

Is There Any CLIL School in Armenia?

Secondary School Level

The “perestroika” in the Former Soviet Union and the fall of the “notorious” iron curtain” resulted in an enormous interest in foreign Language Learning. This subsequently caused the acceleration of foreign language education in Armenia. For many years foreign languages had been viewed as one of the “optional” subjects that could be taken both in high school and college. The national language in the former Soviet Union and now, after Armenia gained its independence in 1990, is considered Armenian. Russian, English, German and French have the official status of “foreign languages”.

As paradoxical as it may seem, CLIL type schools started with the former Soviet regime secondary schools with some of the subjects taught in an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners, were set up in Armenia in 1960-ies, English dominating over other foreign languages / French or German/. The first CLIL School /so called “English-biased” school/ was founded in 1966 in the capital of Armenia, Yerevan, named after the great Armenian poet Yeghishe Tsharents.

The “Regulations, Law and Standards” book dating to 1963 issued by the Ministry of Education /formerly called “Enlightenment Ministry” of Armenian Soviet Socialistic Republic/ says, that this type of a CLIL school is a school with polytechnic (labour productive) education secondary school, that aims to fulfill the tasks of a teaching a “communist behavior” to the pupils which meant “to raise a pupil highly educated, physically and psychologically developed with an excellent knowledge a foreign language /English, German or French/ who would be able to skillfully work in a polytechnic- type production sites”.

This secondary CLIL school functioned under the auspices of the “Enlightenment Ministry” of Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and was directly financed by it.

The pupils enrolled in this type of school started at the age of 7 and studied from 1 through 11 grades. The subjects up to the 8 grade were taught in Armenian. After the 8th grade all the pupils had to take CLIL. The following subjects were taught in English – the Literature of the studied language, Geography of Foreign Countries /Area Studies/, and New History. The courses were linguistic-oriented and language based and ended with a progress check-/an examination/.

In a CLIL school like this the number of pupils was 30, which was divided into 3 groups. The teachers in these special groups were appointed directly by the so-called “public educational department” within the Ministry of Education. The Curriculum of the Program was established and approved by the Ministry of Education. All other subjects were taught in the national language according to the Curriculum established for an ordinary secondary school in Armenia.

The Curriculum for CLIL class of this type was specially designed for advanced foreign language learning.

The CLIL teachers didn’t have special training. They were mainly local language teachers specializing in the area they were supposed to teach. At that time within the Soviet regime, under the “iron curtain” conditions it wouldn’t be reasonable to talk of any native speakers conducting classes in a Soviet secondary school.

There didn’t exist a special methodology for CLIL teaching, /though the content should obviously have influenced the linguistic means chosen for teaching the specific content area/. CLIL teachers were self-trained working out an effective methodology for their classes. The materials they used were made locally and were self-developed. The CLIL teachers had also freedom of materials selection.

According to the Laws and Regulations established by the former Ministry of Education CLIL teachers were paid 15% more than an ordinary school teacher. The most skillful and intelligent teachers were selected for teaching CLIL in content classes.

To improve the educational process in CLIL different types of extra-curriculum activities were organized for pupils such as Olympiads, competitions, parties, readings.

Some special extra funding was allocated to organize this type of activities. Moreover, there were special educational rooms (studies) such as a “Foreign language study” equipped with a tape-recorder, tapes, records and other teaching aids. Besides compulsory Armenian and Russian Literature, the library in this school should have contained Literature in foreign language too. There was a special funding to obtain the foreign literature /as it was difficult to do with the Soviet times/.

As amazing as it may seem, the librarian and the senior pioneer group leader along with a higher pedagogical education should have had compulsory knowledge of a foreign language.

The School principal (The Director) of this type of a school was appointed by the Ministry of Education of Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Director of the CLIL School (Armenian school with Advanced English Education) should have had the compulsory knowledge of the foreign language taught in his school. The vice – directors were involved in Foreign Language Programs and were officially appointed by the Public Education Department within the Ministry of Education, of ASSR.

The pupils selection for CLIL schools was mainly done on the initiative of the progressive parents who wanted their child to have advanced education.

After Armenia’s independence the national policy was somewhat changed. Many Russian and English schools were reconstructed into Armenian schools. The government policy shifted to the encouragement of national education. It was obviously dictated by the raise of the national spirit which is inevitable.

CLIL at University level

As has been mentioned, the “perestroika” process in the former Soviet Union, which influenced all the former Soviet Socialist Republics, Armenia too, eventually opened up opportunities for Armenian people, Armenian scholars in particular, to communicate with western scientists. It also provided them with the possibility to get involved in scientific discussions and professional talks which promoted a better understanding between the people and strengthened friendly relations between their countries. A strong need for professional communication in foreign languages increased due to two more historical events in the lives in Armenians: 1) the devastating earthquake of 1988; and 2) the vote for independence in 1990. The earthquake in 1988 opened the door of the country to people from all parts of the world, who hurried to help Armenia to deal with the aftermath, and to struggle side by side with Armenians for the restoration of both country and spirit. Independence gave Armenia an opportunity to build up its own relations with the rest of the world and to start collaborating with western colleagues.

At this point, Armenians began to feel a strong need for interaction with their western colleagues, e.g. scholars, architects, engineers, doctors, etc. Unfortunately, the communication process on the professional level was somewhat slowed down and rather complicated because it turned out, that Armenia didn’t have scientists and other specialists who could function professionally in languages other than Russian and Armenian. Translators weren’t always able to adequately convey the scientific or professional significance and importance of the matters discussed. Moreover, foreign language teachers themselves, who worked as translators during the earthquake, realized that they experienced certain difficulties in all the aspects of scientific communication. The weakest point in foreign language teaching system became conspicuous Reliable linguistic background, and mainly “theoretical type“of knowledge, proved to be insufficient to the practical use of the language. The “academic approach “ to foreign language learning in the former Soviet educational system , which had been aimed at developing mainly reading and translating skills , had largely ignored speaking and writing activities , which forbid

the learner to convey his ideas and thoughts in appropriate language. Armenian scholars having been famous in the former Soviet Union for their highest achievements in physics and astrophysics, biophysics, molecular biology and other technical and applied sciences, experience, difficulties in trying to join the world community of scholars due to foreign language communication problems.

With the globalization process the need for the education in a foreign language incredibly increased. However, it wouldn't be justifiable to state, there hasn't been any attention paid to the education in a foreign language in the former Soviet schools.

In Armenia CLIL viewed as language-based teaching, started in 1960-ies. Thus, in Yerevan State University, for example, content-based teaching in a foreign language has a long history. The methodology used was called "methodology of teaching a foreign language to non-linguists".

A series of strong Soviet textbooks in foreign languages based on content /mainly English for lawyers, physicists, mathematicians, biologists etc. / have been used. But the majority of them were written in Russian as a language for instruction. Nowadays, in the Armenian independence context, in Institutes and Universities foreign language instructors in collaboration with content area experts compile technical dictionaries, text-books on different branches of science and technology in a foreign language.

As to CLIL in its ideal sense, i.e. Content experts teaching both subject and the language. it's very popular. Rare are the cases when Armenian experts teach both - the content and the subject: these are only teachers who have had a chance of getting foreign language education abroad. Frequent are cases when native speakers-experts in different branches of science- teach the subject to students in a foreign language.

Now, with all the political and economic changes Armenia has undergone, double-focused education became one of the urgent needs for Armenian people.

With the overall globalization process, with Armenia's big wish to join the European community, education in a foreign language will eventually give opportunities to train a big strong army of Armenian scholars, freely functioning in foreign language, who would be able to present their huge scientific potential on the international stage.