

INTEGRATING ART INTO TEACHING ENGLISH AT A PRIMARY LEVEL: A CASE STUDY

Zuzana Straková

Abstract: The article describes a case study of content and language integrated learning with the focus on art integration. CLIL has become a widely discussed topic within ELT and the main reason is the meaningfulness it brings into foreign language teaching. The case study presents the results of a CLIL unit taught at primary level with the intention to monitor the ability of learners at elementary level to cope with fine art and language production oriented tasks.

Key words: content and language integrated learning, art in English language teaching, primary level, case study

Introduction

Last decades brought a very intense discussion about the benefits of integrating other school subjects or areas into teaching English. Numerous articles and research findings documented using other school subjects in combination with teaching foreign languages since 1990s. In general, content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is commonly described as “*using a language that is not a student’s native language as a medium of instruction and learning for primary, secondary and/or vocational-level subjects such as maths, science, art or business*” (Mehisto et al.).

There are basically two ways of how this integration can be organised depending on the conditions in which teachers operate. It can weave into the content subject with the focus on learning and language skills or vice versa through the foreign language lessons focusing on the content areas as well as learning skills. The decision to choose the direction of using CLIL will depend on the qualification of teachers as well as willingness to cooperate with other colleagues. The ideal situation is if a language teacher is also qualified for teaching a content subject such as geography, maths, history etc. since it eliminates the necessity to spend too much time on team planning a preparation. Instead such teachers can make decisions of what kind of content can be integrated and when more easily since they know the syllabus of both language and content subjects in detail.

However, the most common situation is the team work of content and language teachers who plan the integration together in both language and content subject lessons. They choose the areas, they select language and content aims as well as learning strategies which should be used in learning.

Mehisto et al. (2008) stress the interconnection of content-language-learning skills in CLIL orientation and highlight the following as the most important focus in creating a supportive CLIL environment:

- *grade-appropriate levels of academic achievement in subjects taught through the CLIL language;*
- *grade-appropriate functional proficiency in listening, speaking, reading and writing in the CLIL language;*
- *age-appropriate levels of first language competence in listening, speaking, reading and writing;*

- *an understanding and appreciation of the cultures associated with the CLIL language and the student's first language;*
- *the cognitive and social skills and habits required for success in an ever-changing world.* (Mehisto et al. 2008:12)

Slovak schools are no exception in trying out new ways of teaching languages and through these experiments even teachers of other subjects get new ideas and experience the change in teaching their subjects. Pokrivčáková et al. (2010:9-12) carried out a project through which they wanted to both inform teachers of possibilities to introduce CLIL in their teaching as well as verify the “*didactic efficiency of CLIL at the first level of basic schools in foreign language teaching*”. The results of the project are very encouraging since it shows the rising interest of teachers who are willing to invest their time and experience in designing new ways of language development.

Art in the language classroom

In general the most frequent content subjects selected for integration are science subjects such as geography, biology, maths, and physics although other subjects such as history, music or arts are also quite frequently considered by teachers.

This study focuses on art as one of the resources which can be integrated into English language teaching. The reasons for integration do not differ from the general reasons for using CLIL in the classroom; however, using art in teaching other subject represents an added value in developing aesthetic feelings of the learners leading them towards recognition of fine art masterpieces as well as stirring creativity of the learners.

It is certainly not a new phenomena and it has been used by some practitioners with a variety of outcomes. Even some authors of EFL textbooks acknowledge the importance of including the links towards art in their textbooks. However, the good practice examples are rather spare since classroom teachers often do not feel confident enough to work with art if they are not qualified arts teachers. Their worries include uncertainty whether students might be interested in fine art in general, if they as teachers will be able to provide enough information about the individual pieces of art, or if they should bother at all since there are so many exercises in their textbook which need to be covered.

Another worry might be connected to language proficiency level of students. Teachers might be concerned whether their students are able to describe or to discuss the fine art work or whether they should wait until they master the language at higher level. Grundy et al. (2011:10) claim that “*one of the most significant methodological issues in language teaching is the issue whether we learn language in order to use it or whether we learn a language through using it.*” While working with a textbook usually directs the learner towards one expected outcome, involving art in teaching means opening the gates for freer use of the language and for attempts to succeed with whatever is at learner's disposal at the moment. Most of the times the students are focused on real cognitive processes – thinking about the piece of art, receiving messages, creating an opinion, expressing that opinion – rather than rehearsing, practising those processes and looking for the correct answer.

New digital world entered even the world of education and the technologies which are being used nowadays at school can bring even original fine art masterpieces closer to the learners. We no longer need to take the class to the gallery – unless we want the real feeling – in order to introduce the fine art to our students. That makes it easier even for the language teachers who otherwise would find it difficult to excuse the entire class from the lessons to take them to the gallery. Digital technologies and especially Internet websites can expose the learners to what we need and any time we want.

A nice example of using famous paintings is described by Reilly and Reilly (2005). They suggest using Van Gogh's painting My Bedroom for an activity in which through systematic use of language learners practise picture description and use of There is/There are:

- *Show the children the Van Gogh picture. Tell them that the artist was called Vincent Van Gogh and although he is very famous now, he was very poor when he was alive. Tell them how much this painting is worth now.*
- *Elicit the vocabulary they can see: window, chairs, bed, pictures, mirror, table, walls, floor. You could also teach blanket, sheets, pillows, coat hook, if they are useful words for your class.*
- *Draw a table on the board similar to the one below and write in the nouns in column 5.*

1	2	3	4	5
				chair window pictures bed

- *Elicit the colours they can see in the painting and encourage them to make pairs with the nouns, for example, blue walls, a red blanket, and write the colours in column 4 next to the correct noun.*
- *Remind the children that when we want to describe the existence of something, we can say: There is (there's)/There are. Write There in column 1 and is/are in column 2.*
- *Add a/an in column 3 if the noun is singular or some if it is plural. Alternatively, you may wish to add numbers in this column, for example, There are two brown chairs.*
- *Now ask the children to think of their own bedroom and to write sentences about it, referring to the table above.*

Reilly and Reilly (2005:103-104)

Case study: background

The following case study is based on the aim to monitor whether the language level limits the interest of learners to work with art pieces and their language production. It describes an example of how art and language can be developed together in a class where the focus is not exclusively on language practice but where the goals have been set much wider.

Since we wanted to monitor how proficiency level limits the interest and ability to work with art in the class, we have chosen low elementary level - year five at a primary school – which means level where students are rather limited by what they can do with the foreign language.

The group of learners which have been selected for the case study had English classes four times a week and there were 16 learners in the group (10 girls and 6 boys). They were 10 years old and started to learn English in year 1 although the first two years they only had one lesson per week.

Case study: description and outcomes

The aims of the CLIL unit were set as follows:

- students will be able to recognize the famous fine art masterpieces
- students will recognize selected famous painters
- students will be able to express their feeling towards selected paintings
- students will be able to describe a picture using structure “There is/There are”

The entire CLIL unit which was focused on working with fine art consisted of a lead-in lesson, the theme lesson and the feedback lesson.

The lead-in lesson represented introduction into the theme Art in our life and was supported by a CLIL page in the learners' textbook (Project Third Edition 1, p.73) which we considered a good starting point for the entire theme.

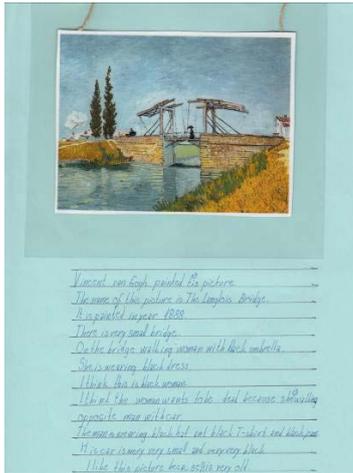
The lesson started with a PPT presentation in which learners were first confronted with the title Art in our Life and had a discussion about it in their mother tongue. After that they were shown four names of famous artists (Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, Leonardo da Vinci, Peter Bruegel) and were asked whether they recognised them. It was quite surprising that not many students were able to respond but some of these names sounded familiar to them. This created a strong learning point in this lesson. After disclosing they were all painters students were asked which one is the oldest and the youngest. Then they were shown their pictures and based on that their guesses were near right. After that the students were presented one selected piece by each painter and their task was to guess who the author was. The last painting (by Bruegel) was identical with the picture in their textbook so the students continued with some language work based on textbook exercises. At the end of the lead-in lesson their task was to describe selected parts of Bruegel's painting.

The theme lesson was focused on the language production and the main aim was to lead learners towards selecting a painting of their preference, describing it using the language they had at their disposal.

At the beginning the learners were presented a set of famous paintings with the name of the author at the back side, printed in colour and laminated. They were asked to look through them carefully and to choose the one they like. If learners recognised some paintings they had a tendency to select it. There was also a brief discussion about the paintings while introducing them. Once each learner had their painting their task was to prepare the promotion of this painting for their class gallery. Learners were presented the idea of designing a class gallery in their classroom and they were also told the promotion of new paintings will be recorded. That brought an element of interest as well as higher anxiety and learners were thinking more carefully about how they can present their painting to the others. Since we worked with 10 year-olds at elementary level they also needed some guidance. They were given the following guidelines:

- introduce the painting (its name)
- give the name of the author
- say what we can see there:
 - there's somebody/something (what it looks like, what colour it is; what people are wearing, etc.)
 - somebody is doing something - What is it?
 - something is happening – What is it?
- express whether you like this picture or not and why

After completing the tasks the written description were edited and written on the coloured paper with the laminated painting above it. We added a string to each paper in order to hang it up in their classroom.



The text of selected painting descriptions clearly shows that although the learners were given some structure they tried to express their feelings depending on their level of proficiency. Some of them went beyond their limits risking mistakes and some stayed within the safe ground:

Vincent van Gogh painted this picture.
 The name of this picture is The Langlois Bridge.
 It is painted in year 1888.
 There is very small bridge.
 On the bridge walking woman with black umbrella.
 She is wearing black dress.
 I think this is black woman.
 I think the woman wants to be dead because she walking
 opposite man with car.
 The man is wearing black hat and black T-shirt and black jeans.
 His car is very very small and very very black.
 I like this picture because it's very old.

This picture was painted by Claude Monet.
 The name of the painting is La Promenade.
 There is a woman in the picture.
 She is wearing a blue dress and a blue jacket.
 She is holding an grey umbrella.
 There is a boy in the picture.
 He is wearing a brown hat and a blue jacket.
 The woman is walking.
 I like this picture because it's very old and very beautiful.

Then learners presented their painting and each presentation was recorded. Most learners tried to learn their texts by heart but some of them tried to describe it freely supporting themselves by the text from time to time:



Summary

The Art in our Life unit in which we tried to monitor learners' behaviour and motivation demonstrated that if we manage to provide learners with meaningful task they are not so concerned with what they cannot do but rather try to use the language they have already mastered to create a meaningful message.

Integration of art and English Language widened the horizons of the learners not only because they have learnt famous names of artists and have seen famous paintings but because they had a chance to make several choices where they performed as active and creative users of the language. They did not mind stepping outside the boundaries since the task was open-ended and they felt the freedom of expression. On the other hand they could rely on the structure given by the teacher if necessary. This means that the language proficiency level does not limit performance and activity of the learners and CLIL art oriented activities can be used even with lower proficiency levels.

This case study is just an example of how integration can bring meaningfulness into the language learning stereotype.

References

- Bentley, K. (2009): *Primary Curriculum Box*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Calabrese, I., Rampone, S. (2007): *Cross-Curricular Resources for Young Learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cimermanová, I., (2009): Možnosti využívania prvkov integrovaného tematického vyučovania v rámci krúžkovej činnosti so zameraním na anglický jazyk. In: *Záujmová činnosť žiakov: stav, problémy, trendy*. Prešov: Katedra fyziky, FHPV PU, KEGA č.3/4114/06, 2009.
- Grundy, P., Bociek, H., Parker, K. (2011): *English through Art*. Helbling Languages.
- Hutchinson, T. (2008): *Project Third Edition 1*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mehisto, P., Marsh, D., Frigols, M. J. (2008): *Uncovering CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning in Bilingual and Multilingual Education*. Macmillan Education.

Pokrivčáková, S., Menzlová, B., Farkašová, E. (2010): Creating Conditions for Effective Application of CLIL Methodology in Slovakia. In: Pokrivčáková et al., *Modernization of Teaching Foreign Languages: CLIL, Inclusive and Intercultural Education*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2010, p.7 – 20.

Reilly, J., Reilly, V. (2005): *Writing with Children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

<<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/artists/coloring>>

<<http://www.vangoghgallery.com>>

This article presents findings collected while working on project KEGA 084UK-4/2011 and KEGA 3/7014/09.

Author

Doc. Zuzana Straková, Institute of British and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Prešov University in Prešov, Slovakia, e-mail: zuzana.strakova@unipo.sk