

Implementing CLIL Approach to Teaching ESP in Academic Contexts in Albania

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Abstract

The love of learning foreign languages and specifically the knowledge of English holds great importance in Albania, especially after the triumph of democracy, when everyone has gained the freedom to learn the language they wish and learn it well enough to implement into practice straightaway. While CLIL is considered as innovative approach, this paper identifies and examines the reason of the implementation of CLIL approach which might get well contextualized in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language at tertiary level institutions. This paper will outline how English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and especially Business English, is taught at the University of Tirana, Albania, and discuss some of the challenges teachers and students face while teaching/learning Business English. The research data in the case study comes from a needs analysis survey conducted by the author aiming at finding ways of improving the quality of ESP instruction at the university with the aim of implementing the innovative CLIL approach while teaching it.

Key words: CLIL, ESP, case study, tertiary education, needs analysis

Introduction

Taking into consideration the growing importance of ESP nowadays and more specifically the demand for terminological competence in the foreign language, as related to the learners' professional development, it is posited that students will learn the foreign language faster, better, and feel more confident in using it at the work place if they effectively master subject-specific/profession-related terms. Many theoretical and practical teaching approaches have been put forward and implemented with the sole aim of empowering ESP teachers to help their learners to better and within a shorter time acquire the language for professional communicative purposes (Belcher, 2006). This is precisely how CLIL approach was suggested as a possible path to achieving this aim, especially in secondary education ESP contexts (not so much at tertiary level so far). Referring to the University of Aston, CLIL is defined as “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language. That happens in the teaching and learning process, there is a focus not only on content, and not only on language”.

Surprisingly, CLIL is not so new approach in itself, as the practice of teaching and learning of various subjects through the foreign language of instruction has existed for many years. Just consider the early example of Latin, which was used as the language of instruction and learning across Europe in various professional contexts for many years (Marsh, Mehisto and Frigols, 2008, p. 9); moving forward to nowadays, we see that medical students at university still learn the Latin language for the designation of specific illnesses and medication terms, and this use of Latin for Specific Purposes (LSP) in their study area is very similar to the use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by, say, the students at the Faculty of Economy, or Faculty of Law, etc.

Although these two disciplines of language learning and specific content learning seem contradictory to each other and with no compatibility on different language aspects, they have many things in common and complement each other (Yang, 2016, p. 46) because they both focus on the development of the four language skills and can be easily integrated as learning approaches for the purpose of accommodating the learners' needs for communication, for instance in the courses of English for academic purposes. As cited in Yang (2016), “ESP has the single main aim of teaching and learning a foreign language, while CLIL places importance on content matter as well as on the status of the language but this does not make them two absolute opposites” (Yang, 2016, p. 46).

This paper argues that the implementation of the CLIL approach to the teaching and learning of Business English in the ESP tertiary level contexts, i.e. by using a variety of integrated activities exposing students to the authentic use of the English language in subject-specific contexts and communicative tasks related to their professional interests, will help university students develop not only their ESP communicative skills, but also critical thinking and professional communicative competence along with the language skills and terminological competence, and it will enhance their learning motivation and professional self-confidence.

ESP in the Context of Teaching Business English

The definition of ESP as argued by Hutchinson and Waters (2010), is more oriented for the language centered approach and it is more concerned with identifying the target situation first and then analyzing the target situation. The ability to use Business English appropriately in various communicative situations and professional contexts is considered an important learner target when teaching it first, because it relates language competence to communication performance in business contexts. This relationship gives further prominence to cross-cultural communicative competence and sound knowledge of subject-related professional terminology, both of which become important parts of Business English communicative competences.

Most of communications in business where English is the medium tool, are held between non-native speakers to non-native speakers, and the language they use is not that of native speakers but 'international English' (Guy & Mattock, 1993) which is somewhat different from the one of English-medium countries such as the UK and Australia. Guy & Mattock (1993) prefer to name it "Offshore English". People who share a first language, may share a common use of English which is not the same as native speakers' use by conditioning though the other party to shift from a literal understanding into a contextually based one just to get over the ideas. This way fosters the effective communication of international English. As English has become the international language of business, there are noticed two main aspects of interacting in business communication; first is the communication with the public and secondly the communication within or between the companies. The purpose of such interactions and the chosen topics in the field of business closely affect the choice of language.

Teaching English in one of the specific contexts is called 'English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Kennedy C Bolitho R, 1984)' and it came as an urgent need for combining together the English courses and learners' needs. In the vast area of ESP, Business English is only one of the examples of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Therefore, it includes topics of the business context like formal letters, emails, authentic materials and activities which help in upgrading specific terminology. As ESP combines the subject matter and English Language Teaching (ELT) skills, it also requires a teacher's awareness of the subject matter.

Differences and Similarities between ESP and CLIL

Many of the linguists and language scholars who have studied CLIL and its application in various FLT contexts state that this approach is not too different from the traditional ESP practice; however, some claim that from a theoretical viewpoint CLIL and ESP share many similarities but they are different in their practical implications. According to Vanessa Leonardi, a researcher and lecturer in English Language and Translation at the Italian University of Ferrara, 'there are more areas of convergence than divergence between ESP and CLIL and, therefore, English language learning in university contexts could benefit from a gradual and mutual collaboration between these two approaches' (Leonardi, 2015, p. 18). From a theoretical viewpoint CLIL shares some typical features as ESP approach; i.e. the use of context and content from subjects, the use of communicative language teaching methodology and the development of academic and communication skills carry the same importance in these two disciplines (Dalton-Puffer, 2010). While ESP focuses on the main aim of teaching and learning a foreign language; CLIL, on the other hand, puts more importance on content matter as well as the status of the language, and that is why often is raised the issue of who is better qualified at teaching CLIL; language teachers or content teachers? (Fortanet-Gómez, I. Bellés-Fortuño, B. 2008). Yet, both these two approaches create a challenge for the trinity; language teachers, content teachers and learners as well. Taking the example of Gonzalez Ardeo (Ardeo, 2013), while teaching at a Spanish University, he examined the coexistence of ESP and CLIL courses and found out that although CLIL seemed to be more liked by the majority of the students especially in the research setting, still both types of the course were a good match and were similarly liked.

Aiming to synchronize the higher education systems of the European countries and beyond (Wächter, 2004), and thus to internationalize universities and foster cooperation among academic staff and student mobility, higher education institutions everywhere made attempts at synchronizing their curricula. Internationalization of tertiary institutions implied the use of a global language such as the English language as a lingua franca to both attract students and staff from other countries to apply different internships and partnerships, as well as allowing one's own people to move out of their countries. Following this, University lecturers and teachers of English, then, had the free choice to decide whether to implement CLIL in their ESP classes or simply teach ESP in the traditional way of the book and syllabus frame, in order to meet their needs in the best way. (Leonardi, 2015, p. 18).

Structure and Aim of the Research

The study takes place in the Faculty of Economy of the University of Tirana and it aims to improve the quality of ESP communicative competence of students at this Faculty, by implementing a CLIL approach in their ESP classes, focused Business English. To achieve this aim first the CLIL methodology will be reviewed, revealing the major principles which underpin its success and examining the ways in which it could be implemented, not only in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) for general purposes, but also in teaching English for specific purposes and more specifically, Business English. An experimental CLIL syllabus was designed and special materials and activities were developed for the target group of students. The research is seen as innovative because to date the CLIL approach has not been implemented in the Albanian higher education system, particularly in teaching foreign languages for special purposes, and its use in the Albanian public schools has also been very limited. It is assumed that among the benefits of adopting a CLIL approach in the teaching of Business English at university level will be students' improved fluency and accuracy in communicative language use, as well as better command of profession-related language terminology. This new approach not only will equip students with better language knowledge and skills related to their area of study but also will increase their motivation and prepare them for the work-related context in which they will have to use the foreign language.

Preliminary Study Data Analysis

Prior to the start of the CLIL experimental case study, there were collected and documented some preliminary study data from the needs analysis (NA) questionnaires, conducted with both the students and teachers. The students involved in the experimental phase were 28 participants ($N=28$) and were assigned in two research groups, the experimental group made of 14 members ($14=N$) and the control group made of the same equal number ($14=N$), divided on the basis of alphabetical order. The only distinguishing factor between the two subcategories was that the control group received classes of English as a curricular subject whereas the experimental group was taught English through CLIL activates. There were also fourteen teachers ($N=14$) interviewed in the study; concerning the ESP classes in Business English at the faculty of Economy aiming to validate some more objective data for the research study. The results of the data of each NA are categorized and displayed separately with the aim to measure, compare and evaluate the effectiveness of adopted CLIL approach into Business English class activities.

The Research Instruments and Participants

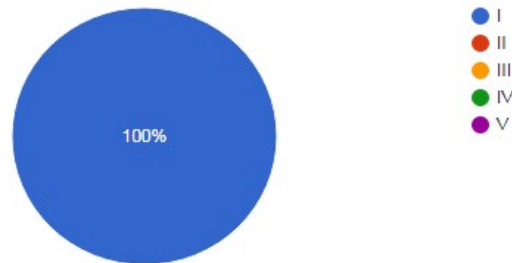
Also, to validate the real level of English language per each group, the students were tested in two ways. First, through the completion of the Common European Framework of Languages (CEFL) self-assessment grid were each student was asked to mark in the checklist divided in the "already know skills/activities" and the "language priorities aimed to learn during the course". Aiming to double check their actual level of English language it was then run a placement test instrument named "Oxford Test of English" (OTE), at the beginning of their course with all the participants ($28=N$). Then, it was continued with the teachers' opinions in the Needs Analysis (NA) provided, concerning those professionals who were already teaching Business English in ESP classes of the same Faculty.

The Students

In order to develop and consolidate ideas for the design of the case study and the research hypothesis, as well as to provide a deeper understanding of the existing features of the research context, a preliminary survey was conducted with a representative group of students from the target population ($N=28$) which participated in the CLIL experimental case study. The data were collected through a questionnaire and the results from its analysis are presented in the graphs and charts below.

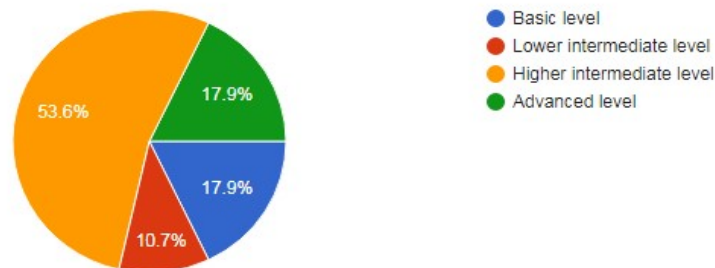
The very first introductory question (Q.1) was about stating that students are all in the first year of their studies in the Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana as it is clearly shown in the pie chart below:

Graph 1: Study Year



The second question Q.2 of the questionnaire aimed to measure the students' self-assessment of their English language knowledge prior to the start of the experimental study. 53.6 percent of the respondents evaluated their mastery of the language at higher intermediate level (see Graph 2). This result could be explained by the fact that most of the students at the Faculty of Economy had studied English for ten years at school before applying to University and they are aware of the importance of good FL communicative competence in their professional career.

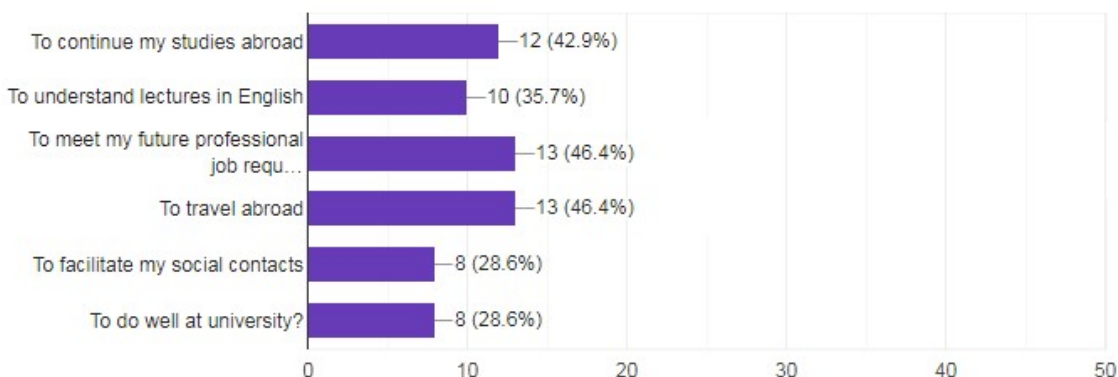
Graph 2: Self-Assessment of English Language Knowledge



Graph 2: Q.2. How would you rate your knowledge of the English language?

The following question (Q.3) concerned their reasons for learning English and 13 students out of 28 in total (or 46.4 percent) claimed they wanted “to meet their future professional job requirements” which confirms the assumptions made for the students' answers to Q.2. In addition, the same number of students chose the importance of learning the language for the purposes of traveling abroad, which is probably linked to their expectations to practice their future profession at some international companies at home or in other European countries, where ESP communicative competence would be essential for their success.

Reasons of Learning English



Graph 3: Q.3. What are the reasons why you want to learn English? (More than one answer is possible here).

Considering the student bigger interest in learning English for specific purposes, the following question focused on the students' preferences for the content of the English language course at the Faculty of Economy. 39.3 percent of the respondents professed preference for having a course of business language first, and then followed up by a professional course where the students would put into practice the acquired language knowledge and communicative skills. These results correlate with the data collected for Q.3 and reaffirm students' motivation to learn the language well in order to meet their future professional job requirements.

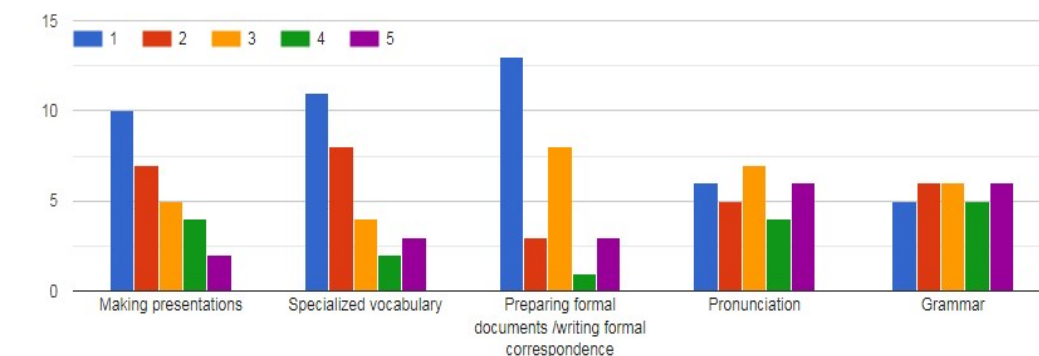
English Language Course Continuum



Graph 4: Q.4 What would you prefer your English language course at the Faculty of Economy to be like?

Following the conduction of the questionnaire, there are selected only some of the questions considered as the most important ones to highlight the most relevant information collected by the students participating in the study.

Scale of Language Skills



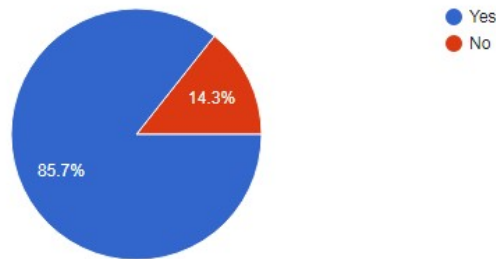
Graph 5: Q.6. What other language skills should be developed during the course? *Please rate their importance on a scale from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

From the data collected in an answer to Q.6 about what language skills should be developed during the course (see Graph 5), it can be concluded that students consider “making presentations” an important element of their Business English language competence (with 35.7% of the students giving it most prominence). Meanwhile, 39.28% of students put emphasis on the acquisition of specialized vocabulary during their ESP classes. Last but not least, the respondents stressed the need of learning how to prepare professional formal documents and write formal correspondence (46.42 % of students highlighted the significance of this ESP language skill). At the other end of the scale, only an inconsiderable number of students (7out of 28) consider grammar and pronunciation improvement important while learning English for specific purposes.

Another interesting aspect of the preliminary study data, providing evidence for the students' strong instrumental motivation in language learning, came to light in the analysis of Q.15, which asks the respondents whether they would be interested in taking any business English exam in the future to certify their ESP knowledge and skills (e.g.

the Business English Exam of Cambridge). 85.7 percent of the whole group showed willingness to certify their Business English competence in the future.

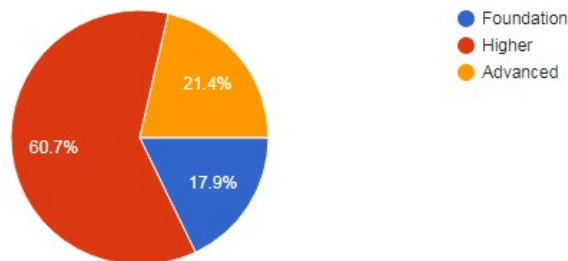
Business English Exam of Cambridge (BEC)



Graph 6: Q.15 Are you planning to take the Business English Exam of Cambridge (BEC exam) or a similar one in the future?

The willingness of the students to sit for this serious international test is also an indicator for the need of improvement and quality assurance in the Business English course they take during their first year of studies and also provides an affordance (the students' high motivation) which should be capitalised on in their ESP training. This conclusion is further supported with the data from question number 16 (see Graph 7).

Desired level of Business English Exam (BEC)



Graph 7: Q.16 If "yes", what level of the BEC exam will you go for?

The pie chart clearly shows the students' motivation and aspiration to score a higher level in the BEC exam (60.7 percent of the respondents opted for the higher level of the BEC exam and 21.4 – for the advanced level in this international Business English testing). Overall, the majority of the students vote for a higher level of profession-related communicative competence and express aspirations to certify it by international standards.

4.3 The Teachers' Opinions

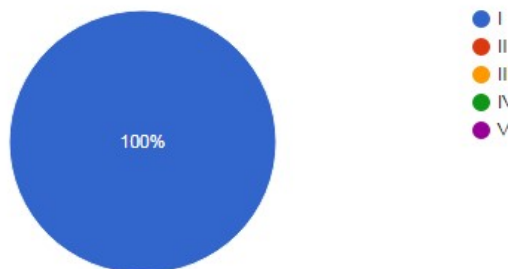
Another step considered as primarily important and instructive in the scaffolding of the research design of the CLIL case study was the conducting of a needs analysis with the ESP teachers and other educational stakeholders who are currently involved in teaching ESP in the Albanian higher education system. It should be noted that in the Business English courses at the University of Tirana, the four language skills are well integrated and intertwined during the teaching and learning process. Interactive exercises for the acquisition of ESP language skills and profession-related terminology are employed by the teachers, which have the added value of boosting the communicative practice in the classroom and of increasing the learners' motivation too.

A key element in any course design, and especially in teaching Business English, is the Needs Analysis (NA) which should be conducted prior to the course itself. Its role is more fundamental in ESP than in EGP because through the application of NA the learners' different language skills could be well identified (Hutchinson and Waters, 2010).

According to Robinson (Robinson, 1991, p. 196) needs analysis should be based on two important subcategories of language skills: first, ‘the Target Situation Analysis’ which serves to establish a target profile of language, based on the real professional activities which students will need to carry out, and second, ‘the Present Situation Analysis’, which aims to establish a profile of the learner personal skills and abilities in which the participant’s proficiency is evaluated. Meanwhile, Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) define the role of Needs Analysis in ESP as “an ongoing process of establishing the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of a course” (p.121). With this they mean that cost-effectiveness of the NA is to define the proper course design for the right learners’, based on their real needs and the actual activities they will need to perform in the real world.

It is the author's firm belief that with the implementation of needs analysis prior to the CLIL experimental case study, the lessons of Business English, as part of ESP, will be more effective and motivating because of accommodating the learners’ needs. So, for the purposes of facilitating the CLIL experimental study a needs analysis was carried out in the format of a questionnaire for the teachers of ESP at the Faculty of Economy at the University of Tirana who were all teaching in the first year of the bachelor program (N = 13). Again, the opening questions in the survey aimed at making sure all the respondents were currently teaching in the first year of the program (Q.1) and measuring the importance the teachers attach to a placement test prior to the start of the ESP classes in order to check the language level of the class (Q.3).

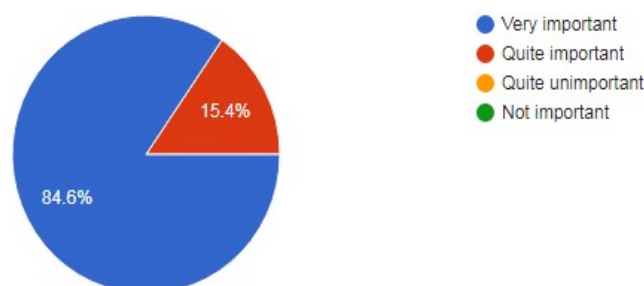
ESP Program Year



Graph 8: Q.1 In which year of the ESP program are you currently teaching?

All the answers stated in the pie chart of the first question (Q.1) regard to the first year study program in which teachers were currently teaching the ESP subject.

Prior Placement Test

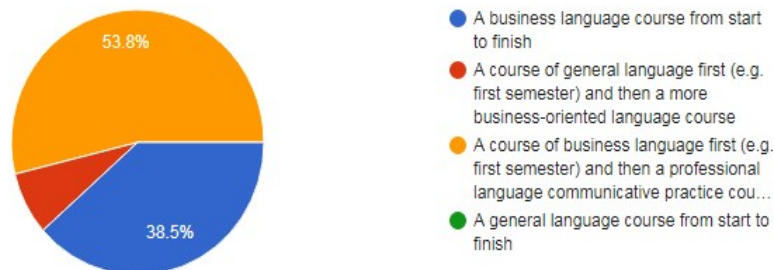


Graph 9: Q.3 How important would you consider conducting a prior placement test with the students for your class language level?

As can be seen in Graph 9, 84.6 % of the respondents believe that conducting a prior placement test for establishing the language level of the class is very important. Teachers consider it important because they can cater for the deficiencies of lower level students, thus offering all learners an equal chance to benefit from the ESP instruction.

Looking at the data from the needs analysis, some interesting tendencies can be observed in the professional opinions of the ESP lecturers. For example, most of the respondents believed that the ESP classes should have a business language focus from start to finish with the addition of some professional communicative practice later in the course (see Graph 10). This result correlates with the students' expectations for the content of their Business English course discussed earlier.

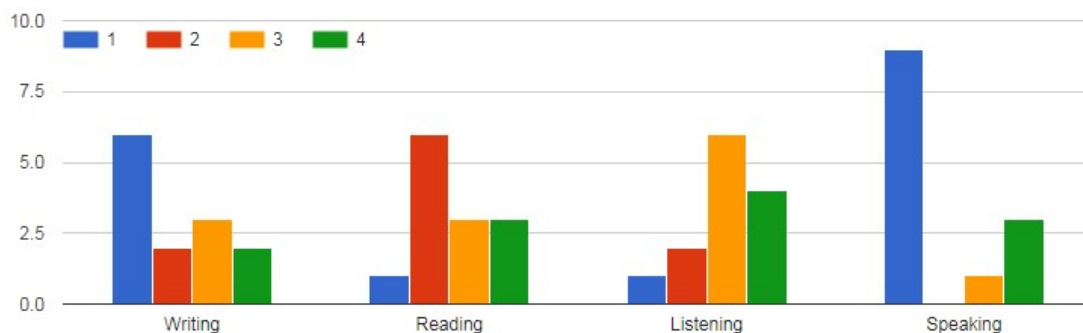
The English Language Course to be like



Graph 10: Q.5. What would you, as a teacher, prefer the English language course at the Faculty of Economy to be like?

Another important element in the teachers' answers in the survey concerned the organization of the ESP classes, suggesting a bigger focus on the communicative skills and this is clearly evidenced in the analysis of the data from question number six (Q.6).

The language skills to be MOST emphasized

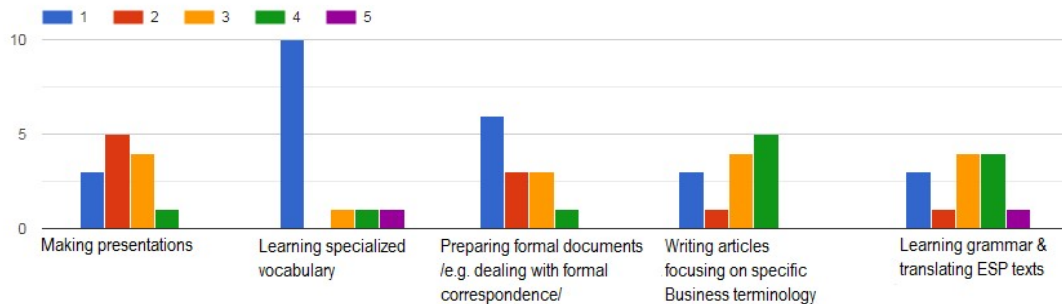


Graph 11: Q.6. The development of which language skills should be MOST emphasized in this course? *Please rank skill importance in order from 1 (most important) to 4 (least important).

Most emphasis is laid on the productive skills of speaking and writing, whereas the perceptive skills of listening and reading, although considered important, are given less prominence by the respondents.

As a follow-up on that question, the teachers were asked what other language skills should be emphasized during the ESP course. The results from the data analysis are presented in Graph 12.

Other language skills to be emphasized during the ESP course

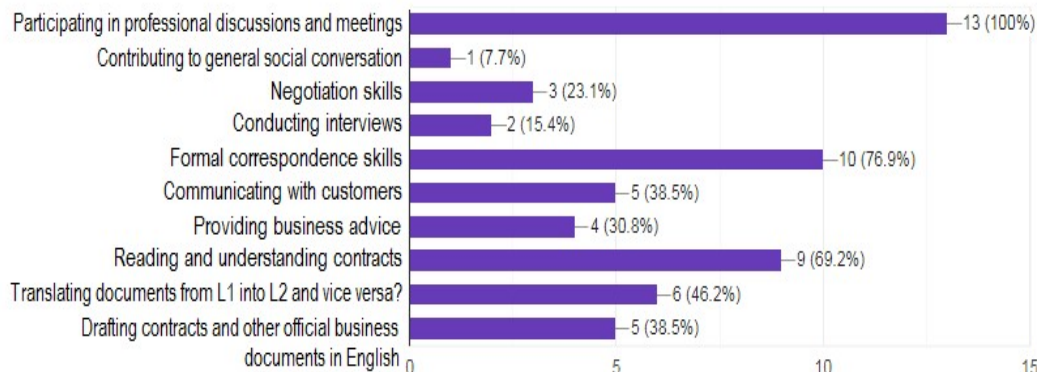


Graph 12: Q.7 What other language skills do you think should be emphasized during the course? *Please rate their importance on a scale from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

Learning specialized vocabulary is considered as the most needed skill which would be of practical value to the students during their future career life. This result coincides with the one received in the survey with the students, so it is a good indicator where the experimental CLIL activities should focus during the forthcoming case study. The importance attached to this skill could be explained by the fact that good knowledge of specialized vocabulary is needed in making presentations, writing documents such as drafting contracts or keeping formal correspondence and translating.

The results from this question are further supported by the answers to question number eight (Q.8), which clarifies the teachers' belief that such specialized vocabulary would be used by the students once they start work and deal with formal meetings/discussions and formal correspondence in their future work places (see Graph 13).

Most Needed Skills for Future Career



Graph 13: Q.8-What do you think their most needed skills for their future career/working life would be? *(More than one answer is possible here)

Another significant finding from the conducted needs analysis appears to be the data from question number eleven (Q.11) which asked the teachers how they would encourage students' reading skills during their ESP course. The majority of them (53.8%) suggest that the best option would be to use a wide variety of authentic materials, such as magazine or newspaper articles (see Graph 14); this suggestion is in line with the frame of CLIL model lesson plan which encourages the use of such authentic content-based materials for a more effective learning process.

Reading Activities



Graph 14: Q.11. How do you encourage students to participate in reading activities in your Business English classes?

In addition, 30.8% of the teachers are keen on allowing the students to contribute materials (e.g. articles on topics of their choice) for improving their reading skills during class work; this is another indicator which implies that the ESP teachers the Faculty of Economy are open to new ideas and approaches to teaching the subject to the benefit of their students.

5. Discussions

The study set out the aim of assessing the importance of using CLIL activities while teaching Business English in ESP classes at the Faculty of Economy, in order to better equip the students with more profession-related terms and specific terminology for their future profession career needs. The study discusses some detailed answers and opinions from both students and teachers being part of the same Faculty and the collected data provide support for the hypotheses. Moreover, concerning the attitudes of both groups, they were positively oriented towards learning more specific profession related terms and planning in their near future to certify their knowledge with an international certification like the one of BEC exam. Furthermore, the students were presented with engaging questions and materials through the self-assessment grid of English Language Portfolio (ELP) and the Oxford Placement test (OTE) with the aim to better document their opinions and language priorities.

On the other side, the data collected by teachers' needs analysis (NA) verify the hypothesis that they expressed very optimistic in the use of authentic materials and that this approach will enhance the students' linguistic and cognitive skills and contribute to the acquisition of field-specific content knowledge.

6. Conclusions

This research ultimately aims to be finalized as a qualitative study, measuring and validating the usefulness of the CLIL approach for university students their acquisition of ESP language skills. The qualitative data collected in the preliminary study described above have helped in the design of the experimental CLIL research framework through further application of an adequate CLIL lesson plan and the use of authentic materials during the classes of ESP with the experimental group. The data were collected though a survey with a sample group of students from the target population at the Faculty of Economy at the University of Tirana, and a needs analysis study with the teachers of Business English at the same faculty.

Overall results from the preliminary data analysis serve as indicators for the big desire of the students to be more focused on the acquisition of profession-related language skills and such specific terminology which would help them to meet the requirements of their future work. The teachers seem to be aware of and to appreciate the instrumental motivation of their students; they also expressed the opinion that the application of authentic materials such as magazine or newspaper articles in the ESP classes would most benefit the students in the development of their profession-related language knowledge and communicative skills.

Finally, the need of implementing more up-to-date methods while teaching Business English and ESP in general is a need in many academic contexts in Albania and specifically in the Faculty of Economy, University of Tirana. The alternative of CLIL can get an easy implementation in such contexts once it its usefulness and effectiveness in

teaching Business English has been validated, which would be the focus of the forthcoming CLIL experimental case study.

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