

## ***SVETIMŲJŲ KALBŲ STUDIJS/ STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES***

### **On Solid Ground. Matching Practice and Theory in a CLIL Perspective**

**Maria Angela Ceruti**

**Abstract.** What differentiates CLIL from simply studying something in another language, as most immigrant students do when they arrive in a foreign country?

In a learning environment that want to promote and sustain BOTH content AND language in a creative and innovative way, language cannot be considered just as a by-product of content, but must have equal status. What does theory say about the cross-fertilization process that allows us to choose the right content to sustain language, and vice-versa? Creativity and innovation in CLIL can only be effective if they stand on solid ground, that is if pedagogical backgrounds and long-term objectives concerning language and learning are clearly defined. This is also in view of a better critical evaluation of what is proposed.

Drawing on the writer's experience as a language teacher, materials developer and researcher, this paper claims that those who are involved in CLIL - including content teachers - should be aware of the principles that favour also the 'knowledge of language'. This article tries to raise questions on how creativity and innovation in a CLIL perspective could be made more effective by systematically taking into account:

- the role of 'probable' versus 'possible' language,
- the notions of input, awareness, noticing, and hypothesis formation,
- the use of corpus-driven tasks in teaching and learning materials,
- awareness of text types,
- studies on language acquisition.

All of the above issues, to various extents and depending on the type of learners, their needs and the related contexts, can contribute to better identifying and developing pedagogical aims and practical activities.

The examples of learning tasks included with this article represent an attempt at putting all this into practice, bearing in mind the constraints of everyday educational situations, and towards the development of 'parallel' content and language syllabi.

**Key words:** *CLIL, content-language acquisition, corpus-driven tasks, text awareness.*

#### **Introduction**

In the stimulating and challenging world of language development, the issue of CLIL, that is of the integration of language and content in learning environments, has become a very popular 'buzzword'. Referred to in different ways (e.g. CBT, CBI, etc., see below) and implemented in a variety of manners in several educational contexts all over the world, an incredibly high number of 'best practices' and of 'experiences that work' is now available to practitioners and language policy makers. Unfortunately, not all of them are replicable or easily implemented in contexts other than the ones in which they have originally developed, because they are more often than not wonderful activities that worked in a specific context, conducted by one or two specific teachers and with a specific group of learners. Changing any of the variables may result in the failure of the activity.

This is certainly true of other educational approaches, too, and it is out of question that there are valuable issues that

sustain and favour the implementation of CLIL in educational systems. Here is just a short list:

- CLIL is a highly contextualised educational approach;
- it calls for a wider use of task-based teaching activities;
- it promotes learning-centredness;
- it maximizes language input in a flexible way;
- it gives learners more chances to document their competences;
- it stimulates learners' awareness and self-assessment;
- it encourages co-operation among teachers of different subjects.

However, there are also some critical aspects that must be taken into account, namely:

- there is not an univocal definition of CLIL;
- the fact that, despite the more and more growing interest for research and scientific investigation in this field,



there are still few long-term evaluation studies on structured CLIL programmes;

- language policies vary greatly both at national and local levels;
- the intake retained by learners is not directly proportional to the quantity of input they are exposed to;
- continuity across and between different school levels is not guaranteed, also due to the lack of support materials;
- the implementation of CLIL activities is often occasional and not clearly included in the school curricula;
- CLIL activities too often focus mainly on content and tend to adjust the level of difficulty of the texts used;
- it is not clear who (whether the content or the language teacher) is supposed to do what, how, when (ie. according to what time schedule), and with what assessment tools.

Just to exemplify a few of the critical aspects mentioned above, let's focus on the problem of definition, on the difficulty of matching language policies and school contexts, and on the lack of support materials.

Concerning the definition of CLIL, Mehisto, et al. (2008, p.13) state that

“CLIL is an umbrella term covering a dozen or more educational approaches (e.g. immersion, bilingual education, multilingual education, language showers and enriched language programmes)”

which seems to suggest the presence of a continuum of approaches, defined by the different times, spaces and foci devoted to the two main components (language and content). The British Council ‘Teaching English’ website (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/transform/teachers/specialist-areas/clil>) indicates as terms related to CLIL

“‘Content-based instruction’, ‘English across the curriculum’, and ‘Bilingual education’. CLIL is sometimes referred to as dual-focused education as lessons have two main aims, one related to a particular subject or topic and one linked to language.”

Taking a rather different perspective, McBeath (2009) in his interesting web article claims that the definitions of CLIL are “so wide as to admit any form of language teaching” and advocates the supremacy of ESP (English for Specific Purposes) both in terms of specific pedagogical principles and of content suitable for the learners’ targeted need.

Within this scenario, it seems reasonable to at least take into account the fact that if we accept such a wide variety of possible approaches, it is also necessary to acknowledge the development of different language learning pathways, or rather of a continuum of pathways, ranging from ‘incidental language learning’, when focus on content is maximized and focus on language form minimized, to what might be called ‘parallel syllabi’, where both content and language are regarded as having equal status and therefore given equal prominence at all stages of the teaching/ learning process (planning, implementation, development, etc.). An example of a pathway privileging ‘incidental language learning’ could be for instance that of total immersion programmes, or even that

of immigrant students with different first languages who are put in classes following the ordinary curriculum without any extra language support. On the other hand, examples of testified pathways accounting for or approaching the notion of a ‘parallel syllabus’ seem to be still lost within the intricate network of ‘best practices and experiences’.

As far as the problems arising from matching language policies and school contexts, an example could be that of the new school reform in Italy concerning upper secondary schools, approved in February 2010 and due to start from school year 2010-2011. According to the documents available, upper secondary schools will have the possibility to offer a ‘non-language’ subject through a foreign language. Such ‘non-language’ subject should be included either within the compulsory or the optional curriculum, according to the limitations set by the number of staff assigned to each institution every year. There is no specification of which subjects should be privileged, what teachers should co-operate and after what kind of training, what language and/ or content competence would be required, what materials should be used, etc. Within such a scenario, it seems rather difficult to guarantee any kind of continuity.

One last example of critical aspect in context concerns the problem of finding suitable materials for integrating content and language. The more and more growing interest in providing lessons with a dual focus has seen the spreading of what might be called the ‘through’ syndrome among materials writers. There isn’t any single recently-published language coursebook that does not include specific sections which recall the idea of ‘content through language’ or ‘language through content’. This could be considered a positive thing in itself if it didn’t account for language courses presenting dialogues where – under an ‘English through geography’ section heading – teenagers meeting for the first time are encouraged to exchange highly unlikely conversations where they ask each other the latitude and longitude of their respective countries, before asking each other’s address!

If learning is what really interests the people involved in the educational process, and if CLIL is deemed to be a suitable option for the context in which those same people operate, it seems important first of all to be aware of where on the above-mentioned continua educators and language policy makers can and/ or want to place themselves, and then step back a little, ask questions, and reflect, investigating, for example, theories of learning, so as to make the most out of the potential of this educational approach. Some questions that may come to mind can be summarised as follows:

- What can differentiate CLIL from simply studying something in another language, as most immigrant students do when they arrive in a foreign country?
- What learning environment is needed if we want to promote and sustain both content and language in a creative and innovative way?
- What does theory say about the cross-fertilization process that allows us to choose the right content to sustain language, and vice-versa, thus enhancing learning?



Starting from the assumption that learning a language is a process that relies ‘on universals of cognitive structures’ (MacWhinney, 2001, p.69), the following paragraphs will try to suggest possible ways of approaching such questions and to provide ideas for developing learning tasks that could enhance the progress from input – through intake – to output, so as to testify to learning. After a brief review of the linguistic issues that are relevant to the development of both language and content, this paper will also try to suggest how the use of corpus-driven tasks, the promotion of awareness-raising activities and the development of parallel syllabi could represent a suitable and more contextualized approach for a wide range of learners.

### Theories that Inform Practice

The notion of CLIL is undeniably related to instruction, it implies input given in a foreign language applied to different contexts and classroom interactions, and must be sustained by suitable materials, also in the view of continuity. Such an approach must account for language development as well as content knowledge, and to do so it is essential to establish shared objectives, to identify suitable spaces and devote the necessary time to allow for learning, to address the issue of assessment in a systematic way, and – most of all – to be aware of the ‘teachability’, ‘learnability’ and ‘processibility’ of the language constructions that are called into play.

Some of the linguistic theories that can provide useful insights into the integrated development of language and content are best represented by the models of learning and language acquisition traditionally placed in the functional-cognitive space. Such models emphasize:

- the idea of learning as ‘experience’ (also in a neuro-linguistics perspective, as – for example – found in Zadina, 2008);
- the similarity between the linguistic systems and other cognitive systems (where knowledge of language is already considered knowledge);
- the importance of noticing, attention, hypothesis formation, and usage factors in processing input, retaining it as intake, and producing output;
- the role of ‘chunking’ for the emergence of second language constructions;

which in turn find application in:

- the lexical approach to language teaching and learning;
- the importance of tasks based on authentic texts and the use of corpora;
- activities promoting the awareness of different text-types;
- the necessity to provide focus on form;
- the role of meaningful interaction;
- the recognition of different learning styles;
- the choice of content that maximizes language development according to the learners’ age and cognitive development;

- the promotion of self-assessment as a tool for learner’s development.

For the purpose of this paper only a few of the above points will be further developed, namely some notions recognized functional to learning, the use of corpus-driven tasks within a lexical approach to the exploration of language and its potential, and the role of text awareness. Samples of activities will also be provided.

### Focus on Learning

There are notions that – even if developed mainly in the context of SLA (second language acquisition) are probably applicable to all learning contexts, as they refer to principles related to how each individual learner organizes his/ her learning experiences and the learning process. Just to list a few, there are the notions of *interlanguage*, *comprehension*, *comprehensible input and interaction* (e.g. Corder, 1967; Krashen and Terrell, 1983), *attention*, *awareness and noticing* (e.g. Schmidt, 1993), *information processing and hypothesis formation* (e.g. McLaughlin, 1987). The notions of *focus on form* (Long & Robinson, 1998), and of *output* (e.g. Swain, 1995, 1997, 2005) are also worth mentioning, even if they seem to be more specifically related to the learning of a foreign language. In fact, focus on form can be considered as the way in which the learner’s attention is guided towards the main focus of the activities throughout the accomplishment of a task, focussing either on language or on content, while output studies underline the importance of the *noticing/ triggering*, *hypothesis testing*, and *metalinguistic/ reflective* functions, in order to account for the delivery by the learner of the content retained and of the reflection on the learning process itself.

These last two notions are also relevant for the use of *corpus-driven tasks*. Despite the fact that there is the need for more experimental evidence of the actual role of *focus on form* in acquisition (e.g. Ellis, 1997),

“[a]ccording to the Interaction Hypothesis, a crucial site for language development is interaction between learners and other speakers, especially, but not only, between learners and more proficient speakers and between learners and certain types of written texts, especially elaborated ones” (Long & Robinson, 1998, p.22).

This seems to testify to the fact that the contribution of the environment to the process of learning should not be neglected and may be enhanced by selective attention (*noticing*) and by the development of the learners’ ability to process a second language.

In addition to that, “the use of corpora, [which] has given an impetus to new ideas on the nature of language and its acquisition” (Johansson, 2009, p.38), when applied to tasks developed in a CLIL perspective can help overcome the problem of adjusting authentic texts so as to make their content available for users whose language is apparently not proficient enough to process it.

“This usage-based approach ... thus accounts both for the nature of language and for [its] acquisition. If this view is correct, the use of corpora will strengthen natural processes of language acquisition in that they make it easier for learners to notice and experience [...] instances of use” (Johansson, 2009, p.39),



which in turn could help master the content encoded in such texts.

On a more practical ground, the use of corpora and corpus-driven tasks to explore authentic texts and their content, also scaffold the possibility to observe language with a lexical perspective, and to apply the ‘lexical approach’ to teaching and learning (see e.g. Lewis, 1993, 1997). According to this approach, language is ‘grammaticalized lexis’ and not ‘lexicalized grammar’, and learning it means to learn it in context, observing it, exploring it and making hypotheses about how it works. Language is observed in authentic texts and teaching activities draw on ‘probable’ rather than ‘possible’ language. Following this approach and using authentic texts to also focus on content can stimulate reflection on what is ‘probable’ in language, awareness of what is not occasional in natural interaction, and sensitivity to how content is encoded in texts.

As a matter of fact, being aware of texts can be considered another important factor in the learning of content and in the acquisition of language. Understanding the way a text – be it oral or written – is built and recognizing its purpose can provide learners with tools that help them acquire both reading and study skills, and foster content analysis and language production. Exploring texts and identifying text types can pave the way to a more structured and parallel development of content and of the language that makes it available for further analyses. As Carter, et al. put it, “in order to study language rather than simply use it, some systematic ways of paying attention to its various components

are necessary.” (2001, xvi). A CLIL perspective to learning should provide for ways to analyse content and study language at the same time, not just to use language without being aware of it.

### Sample Activities

How can all this be transferred to a teaching context? The following are examples of tasks developed bearing in mind all the issues mentioned above, and trying to maximize the parallel processes of acquiring knowledge of content and of language.

#### Activity 1. Parallel Syllabus – Civic Education

This activity, suitable for learners aged 10 to 13, is meant to raise awareness about safety issues and sensible behaviour. The table below shows the parallel development of knowledge of content and knowledge of language, by means of clearly stated objectives. Content knowledge is also expressed through expected behaviour, while language knowledge implies the ability to describe rules, to express degrees of modality and to narrate. The language skills involved are clearly stated from the beginning, and time is allocated to raise awareness on the form and function of the text types (both written and oral) that the students will encounter throughout the activity.

Activities within this framework are best implemented as a self-contained module or as part of a wider cross-curricular project (e.g. European project).

**Table 1.** Planning in Parallel (Adapted from Calabrese, et al., 2006)

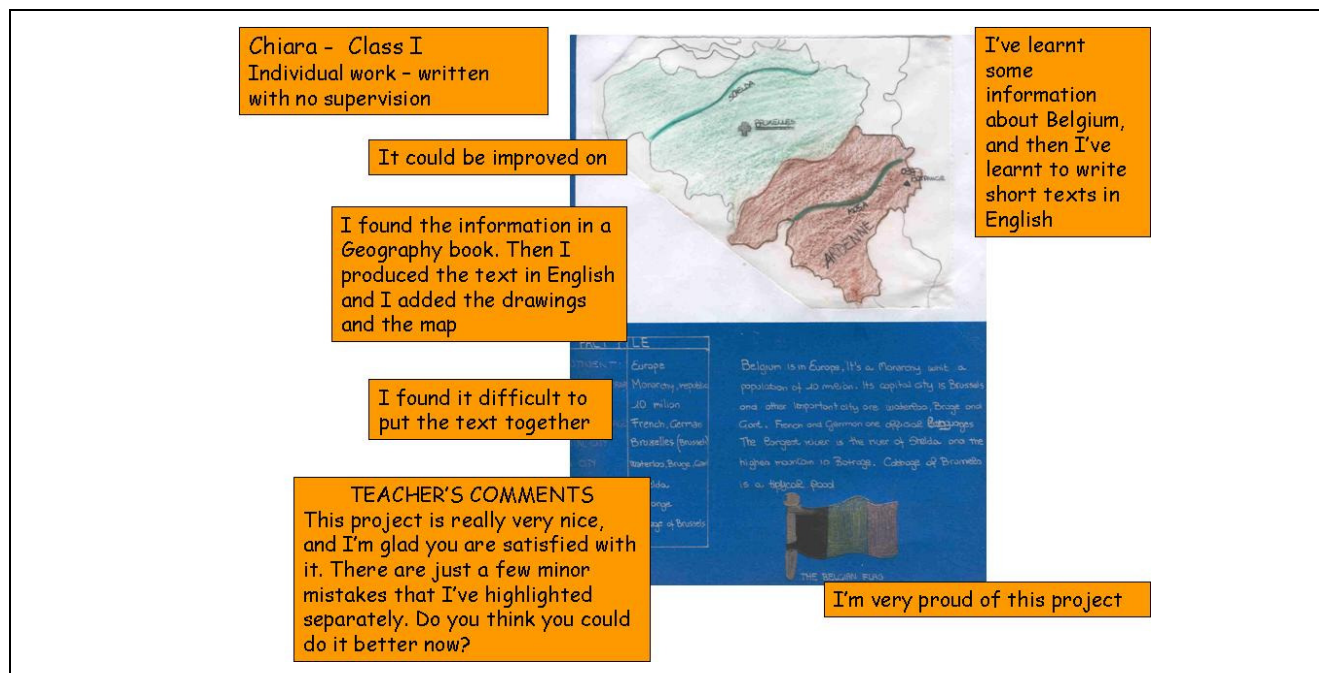
OVERALL AIMS				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be aware of the most common dangerous situations in familiar contexts (eg: home, school, street, etc.)</li> <li>• Know how to behave in case of an emergency and react accordingly</li> <li>• Describe and share personal experiences</li> </ul>				
	AT HOME	AT SCHOOL	IN THE STREET	
<b>CONTENT SYLLABUS (CIVIC EDUCATION)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dangerous situations at home: identification and description</li> <li>• Visual representation of a house map, with indication of where danger can be found</li> <li>• Rules of behaviour in case of an emergency at home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dangerous situations at and near the school</li> <li>• How to behave: an evacuation plan</li> <li>• Rules of behaviour in the event of an emergency at school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The most common road signs (national and international)</li> <li>• The Highway Code (for pedestrians, cyclists, motor-cyclists)</li> <li>• How to behave when playing outside</li> <li>• What clothes to wear when playing outside</li> <li>• Emergency calls</li> </ul>	
<b>LANGUAGE SYLLABUS</b>	Vocabulary	Functions	Grammar	Skills and Text types
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Basic vocabulary (words, chunks, expressions) to describe buildings and streets.</li> <li>– Outdoor games and sports</li> <li>– Basic vocabulary concerning dangerous situations</li> <li>• <i>There is/ are .....; it's formed by ....; it combines with ....; it expands ....;</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Understanding instructions</li> <li>– Describing buildings</li> <li>– Identifying relevant information in authentic materials</li> <li>– Writing instructions</li> <li>– Interacting about good/ bad behaviour</li> <li>– Describing personal experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– <i>Imperatives (positive and negative)</i></li> <li>– If clauses (<i>if..., it can/ will/ could ...</i>)</li> <li>– <i>Modal verbs</i> to express possibility, obligation, prohibition, suggestion, etc: <i>can/ can't/ must/ mustn't/ should/ shouldn't</i></li> <li>– <i>Simple Past</i> to narrate personal experiences</li> </ul>	<p><u>Listening to:</u> instructions, narrations, descriptions of various environments</p> <p><u>Reading and understanding:</u> road signs, notices, maps, evacuation plans, labels, articles</p> <p><u>Speaking and interacting:</u> on the phone, presenting critical aspects, identifying good/ bad behaviour, communicating rules</p> <p><u>Writing:</u> plans, instructions, rules</p>



### Activity 2. Text Awareness – Geography

This activity, suitable for students at elementary level, is the outcome of a joint English-Geography project. There is clear indication of the student's awareness of the type of text required and shows the product of reflection both on content and language. It testifies to the learner's

awareness of learning and to her verbalization of the process in the foreign language, and highlights the possibility for future development. Such products may be suitable for insertion in the dossier section of a language portfolio, when applicable.



Picture 1. Reflecting on Content and Language

### Activity 3. Corpus-Driven Tasks on Authentic Texts- Pulsars

This activity is suitable for upper secondary school students following a course in science through the medium of English. It follows the presentation of an authentic text (that is, not adjusted for pedagogical purposes) about the discovery of Pulsars. The scientific text is completed with comprehension questions and the tasks listed below follow on the work on content. They have

been developed using samples of language found in the BNC (British National Corpus) and in the Collins Corpus Sampler (available on the Internet at <http://collins.co.uk/Corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>). The activity shows focus on language discovery and progression towards awareness and output, through the exploration and analysis of vocabulary and language thought to be significant for the learners in question at the time of the activity. See also O'Keeffe, et al. (2007) for examples of other corpus-driven activities.

Table 2. Examples of Corpus-Driven Tasks

Read the text 'Pulsars' and look for the following words: <b>timed</b> – <b>source</b> – <b>nature</b> .		
1) Look at the words that come before and after them.		
- What function (noun, adjective, preposition, etc.) do they usually have?		
- Do you notice any special structures? Are there any words that collocate (= usually recur) more often with such words?		
2) Look at the following extracts from corpora. They all contain the word ' <b>timed</b> ' in various contexts.		
- Which extracts are typical of spoken language? How do you know?		
- Which are taken from newspaper articles? How do you know?		
- How would you translate into your own language the various occurrences of 'timed'?		
1. Travel times generally concern those trains	timed	to arrive in London between 0745 and 0945.
2. Mr Howard's attack was carefully	timed	to take attention away from the key debate.
3. All three mines were	timed	to detonate simultaneously.
4. Tax increases would be economically ill-	timed	and politically near-impossible.
5. Beef imports could not have been more badly	timed.	
6. After two and a half minutes - I	timed	it on the video - the referee ...
7. Finishers will receive computer	timed	postcard results.
8. In fact, I saw from the station clock that I had	timed	my arrival just about perfectly.
9. You react immediately and hit the pad with a perfectly	timed	technique.
10. Each gesture in a sequence must be carefully	timed	so that it is of proper value to the whole.



11. The reassurance, at a Pentagon briefing on January 24th, was welcome, and well	timed.	
12. And how perfectly	timed	for her.
13. The session will be	timed	not to coincide with noisy exercise classes to music.
14. In a	timed	swim across Honolulu Harbour in 1911 he covered 100 yards in 55.4 seconds.
15. Even the toilet was	timed.	
For each of the following sentences, choose the three expressions that can collocate with 'timed'		
1. The event was _____ timed.		
wonderfully <input type="checkbox"/>	very badly <input type="checkbox"/>	not really well <input type="checkbox"/>
2. A timed _____ system is in operation on busy days.		very good <input type="checkbox"/>
well <input type="checkbox"/>	entry <input type="checkbox"/>	exit <input type="checkbox"/>
3. It was a perfectly timed _____.		ticket <input type="checkbox"/>
technique <input type="checkbox"/>	dog <input type="checkbox"/>	ride <input type="checkbox"/>
		arrival <input type="checkbox"/>

## Conclusion

This brief, partial excursus in the world of CLIL has tried to underline the fact that there is space for developing language and content in a parallel way. The sample tasks proposed above aim at highlighting possible pathways to be followed in order to make suitable choices concerning the content to teach, the text types to analyse, and the language to develop, in a sort of cross-fertilization process that allows content to sustain language, and vice-versa, thus enhancing learning.

Theories of learning and of second language acquisition seems to suggest teachers should consider in a more systematic way:

- the role of focus on form through awareness-raising activities,
- the importance to progress from 'input', through 'intake', to 'output',
- learners' development through hypothesis formation in interaction

in order to outline suitable syllabi and plan activities that are both significant and effective for the learners involved.

Being aware of where on the CLIL continuum – both in terms of type of approach and of preferred learning pathway – teachers place themselves, together with providing explicit statements about the relationship between knowledge of content and knowledge of language in each specific context can help 'innovate' and 'create' accordingly, on more solid ground, for example by means of

- the lexical approach to teaching and learning;
- the use of corpus-driven tasks;
- the promotion of text awareness through usage-based activities.

All this while keeping 'Learning' as the central focus of all the activities.

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Maria Angela Ceruti

## **Teorijos ir praktikos santykis taikant integruotą dalyko ir užsienio kalbos mokymo metodą**

### **Santrauka**

Dauguma studentų, atvykusių studijuoti į svetimą šalį, studijuoja dalykus tos šalies kalba. Koks skirtumas tarp tokių studijų ir integruoto dalyko ir užsienio kalbos mokymo (IDUKM, angl. CLIL)?

Studijų procese siekiant išlaikyti **tiesk dalyko, tiesk kalbos** mokymo kūrybiškumą ir inovacijas, kalbos negalima laikyti dalyko turinio šalutiniu produktu: jie turi turėti lygų statusą. Ką sako teorija apie „kryžminio apvaisinimo procesą“ (*the cross-fertilization process*), kuris leidžia mums pasirinkti reikiamą turinį, kad būtų išlaikytas kalbos bei jos pateikimo lygis ir atvirkščiai?

IDUKM kūrybiškumas ir inovacija tik tada gali būti efektyvūs, jei turės tvirtą pagrindą, t. y. jei bus aiškiai apibrėžta mokomoji programa ir ilgalaikiai kalbos ir dalyko mokymosi uždaviniai. Remiantis autorės, kaip kalbų mokytojos, mokomosios medžiagos rengėjos ir mokslininkės patirtimi, straipsnyje teigiama, kad tie, kurie užsiima IDUKM, įskaitant ir dalyko dėstytojus, turėtų žinoti principus, kurie taikomi užsienio kalbos mokymui. Šiame straipsnyje bandome kelti klausimus, kaip efektyvinti kūrybiškumą ir inovacijas IDUKM perspektyvoje atsižvelgiant į:

- galimą kalbos pasirinkimą,
- įdėtas pastangas, gebėjimą stebėti, analizuoti ir formuluoti hipotezes,
- mokomosios medžiagos užduočių panaudojimą,
- tekstų tipų supratimą,
- kalbos išmokimo lygį.

Visi išvardinti punktai, atsižvelgiant į besimokančiųjų tipą, jų poreikius ir atitinkamą kontekstą, gali padėti geriau nustatyti ir plėtoti pedagoginius tikslus ir praktinę veiklą.

Prie straipsnio pridėtos mokomosios užduotys gali padėti tai įgyvendinti praktiškai, atsižvelgiant į mokymo proceso situacijų ribotumą, ir kurti paralelinę studijuojamojo dalyko ir svetimos kalbos programą.

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### **About the author**

**Maria Angela Ceruti**, MA TEFL University of Reading, UK, Institute of Linguists Diploma in Translation, PhD student in Linguistics at the University of Pavia, Italy.

*Research interests:* acquisition of lexical constructions in EFL.

*Address:* Via Romea Vecchia 8/A, 29015 Castel San Giovanni (PC), Italy

*E-mail:* mariaangela.ceruti@istruzione.it



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