

CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING – IMPROVEMENT OF STUDY PROCESS

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Abstract. Today the CLIL (content and language integrated learning) competencies play a very important role in the labour market of Latvia, as the processes of integration and globalization have become very fast. The students in the process of studies should acquire the knowledge and skills for mastering these competencies in order to be able to integrate in this market after the graduation from the university. Cross-cultural communication competencies can be considered as one of the core CLIL competencies. It can cause problems if the communication participants are not competent in the specificity of other partners' culture, traditions and habits. The article describes the mentioned competencies, presents the definitions and suggests the ways of improving the process of studies through application of the CLIL methods.

Key words: CLIL (content and language integrated learning), competencies, cross-cultural communication, process of studies.

Introduction

Since Latvia has joined the European Union the CLIL (content and language integrated learning) competencies have become crucial in our country. The students of Latvian higher schools have many opportunities to study abroad and foreign students are studying in Latvia. The prerequisites for successful co-operation in this field are developed competencies in foreign languages and cross-cultural communication. They can be considered as very important CLIL competencies.

The aim of the research is to investigate the possibilities how to improve the process of studies at the Latvia University of Agriculture through application of the CLIL methods in order to master the competencies of the students.

The methods applied in the research are the study of scientific literature, enquiry and description of the personal experience of the authors of the article.

Theoretical background

Many definitions of competencies exist in the scientific literature. Still there are different approaches in defining this term and the opinions of the scientists vary in this respect greatly.

The authors of the article will try to reveal the essence of one of the most important core CLIL competencies – cross-cultural communication – as it is the object of the research in this particular case. CLIL is the acronym for content and language integrated learning. “It is an educational approach in which languages and skills of communication are given a prominent role within a curriculum. It is often carried out by professionals who teach on courses other than languages”. (Marsh D., Marsland B., Stenberg K., 2001). Another definition given by the same scientists: “CLIL is a multi-faceted approach which is implemented to reach specific outcomes which enhance the learning of field-specific education alongside”.

It does not mean learning languages but acquiring the content of the specialty applying the competencies of foreign languages.

CLIL is not a new concept. It has been used since the dawn of civilization. Nevertheless, the needs for introduction of CLIL today are new; they are determined by the globalization and integration processes in the world.

One of these needs is put up by the exchange programs of students and teachers organized at higher schools of Latvia. To be able to learn or teach in a foreign country both need to master their cross-cultural communication competencies.

Also the possibilities for the graduates from higher schools to work in joint-venture companies in Latvia or abroad determine the need to be competent in cross-cultural communication. If they lack this communication skill, it can cause a lot of problems. We can distinguish among five CLIL dimensions (See Fig. 1). Cross-cultural dimension includes cross-cultural communication.

Cross-cultural communication means communication among individuals representing different identities and culture. There can be cultural, political, religious etc. barriers. Cross-cultural communication requires the competencies that ensure the knowledge of the world that is very various. It depends upon the persons, groups of persons, regions, age, sex, experience, traditions, politics, race etc.

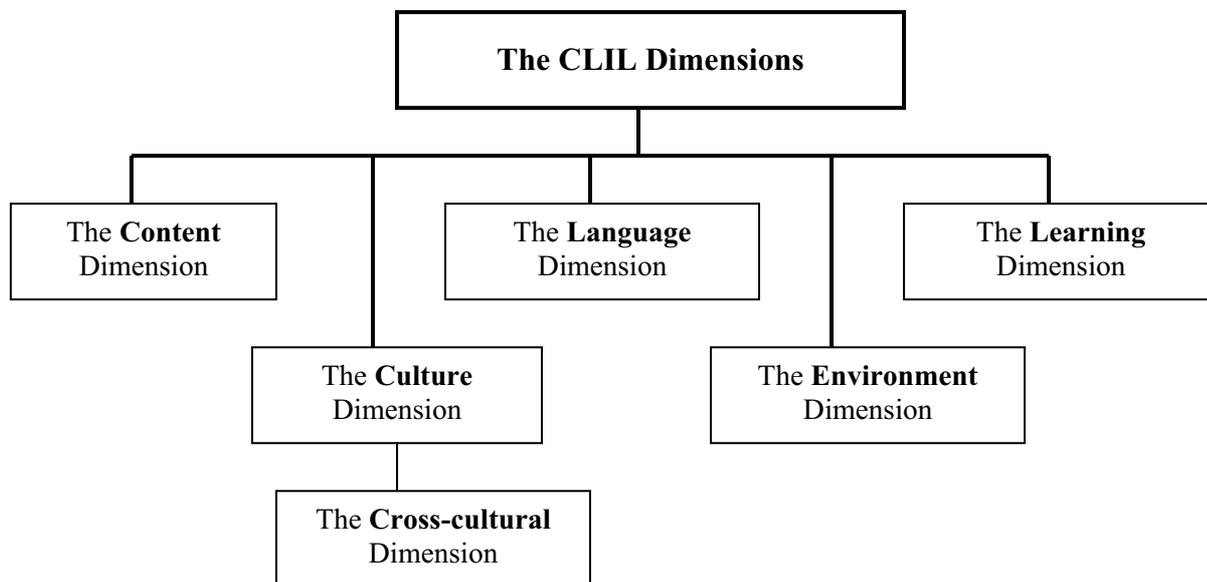


Fig. 1. **The CLIL Dimensions**

Good cross-cultural communication competencies are needed also in professional life for the workplace. Multinational companies often rely on external relationships as they “help these firms strengthen and extend their traditional competencies while responding to the demands of globalization, mass customization, enhanced quality, and rapid technological change.” (Mascarenhas B., Baveja A., Jamil M., 1998). In order to be able to establish and maintain external relationships the employees should master not only the knowledge in a specialized field but also develop cultural awareness, foreign language skills and cross-cultural communication competencies. Professional skills alone cannot ensure promotion, the specialists should be ready to understand their colleagues and react accordingly in compliance with the given situation regardless of the cultural diversities between them. The more we know about the culture of the country where we are, the more successful we will be. Reaching this aim the specialists will be successful in the vast European labour market. CLIL competencies also help people be more self-confident to make a career.

Professional specialists establishing contacts with representatives of different enterprises from different countries should pay attention to three behavior categories: organization, management and communication (See Figure 2).

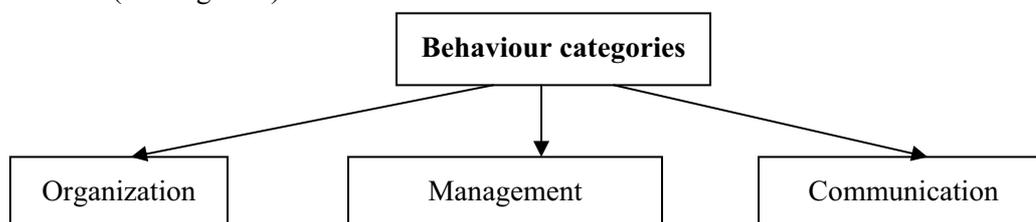


Fig. 2. **Three behavior categories**

Organization includes the totality of values and the role of a person in it – how work is organized and planned, how information is searched for and disseminated, how the results are evaluated. All these activities are developed through application of the CLIL methods.

The other category of behavior, management, includes the following questions: who has the power, how was it obtained, how is it used, what does the authority depend on, who takes decisions, what qualities are necessary to be a good manager.

Communication is a very wide notion and includes many different aspects. The authors of the article consider that the most essential aspects that are necessary for cross-cultural communication are language, identity and culture (See Figure 3).

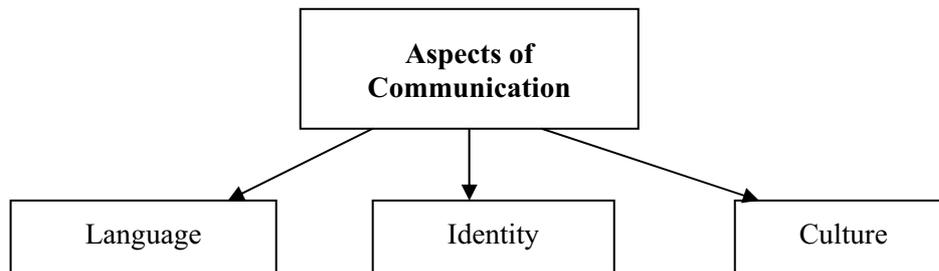


Fig. 3. The most essential aspects of communication

If a person can express him/herself in a **language** that is not the mother tongue, it is already a step towards cross-cultural development. Language since ancient times has been also the means of accumulation of information and it forms the structure and the system for the stored information. This is the reason why language establishes conceptual or even perceptual rules and as such it is the code of culture and every language is the basic element of some culture. It causes difficulties to combine, understand and apply different languages in communication even if the systems of these languages are known to all participants of communication.

Nevertheless, communication among professional specialists includes more social and professional differences although even several languages can be used among them. This explains the fact why professional terminology or slang can sometimes be more easily understandable among specialists of the same profession speaking in different languages than among people having the same native language representing different social or professional groups.

Understanding of national **identity** is very important for successful communication. Identity is what remains unchanged imperishable and permanent in the activities of a person or a group of persons. Identity is a form and a kind of perception to interpret dialectics of the world and oneself. What determines identity? (See Figure 4).

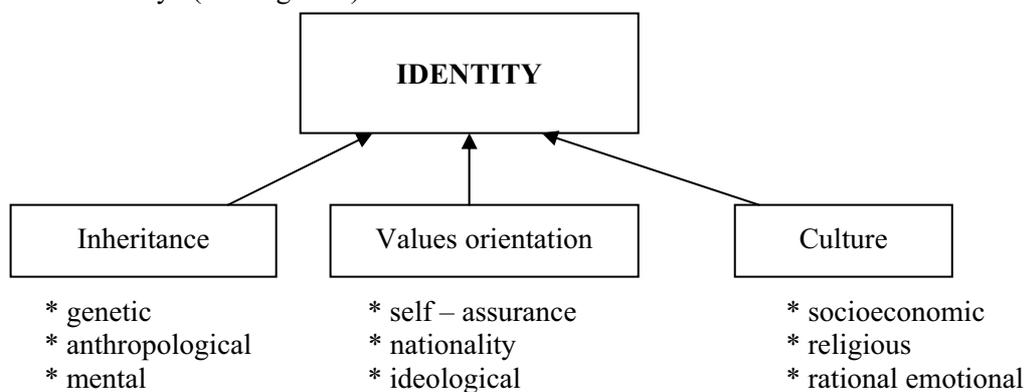


Fig. 4. Aspects of identity

Inheritance includes genetic and anthropological aspects, which are relatively little changing. The anthropological aspect is information on human physical organization, races and body structure and variations in the structure of the body common to the whole mankind. Mental-related to the research phenomenon in pedagogies and manifests as maintenance of relations and understanding in the inheritance.

Value orientation includes self assurance, which is oriented to the basic issues of personality: “Who am I?”, “What do I wish?” and “What can I hope?” Nationality is related to national and nationality. The national is people of the country, but nationality – one of the forms of human relations. Nationality formed linguistically, territorially, economically, psychologically and culturally. It is a natural formation (various in different countries). People should live in accordance with it. This accordance is different for different groups of people. Ideological means collection and systematization of national cultural values.

CLIL offers a possibility to apply different methods of teaching and learning (Marsh, 2001). Here are some of the most important methods that can be applied in CLIL mentioned (See Fig. 6):

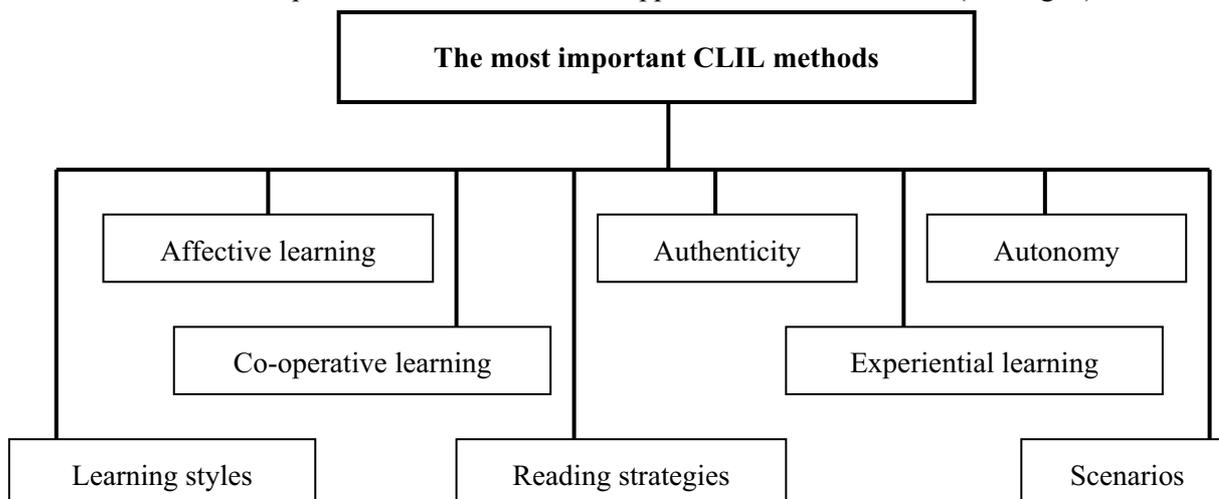


Fig. 6. The most important CLIL methods

Affective learning. This takes into consideration both positive and negative emotional reactions and has a basis in personality and socio-educational background. Affective learning is primarily of interest for student motivation. Different people, for example, react differently to different teaching methods. There is often a relation between affective reactions in the student and his/her learning style.

Authenticity. There should be few problems with authenticity in a CLIL classroom since the learning situation is real by definition. The question is rather if the students are aware of this, or whether they tend to keep the view that use of the language in the classroom is “unreal”.

Autonomy (self-directed learning). The aim of all teaching should be to make the learner independent of the teacher. Autonomy results from a conscious strategy to guide the students towards being free to determine their own actions and ways of performing them. Some students may be completely unused to self-directed ways of studying and need to be trained for autonomy.

Co-operative learning (peer learning). This is a useful approach in CLIL as the students are trained to solve problems together. As with other strategies related to self-directed learning or autonomy, the students must be taught how to learn through such methods. Again there is a connection to affective learning. If the students are expected to work in ways they are unfamiliar with or otherwise do not understand the task, their reactions may be emotionally negative.

Experiential learning. This involves stepping into personal language situations, using communication in an authentic context. This is exactly what CLIL is about, gaining experience in both content and language at the same time.

Learning styles. Some students learn in an analytical way, needing details to add up into a whole. Others work the other way, needing a whole, a holistic picture or vision of what it is all about, and finding out about details later. Whatever studies are performed, the learning situation should meet the needs of both categories and all the varieties in between the extremes, consider the question of affective reactions in connection with learning styles. Certain learning styles are closely linked to successful language learning. These are called language-learning styles.

Reading strategies. People rarely have balanced competencies in different forms of language skills. Speaking may be easier for some than others. However, reading (and writing) skills frequently need to be taught. CLIL invariably requires use of written materials such as handbooks, manuals, magazine articles, IT materials, and so on. The consequences are that we must develop students' reading strategies, being observant of those who may have difficulties. Students need strategies such as skimming and scanning and dealing with texts that are initially too difficult for them. Students would also benefit from knowing when to use receptive reading, that is to store information, and when to employ responsive reading, that is where they react with an answer or an action, such as in an instruction.

Scenarios. Scenarios are closely connected to authenticity. They create a complete situation, as real as possible, where students have to solve problems and build up adequate content structures.

Conclusions

1. The processes of integration and globalization are fast in Latvia today. It determines the necessity for the young specialists to be competent enough not only in their profession but also in cross-cultural communication in order to be able to integrate in the labour market after the graduation from the university.
2. Since Latvia has joined the European Union, the students of Latvian higher schools have many opportunities to study abroad, and foreign students are studying in Latvia. The prerequisites for successful co-operation in this field are developed competencies in foreign languages and cross-cultural communication, as they can be considered as very important content and language integrated learning competencies.
3. CLIL is the acronym for content and language integrated learning. It is an educational approach in which languages and skills of communication are given a prominent role within a curriculum. It is often carried out by professionals who teach on courses other than languages. The definition is given by the leading CLIL specialists in Europe David Marsh, Bruce Marsland and Kurt Stenberg.
4. In order to establish and maintain contacts with representatives of various enterprises from different countries, the specialists should consider the CLIL dimensions and behaviour categories: organization, management and communication.
5. Application of the CLIL methods in the process of studies helps the students acquire the necessary CLIL competences, have cross-cultural communication training in order to widen their experience in this field, as CLIL is a tool for cross-cultural learning.

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