

Challenges in education – A Study Based in Poland

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Abstract

Bilingual education and teachers' experiences in Poland have, thus far, received little attention from researchers. This paper describes the challenges in bilingual education (CLIL - Content and Language Integrated Learning) in the International Baccalaureate in the Primary Years Programme. The study comprised an online survey with thirty-six teachers working with the youngest pupils in five IB PYP schools in Poland. The primary aim of the study was to find the answers to two research questions: What are the main challenges in bilingual education according to Polish teachers? What can facilitate bilingual education at the level of elementary school? The results showed the variety of challenges in bilingual education among teachers, students and parents, such as: lack of training, limited resources, communication barriers. Additionally, content and language teachers described their best practices and methods in teaching primary students. These results may contribute to the changes in the way of teaching non-native languages to young learners.

Keywords

Bilingualism, CLIL, PYP, challenges, teachers, primary education

1. Introduction

As a result of the ongoing globalisation and development of new ICTs (information and communication technology), speaking in more than one language is a basic skill nowadays. Effective communication and use of a foreign language open new opportunities for study and work abroad. According to Dewi (2015) and Mydans (2007) English is the most widely used language in the world. Edwards (2004) claims that bilingual people are able to function in both languages. In the last decades, in Poland, bilingual education has become more popular and is highly valued. More preschools and elementary schools offer bilingual programs, the most popular are the *IB schools* (The International Baccalaureate) for PYP (Primary Years Programme) and MYP (Middle Years Programme) schools.

Bilingual education at the level of elementary school is unique, which might be the reason for the lack of systematic legal regulations. It is worth mentioning that bilingual education in Poland was arranged at the beginning of the 1990s, but the program was set for high schools. Studies about teaching both content and language are still new in the field of education, many ESL (English as Second Language) teachers in Poland are struggling with various challenges in early childhood bilingual education. The aim of this research is to investigate challenges related to bilingual education in five PYP schools in Poland.

2. Language program in IB schools for PYP

International Baccalaureate is a global organisation that offers a continuum of international education through challenging and high-quality educational programmes for students aged 3 to 19. Children start their journey in the first program (PYP) which is designed for pupils aged 3 to 12.

Language learning is crucial for personal development, and it also helps to meet a need for communication. Moreover, IB believes that language is a tool to integrate different groups together, help to overcome boundaries and strengthen relationships among people. That is why language performs a special and very important role in every IB school in the world. All IB schools are committed to allow and support multilingualism. The IB schools are international schools that accept students from different parts of the world, cultures and religious background. *“The term “multilingualism” in the PYP refers to linguistic ability in more than one language and recognizes that each of a student’s languages may be developed to different levels, and within different contexts, depending on their social and academic experiences”* (Language and Teaching: Language in the PYP, 2018). IB believes that students who speak many languages

are more engaged in learning, open to others, and see things from different perspectives. It means that they are ready to be lifelong learners who thrive and make a difference as citizens of the 21st century.

The IB highlights the necessity of the whole school community (students, teachers, parents, board and administrative staff) to take an active part in the language development of the students.

“A learning community builds a positive culture of language learning by:

- *embedding the values and beliefs that underpin multilingualism, such as being open-minded, caring communicators*
- *recognizing the importance of belonging and connectedness in personal and cultural identities*
- *recognizing the vital role families play in supporting, developing and sustaining children’s language development*
- *creating environments where students use their home language with pride, and access host or global languages to engage with the world*
- *actively promoting the maintenance and development of home languages*
- *developing students’ metalinguistic skills and understandings by facilitating and actively encouraging opportunities to make connections between languages*
- *ensuring that multiple languages are seen and heard throughout the school and in communication between home and school*
- *promoting language learning as a means to build and strengthen intercultural relationships*
- *reflecting on the community’s effectiveness of building a positive culture of language learning through collaboration.”*

(Learning and Teaching: Language in the PYP, 2018)

3. How languages are learnt in the PYP

IB clearly states that all teachers are language teachers because all learning is based on language. That is why, especially during the early years, teaching and learning is concentrated especially on the language development of a child. The multilingual students bring to school not only the ways of communication in their language but also the culture, the social meaning of their native

language, knowledge about the language etc. Therefore, there are three inseparable parts of learning a language: learning language, learning through language and learning about language, as illustrated in Figure 1.

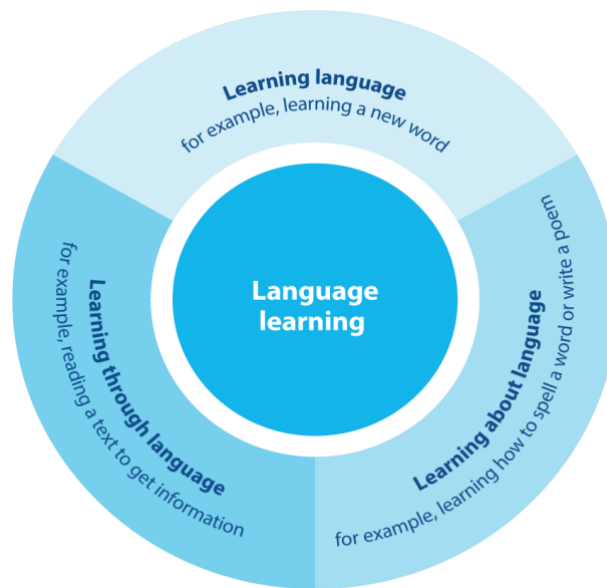


Figure 1: Adapted from Halliday 1985

Learning a language is the most evident part of language learning (LL). The students learn a language by acquiring new words and trying to understand them. It is a part of formal teaching; the students are fully aware of the learning process. The teachers use different techniques to help students learn a new language or to develop their skills in order to get to the higher level. One of the most common methods is scaffolding. Scaffolding is thus the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone. It is future oriented and aimed at increasing a learner's autonomy (Gibbons, 2015). The teachers build new knowledge and skills on the basis of students' prior knowledge. That is why the pre-assessment is extremely important in the IB language learning process.

Learning about language is a part of learning that consists of the knowledge of the form, conventions and contextual use. During the lessons students learn the rules, appropriate form of written and oral language.

Last but not least, learning through language is the third part of language learning. Students meet with the language in new situations, through different perspectives and during various occasions. They communicate with others, listen, read texts, perform plays, write essays, explore

and share new understandings, formulate thoughts etc. They need different approaches to learning to gain new knowledge, create ideas and ways of thinking in subject areas. It is in this part of language learning that the fundamentals of IB PYP and CLIL approach meet.

4. A new approach to teaching a foreign language - CLIL

As can be seen from the previous paragraph, CLIL fits into the IB PYP philosophy of teaching language to young learners. CLIL means a dual type of education. In teaching practice it means that a content subject such as history, maths, science or music is taught through English, or any other second language (L2). In Poland, CLIL happens in English in all stages (from elementary schools to high schools). The concept of teaching content through a second language contributes to the European Union's language politics (2003) and was set in Europe in the early nineties (Coyle et al., 2010). Moreover, in the document *Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan*, it is written that CLIL:

“... can provide effective opportunities for pupils to use their new language skills now, rather than learn them now for use later. It opens doors on languages for a broader range of learners, nurturing self-confidence in young learners and those who have not responded well to formal language instruction in general education. It provides exposure to the language without requiring extra time in the curriculum, which can be of particular interest in vocational settings. The introduction of CLIL approaches into an institution can be facilitated by the presence of trained teachers who are native speakers of the vehicular language.”

Marsh (1994) and Coyle (1999) describe four pillars of CLIL - *Content, Communication, Cognition, Culture, the 4Cs framework*, and the elements of a successful CLIL lesson are illustrated in Figure 2.

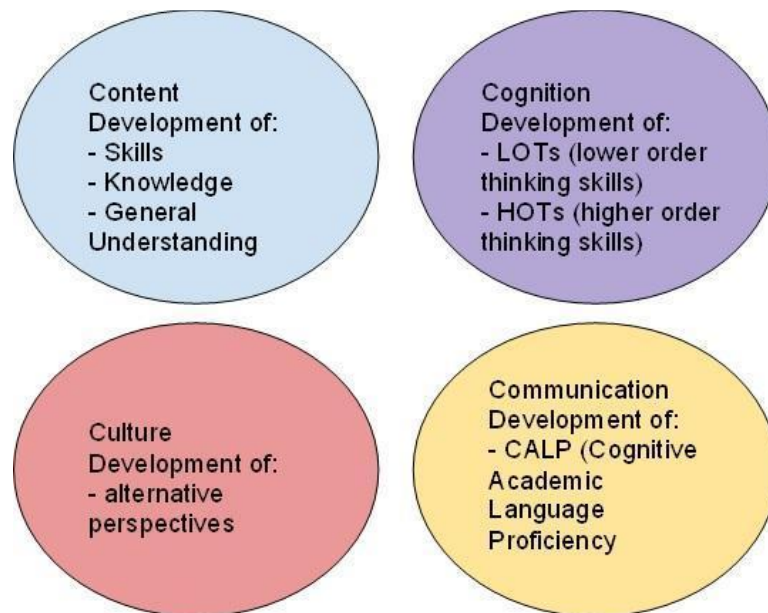


Figure 2: Based on Colye (1999)

The main assumption of CLIL is that the content is taught *with* and *through* the foreign language (Eurydice, 2005). Moreover, the idea of CLIL is better understood by its five dimensions: culture, environment, language, content and learning (Marsh et al., 2010). On the other hand, Ball (2006) gives his own definition and describes CLIL by three dimensions: *content, language and communication*. Firstly, *culture* can support international mindedness. Culture dimension helps students to understand multicultural aspects of the global world. Secondly, *environment* as a part of the CLIL approach, helps young learners to get better education in the international world and open new horizons. Thirdly, the most important base of CLIL is *language* - it is distinguished into two types *CALP, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency* and *BICS - Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills*. Both are crucial during content and language development, second language awareness and multilingual interests. Not only language but also *content* may have influence on early childhood educational growth. Content might be taught through different perspectives and, moreover, supports children's communication development by providing them with the specific language terminology (CALP). The least dimension of CLIL is *learning*. CLIL is the best option to support students with their special educational needs by scaffolding or differentiation. It also can meet with their individual learning strategies. Teachers as well as educators have much more opportunities to choose different methods and forms of work (Coyle et al., 2010). We align with the Content and Language Integrated Learning model that emphasizes the simultaneous development of language proficiency and subject knowledge.

5. Teaching Implications

According to Coyle et al. (2010) there are four techniques on how to implement CLIL in teaching and learning. All of them are also found in PYP teaching.

1. Transdisciplinary curriculum - “*concerns that are at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all disciplines*” (Nicolescu, 2014), teaching can happen then disciplines are united not taught separately, for example: maths and sport (for example: measurement of pulse rate), history and art (for example: drawing own cave art pictures) or language and music (for example: creating a song based on book).
2. Collaborative work and task-based tasks - CLIL as well as PYP demands teamwork and development of social skills. Activities that join all students influence their inner motivation, help students to exchange their knowledge and learn how to be open-minded.
3. Assessment and step forward - those two are the key elements in whole teaching. Integrated assessment is combined by self-assessment, peer-assessment and teacher assessment. That effectively supports further learning, gives valuable information about what students can do better next time. According to Kennedy-Clark et al. (2017) assessment should be: authentic, clear and specific, varied, developmental, collaborative and interactive. Step forward raises students’ motivation and helps them to achieve their learning goals (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
4. Teach language through the context - multilingualism and “*communicator*” learner profile attribute in PYP refer to the ability to speak in more than one language and use other language to learn.

Taking all into consideration, it is clear how IB and CLIL interpenetrate with the fundamental assumption about teaching second language and bilingual education. Both support students with their learning needs, focus on the global world problems, highlight the importance of a multicultural approach, and promote student-centred learning.

6. Teachers in bilingual schools – the Polish aspect

As mentioned, in Poland bilingual education has roots from 1993, there were first high school bilingual classes in English, French, German and Spanish. The European Commission in 1995

enacted the project *The Framework of Reference of Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Culture* and mentioned four main assumptions in bilingual education:

- openness to languages,
- intercomprehension, i.e., understanding related languages,
- intercultural approach,
- an integrated didactic approach to learning multiple languages.

Realisation of those key points by bilingual teachers might lead to better preparation of young learners in living in multilingual and multicultural environments. Noteworthy, from 2011 the European Union began to promote bilingual education at the level of kindergarten and elementary schools. In Poland with the amendment of the Regulation of The Minister of National Education of 2008, teaching a second language has become obligatory at the level of elementary school¹. All specifications for bilingual teaching were described in The Regulation of the Minister of National Education in 2009², where it is mentioned that content and language teachers should hold a certificate at B2 level. It is worth mentioning that a language certificate (B2) is obligatory to obtain at the level of bachelor studies in a 3-year cycle. According to Brzosko-Barratt (2019), Polish teachers have weak language competences. The fact is that there is a low percentage of teachers fully qualified to teach both content and language. Moreover, Brzosko-Barratt claims that insufficient teachers' language skills might have a negative influence on conducting CLIL lessons. In 2016, the Polish Educational Research Institute (*IBE - Instytut Badań nad Edukacją*) prepared a report about teachers' situation in Poland. From that research it is shown that in order to implement bilingual education in schools it is necessary to change the studies program in the field of education. A CLIL teacher in the PYP school needs better language support during studies and the main conclusion is that the certificate should be on a higher level than B2.

7. Statement of the problem

Several studies in Poland have shown that especially at the level of primary schools, bilingual education is not supported by any official regulations. Future teachers are not well prepared for

¹ Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 23 grudnia 2008 roku w sprawie podstawy programowej wychowania przedszkolnego oraz kształcenia ogólnego w poszczególnych typach szkół (Dz.U. 2009 nr 4 poz. 17)

² Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej z dnia 12 marca 2009 roku w sprawie szczegółowych kwalifikacji wymaganych od nauczycieli oraz określenia szkół i wypadków, w których można zatrudnić nauczycieli niemających wyższego wykształcenia lub ukończonego zakładu kształcenia nauczycieli (Dz.U. 2009 nr 50 poz. 400)

teaching (Brzosko-Barratt 2019), and after COVID-19 an increasing number of experienced teachers quit the educational sector. It should be noted that bilingual programs are offered mostly in private schools which means that not everybody can afford it. Teaching English to young learners has been a challenge for ESL teachers.

8. Methodology

8.1 Objectives of the study

The following two research questions have guided the present study:

- What are the main challenges in bilingual education according to Polish teachers?
- What can facilitate bilingual education at the level of elementary school?

The way of selecting respondents to this study was intentional. The authors chose teachers from specific schools (IB PYP) using the CLIL method.

8.2 Research Strategy

The aim of this study is to learn more about bilingual teachers' opinion on challenges in bilingual education. The study was conducted in January 2023, using an online questionnaire. The instrument consisted of twelve questions of different types: open, multiple-choice question and open-ended question.

A total of 36 teachers from five PYP bilingual schools in Poland answered the questionnaire. Due to the small proportion of men, the gender aspect has been omitted in the analysis. Teachers who took part in the survey do not have a very long teaching experience (Figure 3). Most of the participants teach in elementary education. In Poland elementary education usually falls in the period of 0 to 5 grade, where most of the classes are conducted by the same teacher (Figure 4). Of course, some schools might hire additional subject teachers.

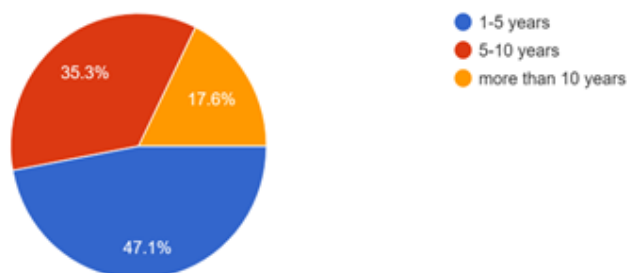


Figure 3: For how long have you taught in bilingual education?

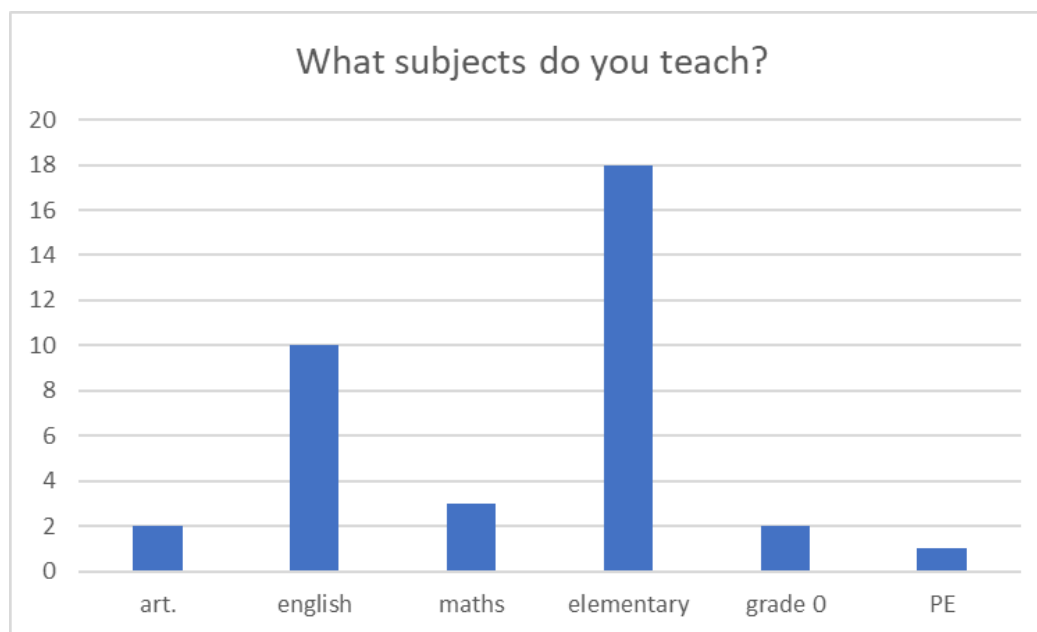


Figure 4: Subjects taught

9. Results

The first part of the survey was dedicated to metric questions, focusing on factors such as level of education, teaching experience, teaching grade, teaching subjects and language combination. From among 36 participants, the majority of them had graduated from university with Early English Learning, only six did not have language preparation. Moreover, close to 60 percent of teachers have never taken any extra course or workshop about bilingual education. Most of the respondents teach in both Polish and English (24), or only English (5). Among the results, there were other language combinations like English-German, English-Spanish (6). Only one person speaks Polish during lesson, the result was gathered in PYP school which provides curricula in polish language.

The second part of the survey concerned challenges in bilingual education (chart 3). Respondents could pick a maximum of four answers. According to 72 percent of the answers, the primary problem faced during teaching is when students who are not good at languages do not take part in a lesson. That might be the most crucial problem in bilingual education. It means that they are not able to be active learners and acquire the knowledge and skills in the same way as their peers. These students usually 'switch off' when the lesson is conducted in the language not well-known by them and they wait for translation. Teachers should remember good techniques and practices - differentiation and scaffolding. The teachers may also use the technique of

translanguaging, which may help all the students to benefit from the lesson. That may have an influence on students' engagement during lessons. Another problem that respondents point out is still related with young learners - their problems with understanding key points of their lesson (14 answers) and their lack of motivation to learn (13 answers). Bilingual teachers, particularly, are supposed to support children, help them to set up learning goals and help them to overcome their problems. Those answers show how the role of the teacher is important. It presents the teacher as the responsible person of learning outcomes. In bilingual education it is crucial to understand the aim and philosophy of CLIL, because that may facilitate the process of teaching and learning. In the PYP programme it is important to follow students' needs, help them to set up their learning goals, to make students eager to learn, help them to be responsible for their learning, and the most important is to discover with them the joy of learning. Teachers also point out other problems in bilingual early childhood education. They can be divided into three groups, as illustrated in Table 1:

Students' difficulties:	Teachers's difficulties:	Others
Students do not understand the key points of the lesson (14)	The teacher translates all the material (10)	Lack of parents' support during kids language and content development (11)
Lack of students' prior knowledge about the content (10)	The teacher or students mix languages in one sentence (10)	Lack of proper guidance at school for teachers how to implement bilingual education (3)
Students who are not good at languages do not take active part in a lesson (26)	Lack of teaching experience (3)	
Students are not interested during the lessons (6)	Teachers low English comprehension (7)	
Students' negative attitude towards learning (11)	Teachers' insufficient pedagogical training (5)	
Lack of students' motivation (13)		
Students skipping classes (5)		

Table 1: Three areas of difficulties in bilingual education.

Several teachers mentioned that they may observe students' negative attitude towards learning (11 answers) and lack of students' prior knowledge about the content (10 answers). It may be challenging for the teachers to catch the interest of the students in the lesson, as students are surrounded by a variety of attractions easily accessible for them. Teachers also highlighted that pupils do not have enough prior knowledge about the content of the classes which makes it harder for them to concentrate on learning. In both CLIL and IB PYP, the basis for teaching is the so-called pre-assessment. The teacher checks what the student already knows about the project they are about to start, what skills they have and what they need to learn. This knowledge is important in order to correctly arrange a learning plan that is individual to each student, in such a way that they can progress at their own pace.

Furthermore, the questionnaire shows that either teacher or the student mix languages while speaking which means that for instance somebody says a statement in one language with some expressions added in other language. (10). Whether this is correct or not is a contentious issue. Probably the reason for using that method is insufficient vocabulary awareness in one of the languages. For language teachers, this may not be suitable due to the mixing of language structures or the possibility of loan translation. However, the CLIL and IB system emphasise that the language itself is not as important as the idea, thought communicated by the student in order to learn more and develop further skills.

Respondents were asked about facilities that might be helpful in implementing content and language. Close to 50 percent of the answers underlined the need to introduce fundamental changes in the entire system by forming a special curriculum for bilingual education. As mentioned above, in Poland early childhood education, the Polish government does not offer legal arrangements. On the other hand, IB PYP schools have their own curriculum known as scope and sequence. There are official documents with the summary of what needs to have been taught and in what order. Our respondents link the Polish national core curriculum with IB scope and sequences. Perhaps one official curriculum for bilingual education might help students to achieve higher competences in expressing thoughts and linguistic correctness.

Additionally, respondents pointed out the importance of parents in education. It is crucial that parents are involved. Usually they motivate their children, help them with homework and support non-formal education by borrowing books from the library or buying them, watching movies in the second language and creatively spending time with the child (Otręba-Szklarczyk, 2015; Zielińska, 2018). Further, approximately 30 percent of the respondents indicate the need of official coursebooks. That may only happen when the Minister of National Education implements a regulation of bilingual education. Currently, all English coursebooks are based on The National Core Curriculum and the aim of teaching English as a foreign language. Factors that could help implementing content and language in PYP schools are, for instance, financial support for extra courses/workshops for teachers, having ICT equipment in the classroom and methodological support for teachers.

As regards the respondents' own proposals (others), five people state that they will need a well-equipped class with art materials, introducing English language as not only a language but a tool to obtain knowledge and learn English in the most natural way. Two persons claimed that additional resources, such as games, books and class equipment would be helpful. It is

worth mentioning that 56 percent of respondents said that their schools have enough teaching and learning equipment and facilities (see Figure 5).

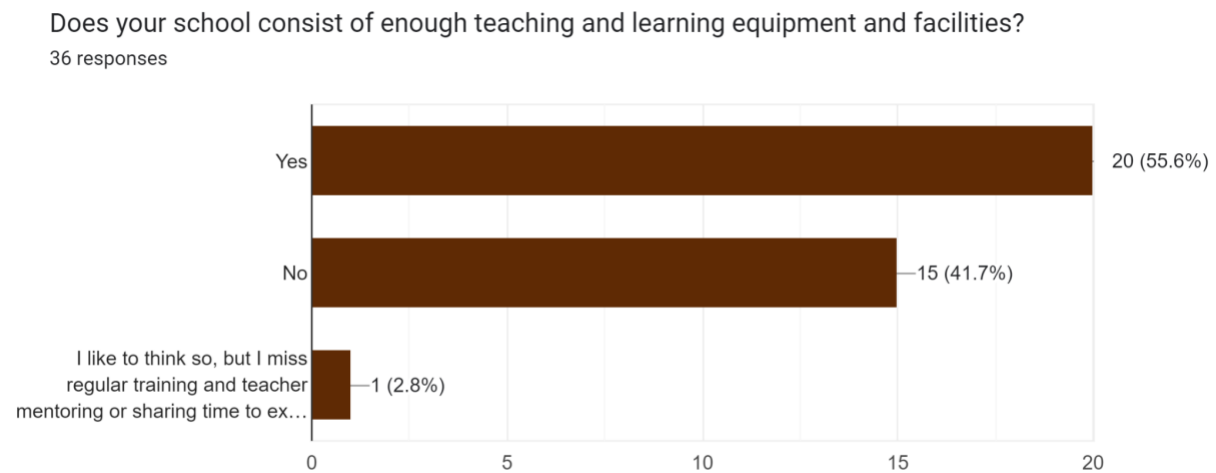


Figure 5: Availability of teaching and learning equipment at school

In the last phase of the study, the authors analysed teachers' descriptions about their best practices and methods which may be helpful in bilingual education (Table 2)

Grouped answers	Number of answers
Methods	13
Forms	5
Tools	9
Practices	13

Table 2: Grouped answers to the best practices question.

In the case of that question and according to the respondents' answers, it would seem that only the best methods and practices might facilitate teaching and learning.

9.1 Methods

Respondents mentioned different methods that they use to facilitate learning, for example:

- Individualization
- SOLO method where students work on different tasks connected with the same topic depending on their level of understanding

- Gamification - creating learning experiences that will engage students emotionally in learning in both languages
- CLIL method
- Immerse
- Supporting gross/fine motor skills -learning songs, tongue twisters and rhymes -playtime in English
- IB, Montessori Education
- learning through action
- Affective filter applied in the classroom
- Audio visual method

All teachers wrote about CLIL, scaffolding and immersion as the method of teaching.

9.2 Forms

As forms of effective learning in bilingual education teachers seem to prefer teaching in pairs, in groups, and implementing teamwork. They often let students collaborate with the peers who speak in the same language, or they allow students with lower language competences to work with more fluent speakers.

9.3 Tools

Teachers responded that they use a variety of tools starting with using ICT tools, they create their self-made materials. They claim that the best tool to support young learners are visuals - video, games, songs, pictures, posters. In addition, they prepare bilingual materials and reading tasks in students' mother tongues.

9.4 Practice

Respondents share with their best practices, for example:

- building relationship with students, increase autonomy, discussions
- choosing interesting topics, various materials and experiments
- collaborating closely with homeroom teachers, having two teachers - one English, one Polish so that the students do not get confused
- differentiation according to the current linguistic abilities of a student, including modifying the tasks, instructions, worksheets
- following students' abilities and needs
- making students understand the key concepts of the unit, even translating.

- giving them easier tasks, appropriate with the concept taught.
- consistency and only speaking in English

The aim of education is not only the achievement of knowledge and understanding. Each teacher beyond didactic aims, has also socio-emotional aims. They want to interest children in education, motivate them to work and influence their self-assessment. The aim of education in PYP schools with CLIL method is the development of social, research, thinking and communication skills. Furthermore, it is important to create a safe, calm and respectful atmosphere.

The last question in the questionnaire concerned benefits of bilingual education (Figure 6). It should be emphasised that IB PYP schools, which have CLIL classes, focus on the development of students' educational potential, create a sense of agility, develop interests and give children the opportunity to learn about global and local problems. Bilingual education in PYP teaches reflexivity and versatility.

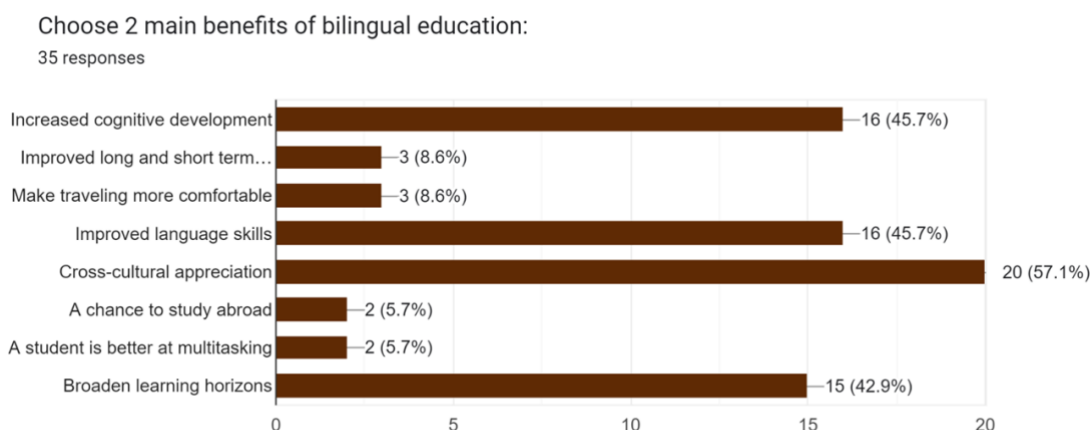


Figure 6: Main benefits of bilingual education

Bilingual education offers numerous advantages, fostering cognitive flexibility and enhancing problem-solving skills by navigating between two languages. It promotes cultural awareness, fostering an appreciation for diversity and creating globally minded individuals.

10. Conclusion

Bilingual education is increasingly popular in the Polish system of education; however, it is associated with different challenges. They are related to teacher, student, and environment difficulties that all people concerned try to overcome using different methods and techniques. The major challenge is connected with the fact that the students' low language skills prevent them from taking an active part in the lesson. That is closely related to the next problem which

is not understanding the key points of the lesson by the students. Insufficient knowledge and language skills lead to lack or low student motivation to learn. All of this leads to the conclusion that students first need to increase their language skills and then they can explore different disciplines in the bilingual system. The teachers emphasised the need of creating a bilingual curriculum with specific coursebooks which will help them in teaching. It is worth mentioning that this study shows that not only the educational system and teachers are responsible for bilingual education, but also parents play a very important role in this process.

Both CLIL and IB PYP are modern, student-friendly environments that help young people become lifelong learners and face their challenges. All those involved in bilingual education should be aware of the fact that, in addition to the great advantages of this type of education, it also struggles with a number of difficulties to which we should seek solutions.

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Appendix

Questionnaire
What subjects do you teach?
How long do you teach in bilingual education?
What university department have you graduated from?
Have you ever taken any extra course/workshop about bilingual education?
What is your taught language combination?
What grade do you teach?
What difficulties do you find while working in bilingual education
What are other challenges and difficulties you face while teaching the students?
Does your school consist of enough teaching and learning equipment and facilities?
Describe shortly your best methods/practices of teaching in bilingual education
In your opinion what will help you with implementing content and language bilingual education?
Choose 2 main benefits of bilingual education

Table 3: Questionnaire