

## Developing Plurilinguism in Slovakia: The CLIL Method, A Starting Point

Desarrollo de plurilingüismo en Eslovenia: El método 'CLIL', un punto de partida

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The paper deals with an introduction of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) - a newly invented and officially recommended method for the teaching of foreign languages in the European Union. The authors describe its general characteristics and benefits as well as give examples of its application in Slovakia, one of the new member states of the EU. Since Slovakia is not widely known in Colombia, the authors have added a description of the situation in teaching foreign languages in their country, thus providing an important context for teaching objectives and conditions of applying the CLIL.

**Key words:** Plurilinguism, Foreign Language Teaching-Young Learners, CLIL-Methodology

Este documento trata sobre la introducción del método (Contenido y Lenguaje integrados en el aprendizaje) CLIL – una nueva metodología diseñada y oficialmente recomendada como método de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en la Unión Europea. Las autoras describen las características generales del método y sus beneficios, así como ejemplos de su aplicación en Eslovenia, uno de los nuevos miembros de la UE. Debido a que Eslovenia no es muy conocida en Colombia, las autoras han incluido una descripción de la situación de la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras en su país. De tal manera, proveen un contexto importante para los objetivos y condiciones de la enseñanza en la aplicación de esta metodología.

**Palabras claves:** Plurilingüismo, Enseñanza-Lenguas Extranjeras-Estudiantes-Jóvenes, CLIL-Metodología

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## INTRODUCTION

The aims of this paper are as follows: 1. To introduce the situation regarding teaching foreign languages in Slovakia, one of the countries which has recently joined the European Union; 2. To explain current trends and priorities in the field (including the latest methodological concepts); and 3. To illustrate the application of the CLIL method in language classrooms for young learners as an example of an innovative method leading to the development of plurilinguism.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SLOVAKIA (THE EU)

Slovakia, one of the smallest and youngest countries in Europe (established in 1993 after the disintegration of the former Czechoslovakia and inhabited by 5 million people), has during the last 3 years witnessed radical changes in teaching foreign languages in general, and in teaching languages to young learners in particular.

However, its long history is interesting as well. Up to 1989, when the country was a part of the former Communist block in Europe, the only compulsory language in Slovak schools was Russian. Pupils started

learning it from the 5<sup>th</sup> year of their compulsory elementary school attendance (while being 10+, i.e. ISCED 2 level<sup>1</sup>). Other languages were taught in very limited circumstances because they were considered to be instruments of imperialistic propaganda. The only language that could be taught more extensively in those times was German (because of the existence of the former German Democratic Republic).

After November, 1989, when the so-called Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia defeated the communist government, the situation in teaching languages started to improve. The schools (mostly secondary) offered a wider scale of foreign languages that included English, French, Spanish and Italian. But, paradoxically, language education became available to a radically lower number of students. Russian as a foreign language was generally refused by learners, although it was the only foreign language taught by qualified teachers. Other foreign language teaching suffered from an extreme lack of teachers, even unqualified.

The following table shows the amounts of pupils learning a foreign language on ISCED 2 level in Slovakia in 1989 and 1991 (based on the data of *The Statistic Annual Book of Education*, 1991):

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<sup>1</sup> ISCED 2 – according to International Standard Classification of Education (revised in 1997) it is a lower secondary level that forms an integral part of compulsory schooling. In Slovakia it starts after finishing 4 years of ISCED 1 level. It lasts 5 years and its end corresponds with the end of compulsory full-time education .

FOREIGN LANGUAGES TAUGHT AT SLOVAK SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF PUPILS LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN 1989 (IN %)	NUMBER OF PUPILS LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN 1991 (IN %)
Russian	100	14.0
German	12.3	22.5
English	1.4	17.6
French	0.8	1.8

**Table. 1** Number of pupils learning foreign languages at Slovak schools in 1989

It is clear that together with a decline in learning the Russian language, the number of pupils learning all other languages increased more or less rapidly. The alarming fact was that more than 44.1% elementary school pupils were not, at that time, learning any foreign language.

Another very important impact on the teaching of foreign languages in Slovakia occurred after 1993 when Czechoslovakia split up and Slovakia (as well as the Czech Republic) applied for membership in the European Union. Together with the "opening of windows and doors" to Europe, the necessity of effective foreign language

teaching has been emphasised. State educational institutions created an enormous activity to increase the number of qualified teachers of the most frequent/popular foreign languages in Slovakia (English, German, Spanish, Italian, and French) and to improve conditions for providing more available and effective language teaching at state schools on all levels. The first results became visible in 2000.

Table 2 shows the number of pupils learning foreign languages at Slovak elementary schools in 2000 (according to *The Statistic Annual Book of Education*, 2000):

FOREIGN LANGUAGES TAUGHT AT SLOVAK SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF PUPILS LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN 2000 (IN %)
English	51.3
German	45.1
French	1.8
Russian	7.0

**Table 2:** Number of pupils learning foreign languages at Slovak schools in 2000

A higher number of learners appeared in all the languages except Russian; moreover, the number of pupils who did not learn any foreign language decreased to 0.4%. However, the situation was not so favourable in teaching/learning foreign languages on ISCED level 1 (primary level of education starting in Slovakia at the age of six and lasting 4 years). By 2000, only 14.5 % of young learners in Slovakia were learning one foreign language, which means that 85.5 % of pupils between the ages 6 and 10 were not taught foreign languages at elementary schools at all.<sup>2</sup>

### CURRENT SITUATION

The preparatory processes regarding Slovakia's entering the EU included extensive and intensive education in foreign languages. Although the Slovak language (the national language of the Slovak people) has become one of the 25 official languages of the EU, the necessity to acquire appropriate skills for communication with other member countries (there are currently 450 million Europeans) has increased significantly. An interesting position is that the European authorities do not favour efforts to establish one official language of the Union. The European document, "Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: Action Plan 2004-2006" (2003), declares that "learning one *lingua franca* alone is not enough"; on the contrary, it stresses the necessity of language diversity, stating that "diversity of languages is the richness of Europe" (Action Plan, 2004, p. 4) and encourages people to learn,

in addition to their mother tongue, at least 2 foreign languages on a level of mastery. Moreover, the teaching/learning of rarely-taught languages (i.e. languages of small communities with a constantly decreasing number of speakers) is highly valued and extra-funded by European educational programmes. The reality is, however, a little bit different: The range of foreign languages frequently used by citizens is much narrower than the authorities would wish. The group of foreign languages most widely taught/learned at European schools includes English, French, German, Spanish and Russian.

In recent years, the European Council extended its recommendations and declared an objective called M+2 "to improve the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age". In an adult age, the command of these two languages should be on an advanced level and, in addition to this, it is also recommended that Europeans know another European language on the level of basic communication strategy. This rationale is connected with other important tasks to be fulfilled within national educational systems such as

- to build language-friendly schools and language-friendly educational environments,
- to extend the possibilities of teaching/learning a wide range of foreign languages,
- to prepare qualified teachers for a wide range of foreign languages,
- to develop effective instruments for testing language skills,

<sup>2</sup> Precise numbers with detailed interpretations dealing with the situation in all the member states of EU were published in statistics annuals, or in EURYDICE and EUROSTAT reports.

- to apply the ICT in teaching more effectively,
- to develop new highly-effective methods of foreign language teaching/learning leading to so-called European **plurilinguism** (i.e. the ability of European citizens to speak at least 3 languages).

The above EC development has manifested itself in the Slovak educational system by the fact that the beginning of foreign language teaching has been permanently descending to lower age categories. This can be illustrated by the latest research carried out by a team from Constantine the Philosopher University in

Nitra which showed that in 2003, the number of schools where pupils learn at least one foreign language on ISCED level I as a compulsory subject increased to 79.8% (see Table 3); as an optional subject to 41.7%; and that there was no elementary school in Slovakia which did not provide foreign language teaching for young learners, which is a radical change when compared to the situation in 2000. (Precise data and their detailed interpretation, which will result from the long-term research conducted by the research team of the Department of Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Education of the CPU in Nitra –whose members are also the authors of this paper– will be published in November 2004.)

FOREIGN LANGUAGE IS TAUGHT AS A SUBJECT	COMPULSORY	OPTIONAL	IS NOT TAUGHT
(in %)	79.8	41.7	0.0

**Table 3.** The number of Slovak elementary schools teaching foreign languages as a compulsory subject in 2003 (preliminary results)

It is curious that the main propelling forces behind the above changes are the parents of pupils. However, the rule is very clear: If an elementary school does not offer foreign languages, parents refuse to sign up their children and the school loses its state subventions. This pressure helps extend possibilities of foreign languages teaching. On the other hand, the range of taught languages is extremely narrow: It is obvious that Slovak parents are enormously interested in English lessons for their children (It is roughly estimated that nearly 92% of Slovak pupils learn English.), dismissing

other foreign languages that were popular in the past.

### CLIL—AN EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The most relevant aspects of the European strategy for language learning, or building European plurilinguism, include the development of language diversity, application of **learner-centred approaches** as well as **respecting learners' autonomy**. They are the reasons why the European authorities singled out CLIL from among

numerous methodological approaches as one of the most effective, and thus recommended, methods in foreign language education (The White Paper, "Teaching and Learning – Towards the learning society", 1995). At the same time, it was recognized as an appropriate approach for the teaching of foreign languages to young learners.

Historically, CLIL as an approach using content (subject matter) for the purposes of foreign language teaching continues in the tradition of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Unlike other teaching methods, it integrates subject matter learning, which is usually provided in the mother tongue, and foreign language learning in which the foreign language is not a goal of learning, but a medium for the communication of its content. It thus enables students to practise foreign language communication skills through contextualized tasks. It means that through CLIL, a particular foreign language (in the European context it is usually English) is not taught/learned as only a subject, but as a crucial instrument for teaching other subjects (mathematics, geography, history, etc.) (CLIL Compendium, 2001).

More than other methodological approaches, the CLIL effectively fulfils the following important learners' needs:

- It provides learners with meaningful and everyday input (Learners are not learning language for the sake of language alone, but language for learning, e. g. Slovak pupils are learning about typical weather in Great Britain through appropriate English vocabulary, or Spanish students are

learning about English history through the English language.);

- It gives learners opportunities to use language meaningfully and productively (Learners communicate in a foreign language not for the sake of pure communication, but to give and receive new information.);

- It gives learners opportunities to use a foreign language in natural or very close-to-real circumstances (While giving and receiving new information, learners really communicate!);

- It shifts the attention of learners from a foreign language itself to the communicated content that could encourage less-skilled students to communicate in a foreign language.

Thus, one can ask whether CLIL is not too demanding for language teachers by asking them to become language teachers and content teachers in one person. It is important to note here, however, that at elementary schools (ISCED level 1), the curriculum content is not so demanding that language teachers cannot manage it. On higher levels, standard preparation of language teachers for ESP is adequate.

### **CLIL AS A PATH TO PLURLINGUISM**

Former definitions of CLIL stressed teaching non-language content. However, today CLIL is used also for teaching combinations of foreign languages (one target language and several complementary languages, e.g. teaching French through English for pupils speaking Slovak as their mother tongue).

In such a case, this approach integrates target language learning and content that

is created by selected items (vocabulary, phrases, or functional elements –not grammar!) of complementary languages. As a typical example, a lesson in which learners collect familiar greetings in various languages (*Good morning! Guten Tag! Zdravstvujte! Dobrý deň!*, etc.) could be used. The main aim of CLIL in such context is to motivate young Europeans through functional introductions of new foreign languages and to learn more foreign languages resulting in the development of plurilinguism and multiculturalism.

The main benefits of such application of CLIL can be summarized as follows:

- improving overall target language competence;
- deepening the awareness of the mother tongue, target language and a wide variety of other languages;
- increasing learner motivation for language learning through creating realistic, educational circumstances in the language classroom;
  - facilitating the EU integration and further internationalisation;
  - developing intercultural communication skills;
  - developing intercultural knowledge and tolerance;
  - getting informed about other countries, regions, cultural communities and minority groups (developing multicultural attitudes and interests);
  - learning how to live in a wider cultural context;
  - developing communicative skills in a target language as well as in other languages (developing plurilingual competences);

- preparing for future studies and/or working life.

The application of CLIL as an instrument of plurilinguism raises demands for foreign language teachers as they themselves should be able to speak several languages, or, at least, master selected elements. It must be noted here, however, that so far there are just a few of such teachers in Slovakia. To cope with the new situation, special courses in complementary languages are prepared and provided for in-service teachers, widening the scale of their plurilinguism. At the same time, curricula of faculties of education are being adjusted by increasing the number of foreign languages as well as the number of lessons dedicated to foreign languages (Currently every graduate of a faculty of education must have a command of at least two foreign languages.).

Since the best way to explain something is to give a concrete example, we would like to present a lesson plan of a model lesson applying the CLIL method. The lesson was prepared for Slovak pupils learning English as a target language, and, at the same time, getting basic vocabulary of other (complementary) languages. In a good teaching practice of CLIL, max. 2 complementary languages are required to avoid overloading children's attention and memory. To better illustrate the example, we have decided to use in our model lesson 4 complementary languages: Czech and Polish are languages of the countries neighbouring Slovakia, their sounding being very close to that of the Slovak language; French and German languages are representatives of the most popular foreign languages in Slovakia

(in addition to English, understandably). Although the lessons also introduce new vocabulary of complementary languages, the main aim is to improve communicative skills of pupils in the target language.

In applying CLIL, it is important that the teacher be able to communicate not only in the target language, but s/he must know

basic vocabulary and pronunciation of the complementary languages as well. To meet this condition, multilateral international partnerships of elementary schools (within the EU's Socrates programme) are created, with each partner school usually preparing suitable CLIL materials for both itself and its partner schools.

### MODEL LESSON

**Topic:** WEATHER IN EUROPE

**Mother language:** Slovak

**Medium language:** English

**Level of pupils:** Beginners (after 60 lessons of English)

**Other languages involved:** Czech, Polish, German, French

**Objectives:** To learn about weather conditions in Europe through English as a foreign language. The secondary aim is to introduce related basic vocabulary of complementary languages

**Grammar structure:** Practicing questions and answers in the target language:

What is the weather like in Germany today? It is sunny in Germany today.

What is the temperature in the Czech Republic today? It is 19 degrees centigrade.

**Previous vocabulary revised:** Countries (Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Italy, Great Britain, France), numbers (0 – 30).

**New vocabulary:** Sunny, raining, windy, cloudy, snowing, stormy, tornado, degrees centigrade

**Material aids:** A map of Europe, cards with weather symbols (see Chart 1), weather forecast from a newspaper (weather map is necessary), multilingual weather chart (see Chart 2).



Chart 1











LANGUAGE						
English	sunny	rainy	cloudy	snowy	stormy	tornado
Czech	slunečno	děš	oblačno	sníh	bouře	tornádo
Polish	słoneczno	deszcz	pochmurno	ośnieg	burza	tornado
German	Sonnenschein	der Regen	bedeckt	der Schnee	der Sturm	der Tornado
French	Soleil	pluie	temps nuageux	neige	orage	tornado

Chart 2

**Lesson Steps:**

1. Introduction: motivating dialogue about weather (in Slovak), using funny questions:
  - What is the weather like today?
  - What was the weather like when you were born?
  - What was the worst weather you remember?
  - What weather does your dog prefer?
2. Introducing new vocabulary by using weather cards as visual aids, pronunciation drill
3. Talking about weather in the target language (English). Practising grammar structures:
  - What is the weather like today? It is sunny.
  - The teacher asks questions and shows the weather symbols as prompts for a pupil to formulate answers.
4. Talking about weather in Europe according to a weather map that the teacher took from a newspaper weather forecast.
  - What is the weather like in Poland today? It is cloudy.
5. Completing the weather chart:

COUNTRY	WEATHER	TEMPERATURE IN DEGREES CENTIGRADE
Slovakia	 ....	....
Germany	.... cloudy	16 °C
Great Britain	 ....	....
....	....	....

6. Relaxing activity: mini-pexeso (card game) with weather symbols.
7. Introducing vocabulary of complementary language through English questions:  
What would Polish people say about today's weather?  
How do Polish people say it is sunny?  
(This is the possibility to fix English vocabulary and grammar structure in a very realistic situation: pupils repeat English phrases rather subconsciously as they are more focused on their content and on the sound of the Polish words).
8. Drawing pictures "Beautiful/terrible weather in Slovakia" for pupils of partner schools.
9. Evaluation of the lesson; assigning homework.

### Possible Variations of the Lesson for Pupils of a Higher Level of English Proficiency:

1. Introducing richer vocabulary
2. Practicing tense changes: What was the weather like in Slovakia today? What will the weather be like in Italy tomorrow?
3. Talking about a hypothesis: What would you do if there was a tornado in Nitra today?

### CONCLUSION

The aim of our paper was to explain the current situation in foreign language teaching in Slovakia (in the context of the European Union), with special emphasis on the development of plurilinguism. We have chosen one of the integrated approaches to languages teaching – CLIL (Content and

language integrated learning) which was proved to be an effective way not only of foreign language learning, but also for the development of plurilinguism and multicultural education; that is, the concepts representing main goals of European education for this decade.

Since the CLIL based teaching of foreign languages is relatively new and not verified

in the context of Slovak education, it has not been possible to offer any empirical research results so far. The Department of Foreign Languages at the Faculty of Education of Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra is involved in an international Comenius/Socrates project focused on the measurement of effectiveness and identification of key circumstances relevant for a massive application of the method at Slovak schools (using the method in the environment of "small" languages - where the Slovak language can be ranked, advantages and risks for young children resulting from the learning of several foreign languages simultaneously, psychological and pedagogical conditions of CLIL, a new role of the teacher, new impulses for teacher training, new ways of testing and evaluation, development of materials suitable for CLIL, etc.). The experience of the schools already applying the method has shown its great didactic potential which is, consequently, expected to improve the overall quality of language teaching to younger learners.

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