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ON THE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROBLEMS OF LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND THE USE OF CONTENT INTEGRATED LANGUAGE LEARNING (CLIL)

SOBRE LOS PROBLEMAS DE APRENDIZAJE DE IDIOMAS DE LOS ESTUDIANTES DE INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA Y EL USO DE CONTENIDOS PARA EL APRENDIZAJE INTEGRADO DE IDIOMAS (CLIL)

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ABSTRACT

Research in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education has revealed that students' beliefs about second language learning can vary based on individual characteristics, previous language learning experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Recognizing the significant impact of these variables on foreign language acquisition, it is important to understand the relationship between language learning priorities, goals, methods, and beliefs about language use among EFL learners at different proficiency levels. Considering this, in this research we analyze the relevance of different methods in teaching English as a Foreign Language. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is proposed as an alternative to traditional bottom-up approaches that artificially separate language and content due to grammar-based instruction. The content-based model seeks to achieve two objectives simultaneously: meeting language goals and content goals within language education. By aligning these aims, the model strives to facilitate the simultaneous acquisition of language skills and subject-matter knowledge. Since this method not only strengthens language skills, but also enriches the educational process by integrating meaningful content and promoting key cognitive skills, preparing students for an increasingly interconnected and multilingual world, for some time we have promoted its use in Azerbaijani language teaching institutions. In this regard, we developed a project of which we share some experiences in this work.

Keywords:

English as a foreign language (EFL), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), foreign language, learning method.

RESUMEN

La investigación en educación de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) ha revelado que las creencias de los estudiantes sobre el aprendizaje de una segunda lengua pueden variar según las características individuales, las experiencias previas de aprendizaje de idiomas y los antecedentes culturales. Al reconocer el impacto significativo de estas variables en la adquisición de una lengua extranjera, es importante comprender la relación entre las prioridades, los objetivos, los métodos y las creencias del aprendizaje de la lengua sobre el uso de la lengua entre los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera en diferentes niveles de dominio. Considerando esto, en esta investigación analizamos la relevancia de diferentes métodos en la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. El aprendizaje integrado de contenidos y lenguas (CLIL) se propone como una alternativa a los enfoques tradicionales ascendentes que separan artificialmente la lengua y el contenido debido a la instrucción basada en la gramática. El modelo basado en contenidos busca lograr dos objetivos simultáneamente: alcanzar las metas lingüísticas y las metas de contenidos dentro de la educación de idiomas. Al alinear estos objetivos, el modelo se esfuerza por facilitar la adquisición simultánea de habilidades lingüísticas y conocimientos de la materia. Dado que este método no sólo fortalece las habilidades lingüísticas, sino que también enriquece el proceso educativo al integrar contenidos significativos y promover habilidades cognitivas clave, preparando a los estudiantes para un mundo cada vez más interconectado y multilingüe, desde hace algún tiempo promovemos su uso en las instituciones de enseñanza del idioma azerbaiyano. En este sentido, desarrollamos un proyecto del cual compartimos algunas experiencias en este trabajo.

INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign language (EFL) education is taught using very up-to-date methods, based on communication and with a student-centered approach. In these respects, it is quite different from English courses in mainstream compulsory education. In the past twenty years, researchers interested in second language acquisition have focused their attention on the cognitive aspects of language learning. Research reveals that there are significant differences between students in terms of the use of language learning strategies and their achievements at the end of the language learning process. At this point, it is seen that the study of the factors that push students to approach a specific language learning task differently and lead to individual differences observed even in students with similar language skills is of great importance. It is considered that the beliefs that students bring to the learning environment in the classroom significantly contribute to the learning process and final success. Second and foreign language learners may have strong beliefs about the structure of the language being learned, language acquisition, specific language learning strategies, success, and learning methods. For example, “it can be said that students who pay a lot of attention to the parts of the word in order to guess the meaning of an unknown word have a belief that the analytical approach is effective in language learning” (Aydoghan, 2017).

Among the different approaches for teaching languages, CLIL – (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is an approach in which it is accepted that both language and subject contents have a common role (Morton, 2018). In this approach, a foreign language is usually used as a tool in learning a non-linguistic subject. The content-based foreign language teaching model aims to teach foreign language and content knowledge simultaneously, albeit at different levels (Dallinger et al., 2018). The model is often applied in countries where English is learned as a second language and in institutions that provide dual language education. Due to its popularity and usefulness, this model is a successful model systematically researched in the field of international foreign language teaching (Rodgers, 2015). In this sense, content-based teaching has been proposed as an alternative to bottom-up approaches, ending the unnatural separation of language and content that results from grammar-based instruction (Wesche & Skehan, 2002). The content-based model aims to achieve two goals instead of one by planning content goals in addition to language goals in language education. Therefore, bilingual education and content-based programs have been applied to many different student groups around the world.

Although field studies on second/foreign language learners’ beliefs, attitudes, priority goals, and learning strategies about language learning provide insight into the subject, there is a systematic need to examine the possible changes of these variables depending on the educational level of the students. In this context, this research study investigates the relationships between the beliefs and priorities of students of different ages and educational institutions regarding foreign language learning and language use, their language learning strategies, and their attitude towards the language learning process, with an interdisciplinary approach encompassing cognitive and social dimensions. The study also has a sociological dimension, as it includes the perspectives of foreign language students from various educational institutions with different demographic characteristics of society, a cognitive perspective in terms of exploring the relationships between students’ beliefs and language learning strategies, and an examination of students’ beliefs about learning a foreign language and their priorities aligned with these beliefs. Delibaş (2023, p. 49) notes a “metacognitive dimension in the context of shaping their determinations, and the attitude and approach they take towards language learning”.

Given this context, in this study we examine the significance of various methodologies employed in teaching English as a Foreign Language. In this regard we highlight the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach as an alternative to conventional bottom-up techniques that create an artificial divide between language and content due to their primary focus on grammar-based instruction.

METHODOLOGY

About the importance of English as a lingua franca

The widespread use of English as a global lingua franca across various domains has been particularly prominent in educational settings, where it often serves as the sole compulsory foreign language, as highlighted by Karakaş (2021). Aligning with this global trend, numerous countries have intensified their efforts to teach English and other foreign languages through innovative reforms and novel policy implementations. This has given rise to a myriad of concepts, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English as a Second Language (ESL), Teaching English as a Foreign/Second Language, Teaching English to Non-Native English Speakers (TESOL), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Content Integrated English Learning (CEIL), Non-Native English Teachers (NNEST), and English as a World Language (ELF), among others. These concepts reflect the evolving landscape of language

education and the growing recognition of English's global significance.

According to Muhammed and Mehmet (2013), the question of how to effectively teach a language has been a longstanding topic of discussion throughout the history of foreign language education. Foreign language teaching methods are systematic approaches that endeavor to guide students towards becoming more proficient and mature learners, transcending the mere acquisition of linguistic knowledge. The chosen method in language teaching is a crucial element that should facilitate the student's progress towards educational goals in the most efficient and reliable manner. In addition, the research conducted by Seis (2023) highlights that English language teaching is widely regarded as a paramount concern for language educators and learners worldwide. The primary objective of this field is to develop effective professional practices and find solutions to the challenges encountered in the process of language acquisition. Consequently, English language teachers often incorporate literary works, especially poetry, into their language classrooms, as literature, particularly poetry, serves as a valuable resource in language teaching by reflecting the thoughts, feelings, and cultural nuances of the writer's societal milieu. Indeed, poetry fosters students' critical thinking abilities, significantly supporting the development of 21st-century skills.

As asserted by several authors (Ding, 2021; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021) the significance of interpersonal communication in an increasingly globalized world is on the rise, necessitating the acquisition of foreign languages to facilitate communication across diverse domains. Throughout history, various languages have served as common tongues for people to communicate, and in the 21st century, English has emerged as the predominant global lingua franca. Driven by factors such as globalization, trade, international relations, diplomacy, and employment opportunities, English, recognized as a world language, has gained paramount importance in the realm of education. The widespread acceptance of English as a "common language of communication" (lingua franca) across the globe has also influenced the Arabic education system, where English language instruction has long been a crucial component of the curriculum.

About the methods of teaching and CLIL

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education employs highly contemporary methodologies that emphasize communication and student-centered approaches. In these regards, it differs significantly from traditional English courses within mainstream compulsory education systems. For example, the term ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) is often used interchangeably with EFL, but unlike EFL, it specifically refers to English language instruction provided to non-native speakers residing in countries

where English is the predominant native language spoken by the majority population. In this context, the methods employed in foreign language teaching have emerged as a response to address the shortcomings or inadequacies of existing approaches. These efforts have contributed to the more effective teaching of foreign languages by introducing alternative methodologies. Some of the language teaching methods include: Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Natural Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Cognitive-Code Method, Communicative Method, and Eclectic Method. Each of these methods brings a unique perspective and set of principles to the teaching of foreign languages. While some methods prioritize grammatical structures and translation, others emphasize immersive experiences and direct instruction in the target language. Due to these differences, next, we will highlight some of the most important elements of these methods.

1. Grammar-Translation Method: The origins of this method can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when it was employed for teaching Latin in the West and Arabic in the East. However, it was Karl Plötz (1819-1881) who consolidated the general principles and developed them into a cohesive approach. The method does not rely on a specific theory of learning; instead, it focuses primarily on reasoning, rule acquisition, and comparative linguistic studies. As Hengirmen (2006) notes, "Until 1970, all books on teaching Turkish to foreigners were written using the Grammar-Translation Method, and the majority of books published from 1970 to the present day were also prepared according to this method." This method remains in use within Arabic and Persian departments at universities in Turkey.

2. Direct Method/Direct Method: Developed in the 1950s as a reaction to the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method gained widespread adoption globally and in Turkey, supplanting the previously dominant approach. This method is termed "direct" or "indirect" because it establishes a direct connection between the target language and real-life situations, facilitating language learning without reliance on the learner's native tongue. The Direct Method introduced the initial ideas about developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills simultaneously. Additionally, Gouin's concept of physical activity (learning by doing) was incorporated as a new element in language teaching alongside this method. The Direct Method represents a significant shift from the Grammar-Translation Method's emphasis on rules and translation. Instead, it prioritizes immersive exposure to the target language, fostering communicative competence through practical, real-life scenarios. By eliminating the use of the learner's native language in the classroom, the Direct Method aims to replicate the natural process of language acquisition, akin to how children learn their first language.

3. Natural Method: The Natural Method emerged as a reaction against the Grammar-Translation Method, advocating for the teaching of a foreign language in a manner akin to how one's mother tongue is acquired. Unlike the Grammar-Translation Method, which focused on teaching the written language through classical literary works, the Natural Method aims to impart the living and spoken language of the current era. brahi mov (2023, p. 329) defines the Natural Method as "communicating with foreign language students through continuous speech using only the teacher's native language from the outset, and carrying out this interaction with a series of interconnected sentences that form a cohesive text, which can be understood without grammatical explanation".

4. Audio-Lingual Method: This method was developed in the 1930s, particularly with the assistance of the University of Michigan, when the American army needed to learn the languages of countries where they had established military bases, and existing methods yielded unsatisfactory results. The outcomes obtained through this new approach were highly successful, and subsequently, in the 1950s, the Audio-Lingual or Ear-Tongue Training Method gained widespread acceptance in secondary schools (Unsal et al., 2023). The Audio-Lingual Method was developed under the influence of behaviorist learning psychology (Skinner) and structuralist linguistic views (Bloomfield, Nelson Brooks, and Lado). It posits that natural language learning begins with listening, followed by the acquisition of speaking, reading, and writing skills. Consequently, this method places greater emphasis on listening comprehension and speaking than on other language skills (Karaka, 2021).

5. Cognitive-Code Method: The Cognitive-Code Method was developed in the 1960s by cognitive psychologist John Bissell Carroll and applied linguist Kenneth Chastain, influenced by the cognitive learning theorist Ausubel and the renowned linguist Noam Chomsky. It generally emerged as a response to behavioral language teaching approaches. The method argues that language is not merely a product of habit formation but rather a creative process. What distinguishes the Cognitive-Code Method from other methods is its emphasis on storing new information in a foreign language and establishing meaningful connections between new and previously acquired knowledge. For meaningful learning to occur, new learning must be integrated with existing knowledge (Marsh, 2012).

6. Communicative Method: The development of the Communicative Method was influenced by sociolinguist Hymes, language teaching experts Henry Widdowson, Christopher Brumfit, and Keith Johnson, as well as Chomsky's concepts of performance and competence regarding the nature of language. This method can be seen as a critique of the perceived shortcomings of

the Cognitive Method. While the Cognitive Method focused on characterizing the abstract abilities that enable a speaker to produce grammatically correct sentences, the Communicative Method theory posits that this approach is far removed from natural language use. It argues that language should be viewed as part of a broader theory that integrates communication and culture (Muhammed & Mehmet, 2013). Based on the theory that language is communication, the Communicative Method aims to develop communication skills. A student who acquires these skills possesses both the knowledge and the ability to use the language effectively.

7. Eclectic Method: The Eclectic Method is used in the sense of a selective approach, a combination of methods, or a compilation and synthesis of various methodologies. It is considered a method selection technique rather than a distinct method itself. The applied linguists Henry Sweet and Harold Palmer were among the first to propose this perspective. The main principle of the Eclectic Method is to embrace general principles in the field of language teaching instead of adhering to a single, precise methodological approach (Seis, 2023). Specific principles are developed according to the language being taught, and all available methods and tools are utilized to achieve the goal of language learning. The Eclectic Method advocates that an effective approach should primarily rely on the collective knowledge of linguistics and apply psychological principles when employing this knowledge. In this method, the teacher selects the most beneficial and useful aspects of various language teaching methods and adapts them to suit their specific purposes (Hengirmen, 2006, p. 36). The Eclectic Method acknowledges the strengths and limitations of individual methodologies and aims to create a customized approach that draws upon the most effective elements of each. By adopting an integrative and flexible stance, it allows educators to tailor their teaching strategies to the unique needs, proficiency levels, and learning styles of their students, as well as the specific goals and contexts of the language learning process.

On the other hand, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a widely adopted teaching approach employed in almost all European Union countries. Originated by the Finnish educator David Marsh, CLIL involves providing instruction in at least two languages. While some courses are taught in the students' first (native) language, others are delivered in a second language, which is typically a foreign language. The CLIL method aims to facilitate language learning by rendering it more engaging and enjoyable. Furthermore, students participating in CLIL programs demonstrate significantly higher language proficiency levels compared to their peers, and they are granted opportunities for further cultural enrichment and personal growth.

Specifically, the continuous emergence of alternative methods in foreign language teaching demonstrates that there is no single, perfect approach that can universally address the diverse needs and contexts of language learners (D. Xie & Sun, 2023). The success of any method ultimately depends on its ability to adapt and cater to the unique circumstances and characteristics of the target audience. For a method to be truly effective, it is crucial to consider and tailor its implementation based on various factors, including:

- **Personal characteristics of the target audience:** This encompasses aspects such as age, learning styles, motivation levels, and individual preferences of the learners. Recognizing and accommodating these individual differences is essential for creating an engaging and personalized learning experience.
- **Language environment:** The language spoken in the learners' immediate surroundings, whether it is the target language or their native tongue, can significantly influence the appropriate choice and application of teaching methods.
- **Economic and social situations:** The socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural contexts of the learners play a vital role in shaping their learning experiences and expectations. Methods should be adapted to align with the socio-economic realities and cultural sensitivities of the target audience.
- **Availability of resources:** The accessibility of instructional materials, technological tools, and other resources can impact the feasibility and effectiveness of certain teaching methodologies. Adapting methods to optimize the use of available resources is crucial.
- **Teaching objectives and learning goals:** Different methods may be better suited for specific language learning objectives, such as developing conversational fluency, mastering academic writing, or preparing for language proficiency examinations.

By considering these factors and tailoring the implementation of language teaching methods accordingly, educators can enhance the effectiveness of their instruction and create a more engaging and personalized learning experience for their students. Ultimately, we have seen that the ability to critically evaluate and adapt teaching methods to the unique needs and contexts of learners is essential for achieving successful language acquisition outcomes.

On the other hand, it is true that many countries where English is learned and used as a foreign language have struggled to implement a long-standing and consistently successful language education system. The limited opportunities for natural language exposure and the frequent changes in systems have hindered the development of desired English skills. However, it is encouraging to note that some positive steps have been taken in recent years to improve English education. From a constructive

perspective, we can highlight several factors that contribute to facilitating and enhancing the process of learning English such as:

- **Well-prepared, up-to-date educational programs:** The development and implementation of comprehensive and current educational programs tailored to the needs of language learners is a positive step forward.
- **Early introduction of English education:** The decision to introduce English language instruction from the 2nd grade in the educational system provides learners with an earlier exposure to the language, which can be beneficial for language acquisition.
- **Technological advancements:** The integration of technological tools and resources into language learning processes can create engaging and interactive learning environments, supporting students' language development.
- **Access to a wealth of resources:** The availability of numerous language learning resources, including online materials, multimedia content, and digital platforms, provides learners with diverse and accessible learning opportunities.
- **Integration of English elements:** The increasing presence of English elements in various aspects of daily life, such as media, entertainment, and popular culture, can contribute to creating an immersive and authentic language learning experience.
- **International exchange opportunities:** Programs like Erasmus+ offer students the chance to participate in international exchange programs, providing invaluable opportunities for language immersion and cultural exposure, further enhancing their language skills.

While challenges persist, these positive developments highlight the efforts being made to address the issues and create an environment that fosters effective English language (Cenoz et al., 2014). By capitalizing on these factors and continuously adapting to the evolving needs of learners and the changing educational landscape, further progress can be achieved in improving the quality of English education.

Considering the above, and in light of the benefits CLIL method, we are carrying out a project in Azerbaijan that endeavors to enhance the English language skills of our students by implementing the CLIL method. Through a meticulously designed activity booklet comprising well-planned, collaborative, and hands-on activities, we aim to ensure the effective utilization of the CLIL approach and to showcase its positive impact on English language learning, thereby inspiring other educational institutions to adopt similar practices. By seamlessly integrating content knowledge and language acquisition, the CLIL methodology creates an immersive and contextualized learning environment. Students not only acquire language skills but also deepen their understanding of subject-specific

content, fostering cognitive development and critical thinking abilities. Moreover, the cross-curricular nature of CLIL promotes interdisciplinary connections, enabling learners to perceive language as a tool for communication and knowledge acquisition across various academic disciplines.

As a training strategy, we encompass the following key elements: (1) requirements for the organization of training, (2) forms and methods of training delivery, (3) planning of the teacher's activities and (4) interpretation of content standards. We considered then that training must address:

a. Completeness of the Pedagogical Process - This requirement emphasizes the need for a comprehensive and holistic approach to the educational process. It entails the realization of training goals through a multifaceted approach that integrates developmental, educational, and formative aspects. Typically, when asked about completeness, students might initially refer to the presence of basic elements such as the teacher, students, and instructional materials. However, the true definition goes beyond these surface-level components and involves the complex interplay of various factors to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

b. Creating a Supportive Environment - As the term suggests, the training environment should be conducive to learning and personal growth. A supportive environment encompasses two crucial elements: material and technical support, as well as psychological support. Material and technical support refers to the physical environment and resources available in the classroom. Psychological support, on the other hand, involves fostering self-confidence in students, adopting a positive attitude towards them, encouraging freedom of thought, and cultivating an atmosphere of trust and respect.

c. Stimulation of Activity - This requirement emphasizes the importance of actively engaging and motivating students throughout the learning process. The teacher plays a pivotal role in monitoring and evaluating students' activities during training sessions. Evaluation can take various forms, such as displaying photographs of active students on classroom walls, offering small rewards or incentives, or providing verbal encouragement and acknowledgment of their efforts. The key aspect is to ensure that students' contributions and progress are consistently tracked and valued.

d. Development Orientation - This requirement focuses on tailoring the learning experience to individual students' needs and abilities. It involves closely monitoring their cognitive processes, analyzing their achievements, and adjusting the level of knowledge, skills, and habits accordingly. Recognizing that students within a classroom may have varying levels of proficiency, the development orientation calls for creating conditions that facilitate

step-by-step growth and progress for each individual learner.

So far, by implementing this project we have got numerous results like intertwining language acquisition with content instruction, students not only have advanced their language proficiency but also develop a deeper comprehension of the subjects being taught. Furthermore, this pedagogical approach not only has facilitated language learning, but we also believe that has nurtured critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and effective communication skills in English—skills crucial for both academic excellence and professional success of our students. Moreover, students have become more culturally aware and globally competent as they engage with diverse topics and materials presented in English. As in other projects, it has shown significant improvements in students' language fluency, academic achievements, and overall confidence in using English across various contexts, showcasing the efficacy and multifaceted benefits of the CLIL methodology.

CONCLUSIONS

Students of English as a foreign language often face significant challenges in academic writing, speaking, listening, and oral communication. These difficulties are linked to the demands of processing new content in real-time, unfamiliarity with using English beyond textbook exercises, and cultural differences in learning approaches, which can negatively impact their confidence, self-esteem, and overall engagement in language learning. To address these challenges, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a promising methodology that integrates language learning with subject content, providing students with opportunities to develop language skills while engaging with academic material in a meaningful context. Aligned with the communicative approach to language teaching, CLIL emphasizes communication, problem-solving, and comprehension through exposure to authentic language use, promoting a more natural and effective language acquisition process. By integrating language learning with subject content, CLIL offers a valuable approach to language education, enhancing language acquisition and proficiency in a meaningful and contextualized manner.

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