

Teachers for the Knowledge Society

The foreign language teacher's roles in response to the knowledge society requirements

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Abstract

The knowledge society demands matching educational reforms to respond the students' needs of acquiring good performance skills. The study aims to produce evidence for stakeholders in education regarding the new roles foreign language teachers could play to fully answer these expectations. They should be supported by appropriate curricular changes to develop CLIL focused competences. The research takes stock of the current situation in Romanian non philological universities regarding the roles and perspectives of English teachers. Although more research is needed, findings confirm that formal teacher training programs should be created, as well as a sharing network of CLIL professionals.

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1. Stating the problem - contemporary challenges to education

The contemporary society has been subjected to changes along the economic, social, cultural and educational paradigms. There are studies that try to express the essence of the newly emerged *knowledge society*. Thus, Csorba (2008) shows that it is based no longer on facts, data and rules, like the previous – industrial - one, but on skills and competences, based on constructivist principles. Underlining that the knowledge society comprises three interconnected dimensions - political, operational and that related to the development of human beings, Udas (2009) emphasizes that the essence is a focus not only on creating new learning cultures and spaces, involving all the players of education in generating lifelong learning partnerships, but mainly on concentrating upon the development of people, seen as well defined beings and not mere labels such as 'end-users'. We are witnessing transformations in the teaching/learning proposals, which require adopting a new view of teacher's education.

Teacher training has become an important element within educational policies in the post Bologna/Prague/Lisbon documents Europe, in an effort to create a framework of principles as regards teacher competences and qualifications at high quality standards. As Furlong (2007) claims, school is preparing young people for 'learning in an uncertain world', which arises from the relation to the emerging technology and knowledge, the increasing mobility, a diversification of values and intercultural differences. Education must be reshaped to answer these challenges, with teachers learning to answer 'the contestability of knowledge'.

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The academia reply to such demands must include, we maintain, support in building up a coherent framework that should combine forms of training, personal research and learnedness. The focus should go on decentralizing, personalizing and rendering education flexible. Teachers should be ready to assume new roles and develop/facilitate strategic learning, emphasizing communication and technological abilities. They have to reshape their professional development *classical* path and identify means of improving it. This implies a process of de-monopolizing and diversifying the educational opportunities for university teachers. They should be encouraged to embark upon new career lines involving professional development, as they are expected to enlarge their strategic, content and methodological repertory of skills and competences that could enable them to become not only English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers, but also Content and Language Integrated learning (CLIL) type of educators. For this, appropriate curricular changes are mandatory, which should provide coherent comprehensive teacher training programs at national level for foreign language teachers.

2. Defining the rationale underlying the study - focus on CLIL

The notion of CLIL is a relatively new one. Therefore, if one tries to define it, one must assemble together a range of viewpoints. Thus, the Council of Europe document on education (North, 1998) includes teaching content in a foreign language, as ‘an improvement in both the foreign language and the non-language area competence’. According to the parent of the notion, Marsh (2002), the term refers to ‘any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and subject have a joint role’. As shown in the specialized online CLIL Compendium (2001), ‘CLIL refers to any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language ... is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content’. Literature on CLIL prefers to maintain that we should see it located along a *continuum* of the foreign language and the non-language content, with various views as regards their weighting. It covers all levels of education, taking various forms. Thus, in content-driven programs the key instructional force is represented by the content outcomes, while in language-driven ones, content is restricted to being a tool for promoting the language curricular objectives (Met, 1999).

Discussing the relevance of CLIL at European Union level, Coyle (2002) lists the major components required for a successful implementation of CLIL programs: subject matter (content), the language of and for learning (communication), the thinking integral to high quality learning (cognition) and the global citizenship agenda (culture) – all equally important in determining a really operational CLIL framework. He puts forward certain principles in practicing CLIL: content does not refer only to knowledge and skills acquisition, but mainly to the learner’s personalized effort to re-create them; in order to facilitate the learner to rebuild knowledge in a personal manner, content, which is related to cognition, should be analyzed from its linguistic perspective. Equally, thinking processes should be examined from the linguistic perspective, as well; interactivity and an attention to intercultural awareness are also important.

Fernandez (2009), referring to the long-lasting debate over the differences between CLIL and Content-Based instruction (CBI), ESP with all its derivations, and Language Across the Curriculum, respectively, considers they are mainly ontological and epistemological, although there are common assumptions underlying them all. Similarly, coordination between language and subject-matter learning is a must. Thus, Mohan (1986) describes three possible language (L) – content (C) combinations: (i) *L by C*; (ii) *L with C*; (iii) *L for C*. To them, Fernandez (op. cit.) adds *L through C* – which ‘aims to teach language, introduce new subsidiary subject-matter related topics and exemplify or expand, from a communicational perspective, subject-matter content’.

In the *language vs. content* relationship, as Creese (2005) correctly maintains, there has been a tendency in the literature that language work in the content classroom is given less status than content, although there are benefits to be obtained if content is integrated with language teaching objectives. This point of view is confirmed by Md Yassin et al. (2009), who underlines that CLIL is a ‘dual-focused educational approach’.

How CLIL – seen as ‘an innovative form of language-enhanced education’ – is actually implemented in various countries is, as Frigols (2007) shows, a matter of difference within the European Union and/or outside it, with English as the most common ‘vehicular’ language. Moreover, as Mehisto (2008) warns, there are certain factors that can negatively influence on CLIL implementation: difficulty teachers may have in applying ‘a multiple focus on content and language’, lack of knowledge about ‘CLIL-specific strategies and their impact on learning’, ‘teachers’ mindsets’, as well as ‘planning by teachers and ...authorities’ of the necessary curricular changes to accommodate

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