communication – means that language is a channel for communication and learning. Language is acquired through its use in authentic and unanticipated settings, which in a language classroom is ensured through especially prepared, graded in meaning and difficulty (scaffolded) situations. According to this principle, in CLIL classrooms, language should be activated in contexts motivating and meaningful to learners. It also ensures that different areas of the curriculum are delivered in “meaningful and economical use of instructional time”.

The third principle – Cognition – is related to promoting cognition, regardless of learner abilities.

The fourth principle - Culture/Citizenship – refers to pluriculturality. Since language, thought and culture are connected, CLIL provides an opportunity for learners to operate in other cultures by learning (through) the languages associated with those cultures. This paves the way for understanding and empathizing with different points of view and is central to distinguishing European understanding and making European citizenship a reality.

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI)

English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a subject of research in relation to the concepts of World Englishes and the idea of English as a lingua franca, with a particular emphasis on the leading use of English in the context of higher education. In a European higher education setting, it is studied both as a function of or a threat to multilingualism and a result of the internationalization of higher education (see European Commission, 2005, Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011; Soderlundh, 2013; Baker and Huettner, 2017; Byram, Hu & Rahman, 2017, etc.). [14]

It can be said that, globally, there is a trend in countries where English is not the official or dominant language it is used as a medium of instruction in various academic disciplines such as natural sciences, mathematics, geography or medicine. CLIL is contextually situated (with its origins in the European ‘ideal’ of providing opportunities for EU citizens to acquire competences in more than

one language – the formula ‘mother tongue + two other languages of the EU’) unlike EMI. In applying CLIL, it is not mandatory to determine in advance which academic disciplines and in which foreign language to study, while in the case of EMI, the language of instruction is always English. As the very term CLIL implies, the purpose of the training when applying this approach is two-fold – to promote learning specific subject content and language, while in EMI this is not necessarily an explicit aspiration. A study carried out with the financial support of the British Council in 2013-2014 (a pilot study of EMI in three European countries and a follow-up study in 55 countries all over the world, including Bulgaria) established that EMI is associated with higher education (more characteristic of the tertiary level) but with primary and secondary education too. Although policies and practices vary from country to country, it can be contended that the provision of EMI is a means of attracting learners and is partly a matter of prestige, however, EMI reflects the desire to include immigrants in the educational process (Dearden, 2014). [15]

Internationalisation and EMI

One of the main objectives in implementing EMI is to internationalize the education offered in a particular country, especially in higher education. In Europe, this is also related to the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (<https://www.ehea.info/>), as well as to the increasing exchange of students and teachers between European universities within the framework of the Erasmus program.

In a EU perspective, it is important to bear in mind that “the European Education Area will be an area where learners and educational staff can easily cooperate and communicate across disciplines, cultures and borders...” (Council of Europe, 2021). [16] This means that language teaching and learning at the tertiary level is a complex phenomenon, which should be informed by sound pedagogical principles simultaneously having to serve a number of purposes – developing linguistic, cultural and discipline-specific competences and promoting communication across disciplines, contexts, levels of educations and national borders.

Internationalization can be conceived in the narrow sense of attracting and accepting foreign students. It may additionally be related to attracting and hiring faculty from other countries, but it may also be that a university seeks to prepare its students for an international experience. For example, in the above-mentioned study (Dearden, 2014) [17], 72% of respondents answered that universities in their country accept foreign students. In many cases, however, it is claimed that the number of these trainees is not significant or even negligibly low. The issue of access to quality education for foreign students is also raised due to the use of English as an academic lingua franca and the insufficient language training of teachers. In fact, Dearden points out that this situation leads to a greater number

of non-native English speakers, and believes that this perhaps means a lower quality of educational service. (The idea that quality teaching is a function of whether a teacher is a native speaker has been disputed by a number of scholars.) On the other hand, the importance of EMI as an opportunity to create global partnerships between universities around the world is recognized.

Bulgaria is no exception to the general strive for internationalization of higher education. According to the National Statistics Institute, in Bulgaria in 2021, more than 8% of all students enrolled at universities in Bulgaria were foreign students, which is almost 6% more than in the previous year and 24% more than in 2017/2018. Almost half of the foreign students come from Greece, the UK and Germany and most Bulgarian students prefer Spain, Romania and Greece to visit under Erasmus+ (National Statistics Institute, 2021). [18]

The wider provision of EMI in higher education leads to the need for a larger database to document different practices in different situations and contexts, and especially with regard to language, due to the increasing concern about the “anglicization” of higher education. Multilingualism which is in the heart of EU language policy and the EEA envisage promoting linguistic diversity. However, even enthusiasts recognize the problems associated with the implementation of these policies given the objective increase in the use of English (Coleman, 2006). [19] The roles and conceptualizations of English and other languages in various universities and programs are explored. By means of quantitative and qualitative analyses, different roles of English and other languages presented in the studied forms of education are revealed. Different levels of recognition of multilingualism stand out, as well as a complex range of conceptualizations of language by stakeholders. In these studies, English as subject-specific language use emerges as a key concept, but language intersections, learning and teaching are also highlighted.

Considering the above points, we can conclude that the existing complex understanding of the diverse roles of languages in the educational process in higher education and outlines EMI as a non-uniform, non-monolithic subject (Baker and Huettner, 2017). [20]

A case in point - teaching English for Communication at EU Institutions (ECEUI)

In her monograph “English for Communication at EU Institutions. Theoretical and Applied Aspects”, Tsvetkova (2018) [21] discusses the results of a series of small-scale surveys implemented between 2011 and 2016 whose aim is to establish the communicative and discipline-specific needs of European Studies students at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”. Their position is beneficial to such studies due to the prominent place of foreign languages and foreign language-related disciplines. Apart from the disciplines from the field of Political Science – European Studies, students study two languages (with a choice among

English, German, French Spanish and Russian) with an option to study a third one. They also study Terminology of the EU and Civilisation in their first foreign language. Among the elective disciplines they can choose from Introduction to Multilingualism in the EU, Intercultural Relations, Communication and Presentation Skills and a few others.

The study in question helps to find out about students' self-awareness in terms of linguistic competences and intercultural communication experience and skills and the established “gaps” mean that there is a need to provide systematic opportunities for developing European Studies students' plurilingual and intercultural competences. This, however, is also related to what students have acquired before enrolling at university, i.e. in their secondary education. The figure below demonstrates the above.

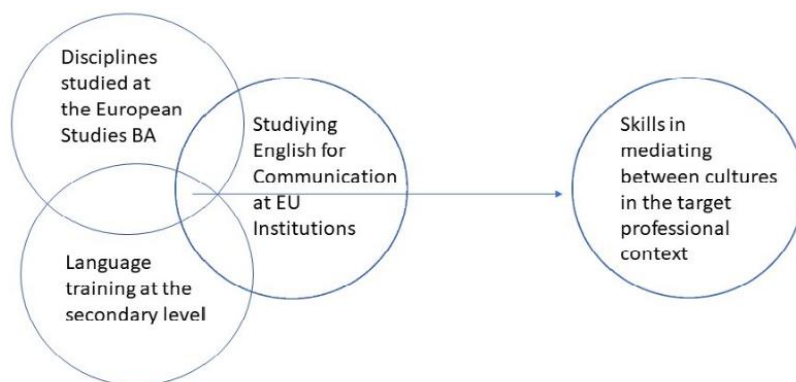


Fig. 1. Developing European Studies students' Intercultural and Plurilingual competences (Based on Tsvetkova, 2018: 201)

Taking into account the crises the EU has been undergoing over recent years, including Brexit and COVID-19, it is not surprising that more and more Eurosceptic voices are being heard. On the other hand, European Studies students are supposed to be able to communicate, act, make decisions, etc. in an arena that is far greater than the national or even that of the European Union. This emphasizes even more strongly the need for the language training of these students to be implemented in close synergy with their training in the other subject-specific disciplines, in order to lead to the development of intercultural competence so that, in the end, the training in a foreign language is actually training in intercultural and European citizenship.

Going back to the fourth 'C' of the '4C's' of CLIL – Culture/Citizenship – we can conclude that the training of European Studies students should be informed by CLIL. In view of the expected enhanced mobility in the EEA, this pedagogical approach can be combined with EMI in order to boost students'

preparedness for efficient communication in various classroom and extra-curricular settings as well as across higher education institutions and countries.

The figure below presents a conceptual framework for teaching English for communication at EU institutions.

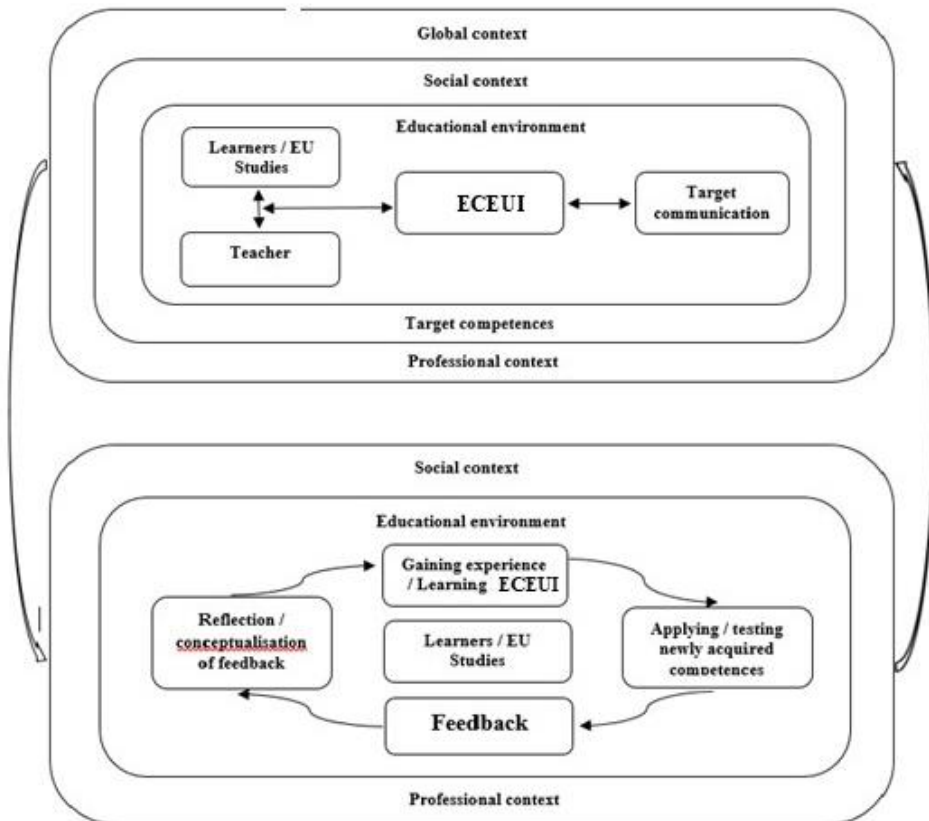


Fig. 2. A pedagogical framework for teaching English for communication at EU institutions (Tsvetkova 2020) [22]

The figure shows the interplay between several contexts informing the approach to teaching English for communication at EU institutions – global, social and professional, including the desired target competences. Learners with their communicative, intercultural and cognitive (target) skills, teachers of ECEUI, the content of ECEUI and the target competences are in a complex interrelation. Furthermore, placing learners in the center of educational processes ensures that acquiring ECEUI follows a reflective cycle which starts with students gaining experience or acquiring ECEUI and continues with applying/testing the acquired knowledge and skills, then receiving feedback on their performance leading to reconceptualizing the acquired knowledge and skills,

which is then applied to gaining further knowledge and skills thus the cycle means moving on a sort of a continuing upward spiral.

This approach has been applied in the author's pedagogical practice most recently in teaching Intercultural Relations and Introduction to Multilingualism in the EU as part of the BA tracks for students from the Transform4Europe Alliance. Although the actual evaluation of applying it in practice is still to be done, there is evidence of its viability and applicability in a broader context.

Conclusions and further considerations

The brief overview of the concepts of cross-curricular teaching, CLIL and EMI supports the view that it is possible to establish the most adequate pedagogical response to some current developments in European higher education in their cross-section. The European Education Area and the European University Alliances initiative require innovative approaches to teaching and learning, including languages and multilingualism which are a horizontal priority for achieving the EEA targets. The proposed conceptual framework for teaching English for communication and EU institutions can serve as a starting point in revising and updating the existing language curricula or creating new ones. It can also be used to devise tools for evaluating the efficiency of delivered language courses at the tertiary not only in Bulgaria but also across Europe.

Clarification: Transform4Europe is a European University Alliance comprising initially 7 and now 10 members - Saarland University (Germany), University of Alicante (Spain), Estonian Academy of Arts (Estonia), Universidade Católica Portuguesa (Portugal), University of Primorska (Slovenia), Jean Monnet University (France), University of Silesia in Katowice (Poland), Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria), The University of Trieste (Italy), Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas and Jean Monnet University (France), University of Primorska (Slovenia) and Catolica University (Portugal). The Alliance was established under the project "Transform4Europe: The European University for Knowledge Entrepreneurs", Erasmus+ European Universities, EPP-EUR-UNIV-2020, Project No. 101004048.

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