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The fusion of postmodernism and CLIL through teaching geomythology

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Abstract

This paper explores the integration of postmodernism and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in the context of geology education, specifically through the teaching of geomythology. The influence of postmodern ideas on education has been substantial, challenging traditional notions of knowledge and authority. In language teaching, postmodernism and CLIL converge by prioritizing cultural understanding and interdisciplinary knowledge. This study demonstrates how CLIL can effectively incorporate geological content with language acquisition, fostering a nuanced understanding of both through myth narratives. Additionally, by applying postmodern tenets, this approach challenges traditional scientific narratives, promoting critical thinking and cultural diversity. The practical application of geomythology in the geology classroom is examined and the paper presents the results of a qualitative study of students' perceptions of the use of geomythology, with the aim of assessing the aspects of motivation and improved communication and debate skills. The results of our study clearly indicate an overall positive attitude towards activities of interdisciplinary nature and show an increase in student participation and motivation in communicative activities. *(примљено: 29. јуна 2024; прихваћено: 31. октобра 2024)*

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1. Introduction

The connection between postmodernism, the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach and geology studies becomes evident through the observation of modern educational trends. The influence of "the postmodern condition" on education has been explored since its very onset (Aronowitz/Giroux, 1991; Blake et al., 1998; Breen, 1999; Fahim/Pishghadam, 2009; Finch, 2006; Kumaravadivelu, 1994), so it is not a novel avenue of exploration. However, the focus of this paper is to show how the tenets of postmodernism have influenced, or rather, found their place in the CLIL methodology (Gabillion, 2020; Beko, 2021), which, in turn, has been proven an adequate approach to teaching geology (Beko, 2013). In this way, we will demonstrate the subtle, but permeating influence of postmodern ideas within a CLIL context in a geology classroom and how it can be practically applied in teaching and learning geology. We will also include the practical application of a postmodern CLIL activity in a geology classroom through teaching geomythology. This will be followed by a study of the students' perception of the activity in question.

Firstly, within the domain of foreign language teaching, the connection between postmodernism and CLIL becomes particularly pertinent (Gabillion, 2020: 18). Traditional language instruction often prioritizes linguistic competence in isolation from real-world contexts and disciplinary knowledge (Beko, 2021: 59). In the postmodern era, language proficiency is seen as inseparable from cultural understanding and interdisciplinary knowledge, which, again, is at the core of postmodernism. CLIL responds to this paradigmatic shift by immersing learners in meaningful real-life content while providing opportunities for cultural language acquisition. Through engaging with authentic materials and participating in content-based activities, students not only develop language skills, but also gain insights into diverse subjects, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the world. Hence, the alignment between postmodernism and CLIL offers a transformative approach to foreign language education, empowering learners to navigate the complexities of a globalized and interconnected world (Gabillion, 2020: 22).

2. The crossroads of postmodernism, CLIL and geology

In the realm of education, the advent of postmodernism has ushered in a major shift, challenging traditional notions of knowledge (Blake et al., 1998: 21–23), truth, and authority. Postmodernism advocates for a pluralistic approach to understanding the world, rejecting grand narratives, and embracing diversity in perspectives. This philosophical stance has had profound implications for teaching, as educators now seek to cultivate critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability in learners (Finch, 2006: 12, 19). Moreover, postmodernism acknowledges the change present in the learning/teaching environment which must be recognized and accepted (Rogers, 1969).

In terms of its relevance for the study of geology, it is important to note that postmodernism challenges the traditional narratives of scientific objectivity,

emphasizing instead the plurality of perspectives and the influence of social constructs on knowledge production (Lyotard, 1979: 7). This translates into acknowledging the subjectivity involved in interpreting geological data and the cultural influences on how we perceive and categorize geological phenomena. By embracing postmodern ideas, geology education through CLIL becomes not just about transmitting facts, but about cultivating a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between human perception and the natural world.

In postmodernism, everything became susceptible to a kind of "fact-checking" which stemmed from a deeply rooted mistrust towards established structures or, as Lyotard defined it, an "incredulity toward metanarratives" (1979: xxiv). This climate of insecurity, doubt, scepticism verging on cynicism created a changed societal, political, historical, economical, and educational environment (Kumaravadivelu, 1994: 42). These defined what Kumaravadivelu has termed the postmethod: "the postmethod condition signifies a search for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method" (1994: 29). This need for a change stemmed from a misalignment between L2 theory and in-classroom teaching experiences and practices. However, this postmethod pedagogy can be applied to the CLIL classroom since it "can help to integrate the '4C' model by observing the locality of CLIL practice as the main principle of organization behind the whole system of integration" (Beko, 2021: 27)

In her paper on the CLIL approach in geography studies, Nicole Berg defines the term "geo-literacy" (2023: 97), which could equally be applied to geology studies. She states that geo-literacy is "a concept combining different subject-specific skills and practices resulting in the mastery of a broad variety of media, databases, forms of representation and instruments" (Berg, 2023: 97) which are relevant to the field of geo-science. In accordance with CLIL, in order for students to be introduced into a specific linguistic sphere, in this specific case, that of geology, the CLIL teacher needs to bear in mind the complexity of the "genre" (Beko, 2021: 47; Berg, 2023: 101). Beko states that the introduction of the geo-genre is "part of a situation where students become members of scientific communities, learning to communicate with the language of science" (2021: 47). In this context, we see the preparedness of CLIL to equip the students with the knowledge necessary for them to become independent and confident speakers of a niche genre of language, all within the safe confines of a classroom. Thus, for the students, the classroom becomes a gateway into the real world, a form of a simulacrum of reality, and much in a postmodern manner brings the outside world into constant interrogation through the perpetual process of learning.

3. Creating a postmodern CLIL geology classroom

Even though CLIL draws on and learns from what we may call the "traditional" method of teaching, it is actually located on a metaphorical crossroads between theory and practice. In an attempt to combine the best of both, all the while incorporating new perspectives, CLIL defies grand and pre-established narratives on a microlevel, i.e., creating its own narrative within the confines of a language

classroom. Taking all of this into account, Breen asks "[h]ow else could a language classroom exist other than a postmodern way?" (1999: 56). However, we can then ask, "How can a CLIL geology classroom not be postmodern?" These shifts reflect the changed view of educational goals and the aims of a newly established pedagogical approach CLIL tends to accommodate for the socio-economic changes visible in every generation, and it does so from a perspective of integrative educational practice (Coyle et al., 2010: 10), which is, in this case, applied in a geology-focused environment.

From 1994 onwards, the biggest arena for change in the CLIL context has been the aforementioned classroom, whose importance becomes even more apparent in light of social change. As Coyle et al. state, "it is the social microcosm of the classroom, and learning practice, which reflect the successes and failures of the community as a whole" (2010: 7). Expanding on that, if we take into account Breen's statement that in the postmodern condition "the classroom walls become its windows" (1999: 55), the focus, once again, turns to what is at the core of the CLIL approach and that is experience. For a CLIL teacher, it is essential that they be aware professionals who are autonomous (Beko, 2021: 27), which then allows them to analyse their environment and adapt it in such a way as to be able to provide their students with "authentic experience in learning" (Beko, 2021: 27). By creating curricula and lesson plans which are based on real-life scenarios, CLIL teachers form an environment in which it is safe for their students to explore multiple options and face new potential scenarios beforehand, thus providing them with the necessary knowledge and familiarity which they can later successfully apply in real life.

Prior studies have demonstrated that students perceive the importance of applying foreign language knowledge and skills in real-world contexts as early as in primary education (Giannikas, 2014: 23), and they are essential in terms of functional literacy as far as higher education (Stevanović, 2023). For this reason, it is imperative to consider the sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects of language learning, placing greater emphasis on students' practical proficiency and utilization of foreign languages (Janković/Buđevac, 2023: 51). Hence, there has been a growing emphasis on developing individuals' functional proficiency and application of foreign languages in both academic and professional spheres (Đorović/Janković, 2018: 119). The classroom must accommodate for this and in so doing become "a new cultural core, which, unlike the 'high' culture of one's own nation and ethnicity, and the 'high' culture of a specific foreign language, English, French, etc., represents a small culture or subculture" (Beko/Mićović, 2022: 207).

This form of language teaching heavily relies on situations which the students can recognize and live through, creating space for a more natural and scenario-specific use of language. These, in turn, allow for "language development which builds on other forms of learning" (Coyle et al., 2010: 11). Coyle and Marsh define this as "naturalness" (Coyle et al., 2010: 12; Marsh/Langé, 2000: 5) which is at the centre of CLIL and stands in stark contrast to the prescribed and ready-made (oftentimes even outdated) curricula of the traditional, prescriptivist methodologies. Going back

to the postmodern condition, we again see a match. If postmodernism relativizes the notion of objective knowledge, and favours the situated variant, allowing for contextual aspects of it, then CLIL perfectly follows suit and offers a pragmatic application of those ideas.

Nevertheless, for these ideas to be put into practice, CLIL-based materials and textbooks need to be created. For that precise reason, many would say that the practical aspect of the implementation of those ideas can prove to be troublesome since CLIL-based material is unfortunately not as readily available as it should be and "that is where we enter an arena of the underdeveloped, if not absolutely vacant" (Đorđević, 2023: 86). This may be considered another postmodern feature of the CLIL approach since textbooks are usually associated with the traditional method and expect the teacher to follow a prescribed lesson-plan, which more often than not does not suit the reality of the classroom and most definitely does not take into account the diversity present among the students of a class. In this postmodern CLIL context, the teacher is still "confronted with the complexity of language and language learning situations on a daily basis and no single method or explanation could meet their needs" (Gabillion, 2020: 20). Thus, it is on the teacher to create the material which would cater for the uniqueness of the class and its requirements. If we are to create teaching material for geologists by including "non-scientific" texts and exercises, in this case myths (for geomythology), we will provide our students with the opportunity to view something as factual as science from an educated distance and through the lens of life and culture.

4. Geology and myth

In terms of its practical application, Beko and Mićović claim that through the use of the geomythological narrative students can be introduced into a multicultural and multidisciplinary education (2022: 208). This is one aspect of how postmodernism has found its way into a CLIL geology classroom. Not only are we given an opportunity to teach actual science while leaning on its mythological (thus unproven and non-factual) heritage, but we are also introduced to lateral insights into a subject matter previously deemed unquestionable (this holds true for any scientific area, but in this particular case, the geological heritage of our planet and its very existence). In addition, the cognitive structure of a myth is holistic and does not include only the Earth, but the whole universe as well, not to mention the religious, historical, industrial and many other aspects which are intertwined with science (Beko/Mićović, 2022: 208), allowing for the development of the "Culture" segment of the CLIL method and increasing the students' intercultural awareness (Beko, 2021: 61)

5. Methodology

Theory may only go so far in assessing the impact a certain innovative method could have in a language classroom. With the aim of demonstrating the benefits of using activities based on geomythology in a geological classroom, we have conducted

a survey amongst our students in order to get the full picture of their perception of the use of myths in a such a classroom. The aims of this research are to prove the following hypotheses: 1) using geomythology in a geology language classroom can make students more motivated and engaged with the subject matter, 2) using geomythology in a geology language classroom creates a space for interactive activities, such as discussions and debates, where students can be encouraged to express their opinions more freely and without fear of judgement.

The survey was conducted among 40 students on the first year of studies at the Faculty of Mining and Geology (FMG). The class in which the survey was done is heterogenous in terms of individual student language competence, varying from A1 level to full proficiency at C2. Most students, however, were on the C1 level (10), followed by A2 (9), and an equal number of students was placed on the B1 and B2 level (7). Based on this, it was expected that the students would have different assessments of the difficulty of the tasks. It is important to state that some students did not answer all the questions; thus, the numbers of students who did answer certain questions can vary accordingly.

Before the survey took place, students had three lectures which were based on presenting three myths connected to specific geological phenomena: the myth of the oracle of Delphi, the myth about the Devil's Tower (US) and the myth about Pele, the goddess of volcanoes and fire. These myths were used as introductory activities to the units on tectonic plate movement, sedimentary and igneous rocks, respectively. All these texts are parts of units found in the official textbook *English for Geology Students 1* for the obligatory first-year English course at the FMG.

While this kind of activity lends itself to various uses and applications, the classes where myths were covered were organized in the following manner:

- The students were given some time (5 minutes) to read the text.
- Following this, time was allotted (10 minutes) for student-teacher and student-student discussion. The students were encouraged to give their own view on the story of the myth, discuss why they think the story was created in that way, what explanations would they give for the phenomenon in question and how they would relate it to their own knowledge and experience, preparing them for a formal debate setting.
- Then, they were given time (5 minutes) to read a text explaining the science behind the myth, after which they were again encouraged to take part in discussions with this information in mind.
- The last activity was organized in a student-student manner, where students assumed opposing sides on the same issue. They were to use debate prompts and ideas to discuss both stances. The prompts were given as a separate part of the unit in the book. They cover three types of debate skills: "Asking follow-up questions", "Keeping it to the point" and "Asking for opinion" (skills to be practised for the myths in question, each myth covering a different aspect). For this, the students were given 15 minutes and at least 10 suitable phrases they were encouraged to use in the conversations.

Table 1 presents the questions asked in the questionnaire handed out to the students, with the number of students according to their answer choices. The questionnaire was created specifically for this survey, and it consisted of eleven questions designed to assess students' perceptions and opinions regarding the use of myths in a geological classroom. The questions aimed to address and evaluate various aspects of this practice. Each question used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "I strongly disagree" to "I strongly agree" to properly assess students' agreement or disagreement with the survey statements. The results based on student responses can be used to show how myths can be integrated into geological education to facilitate learning and understanding, while encouraging creative expression.

The students were given 20 minutes to complete the survey, which took place during a regular class. All the students gave verbal consent for willing participation in the survey. The participants were given clear and detailed instructions on how to answer the questions and were asked to provide additional commentary, supported with examples and suggestions based on their own experience from the classroom. This was done to gain a more detailed and precise view of all the aspects of the needs and interests of the students.

6. Results

The survey aimed to gain insight into students' perceptions of incorporating myths into the geological classroom and their general opinion on this experience. We conducted a qualitative study, but for the sake of clarity, a quantitative element was also included. Thus, the table with the results contains the number of students who responded in a certain way for each question individually. Selected comments are presented at the end.

		I strongly disagree	I disagree	Neutral	I agree	I strongly agree
1.	I like reading myths and stories about mythical creatures in general.	2	2	7	17	12
2.	I find myths about geological phenomena interesting.	1	4	4	22	9
3.	Learning through myths is a welcome change.	2	2	13	20	3
4.	Fully understanding myths can sometimes be a bit demanding.	3	7	14	10	6
5.	Learning language through myths is easy and appealing.	0	3	7	15	15
6.	Myths can serve as good support to accompany geological texts.	0	3	7	20	7
7.	Myths have helped me better understand some geological phenomena.	0	12	3	18	7

8.	I prefer learning where open-ended questions are more favoured than yes/no questions.	0	4	6	11	18
9.	Learning through debate is a good change and should be applied more often.	0	0	2	23	12
10.	Learning through independent reasoning is very useful.	0	2	2	17	17
11.	I like activities where I am not exposed to material that needs to be memorized, but where I am expected to explain something in my own words.	0	3	5	7	23

Table 1. Questionnaire with results

Overall, the comments were positive, demonstrating general student satisfaction with the incorporation of geomythology into the language course. Some of the selected comments are: "Learning when we talk about myths is more fun and the lesson is easier to learn," "The myths we covered on this course helped me a great deal to learn, and it was useful for other subjects as well. They are very useful," "I think that learning myths was interesting and deepened interest in certain topics," "The best part was when we talked about our interpretations of the myths, I listened to everyone."

7. Discussion

The first question deals with the students' general preferences towards reading myths and stories involving mythical creatures and occurrences. The findings show differing attitudes, with 72.5% of participants expressing agreement or strong agreement with the statement that they do read myths and similar stories, regardless of classroom use, indicating a strong affinity for mythological narratives. Meanwhile, 17.5% remained neutral, suggesting a reserved interest, and only 10% exhibited disagreement or strong disagreement.

Question two is about the students' interest in myths concerning geological phenomena. Despite a minority of students (12.5%) expressing strong disagreement or disagreement, a significant majority (77.5%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, underscoring substantial interest in these topics. This suggests a potential space for the combination of geological concepts with mythological narratives to strengthen student engagement with the subject matter and ease comprehension.

The third question aimed to determine the levels of students' openness to learning through myths as an alternative teaching method and material. The responses were mixed, with more than half of the students (65%) expressing

agreement or strong agreement, indicating receptiveness to experimental pedagogical approaches. However, around half that number showed a neutral stance, whereas an equal number of students (2 in each category) expressed disagreement or strong disagreement, pointing out potential resistance or lack of interest in methods and materials deviating from the traditional ones.

Question four assesses how the students perceive the difficulty of myths in terms of understanding. More than a half of the students (75%) expressed either a neutral stance towards the difficulty of texts with mythological narratives (14 students) or stated that they do find them a bit harder to understand (16 students). Meanwhile, one fourth expressed that they had no bigger issues understanding these texts, which does highlight potential obstacles in student comprehension. This is something that teachers should bear in mind in order to optimize learning outcomes. This may also present an area of research in itself, since it depends on various factors, including the students' level of English and a general linguistic preparedness.

In question five, participants were asked about the ease and appeal of learning language through myths. An equal number of students in both categories (15 students, or 37.5%, 75% in total) stated they either agreed or strongly agreed with this idea, demonstrating their perceived efficacy of using myths as an additional means of learning. Three students disagreed with the statement, while the remaining number remained neutral in their attitudes.

Question six explored the perceived usefulness of myths as supplementary aids alongside geological texts. Responses were evenly distributed among the students, with 67.5% expressing agreement or strong agreement, endorsing the potential of integrating myths with traditional educational materials. Only 3 students did not seem to see the value of myths in this regard, and an equal number did not answer this question. Seven students remained neutral. On the whole, a much greater percentage of students do see myths as useful material to accompany geological texts.

Question seven examined whether students see any educational value of myths in improving understanding of geological phenomena. A majority (62.5%) acknowledged this benefit, stating that myths have indeed been useful in explaining complex geological concepts. Though around half this number remained unconvinced, the percentage of students who showed a positive attitude towards the helpfulness of myths does indicate a positive stance.

In question eight, participants were asked about their preferences for open-ended compared to yes/no questions. Around half the students responded with "strongly agree" (18 students, or 45%), whereas 17 students stated that they agreed with the statement or remained neutral (11 and 6 students, respectively). One student did not answer this question, while 4 students disagreed with the statement. The results show an evident and strong preference (over 70 per cent) towards the classes and activities which make way for the students to express their opinions in an open-ended manner.

In the last three questions, some students did not provide answers. This number is not higher than 3 students per question.

The ninth question focused on the perception of learning through debate as a beneficial change in classroom dynamics. This question highlights the potential of using such open-ended texts like myths to allow for student discussions and debates. Though three students did not answer this question, our results show that 87.5% of students chose the options expressing their agreement and strong agreement with this statement. This result is a definitive sign of the desire and need for more activities in which students' own thoughts and opinions can be freely expressed.

In question ten, participants were asked about the usefulness of independent reasoning in learning. An overwhelming majority of 34 students (85%) either agreed or strongly agreed with its usefulness, showcasing the importance of motivating student autonomy and critical thought. The purpose of this question was in line with this result, underlining the importance of classroom activities which encourage active student participation and expression.

Finally, question eleven explored preferences for activities emphasizing comprehension over rote memorization. What stands out is the fact that more than half the students (23 or 57.5%) chose the "I strongly agree" option, indicating their overall inclination towards activities and exercises which steer away from conventional rote learning practices. This may well be a sign of an overarching need and desire for pedagogical approaches that foster free student engagement and motivate the students to express themselves and their opinions.

The results of the survey demonstrate positive attitudes towards integrating myths into the geological classroom, with a strong emphasis on their potential to foster free thought expression, class discussion, and debate. While some challenges were acknowledged, most students recognize potential benefits in this approach. These findings are indicative of a changing classroom environment where the subject matter should be interwoven with additional material and activities that allow for the students to have a more relaxed approach to learning, where they can express their viewpoints with no apprehension.

8. Conclusion

In summary, the integration of postmodernism and CLIL in the geology classroom at the FMG represents a significant step forward in educational practice. The research findings highlight the potential of this approach to create a more dynamic and inclusive learning environment that promotes better student control over the subject matter, while at the same time encouraging student expression and critical thought. The successful application of geomythology in a geology classroom can be used as a model for how teachers can incorporate cultural narratives into their own lessons, thus creating a richer and more engaging educational experience for their students.

The research presented in this paper confirmed our first hypothesis that activities based on geomythology improve student engagement with and comprehension of geology. The survey results and direct feedback from students demonstrated that those involved in geomythology-based activities showed an increased interest in geological concepts and were, on the whole, more motivated to learn about them. This can be attributed to the interactive and contextual nature of the lessons, which made complex scientific ideas more relatable and easier to understand. By integrating mythological narratives with scientific content, students were able to connect with the material on a deeper level through being given the opportunity for individual interpretation and discussion.

Our second hypothesis, which states that the integration of postmodern principles through geomythology promotes creative in-classroom discussions and contributes to students' freedom to express their opinions, has been confirmed. The activities designed around geomythology required students to analyse and interpret various cultural myths juxtaposed to their geological background, fostering a critical approach to both cultural and scientific knowledge. This approach not only broadened students' perspectives, but also encouraged them to question traditional scientific narratives and appreciate the broad cultural contexts in which geological phenomena are understood and through which they are interpreted. The students' ability to engage in discussions and debates about these myths further demonstrated the influence of these activities in developing critical thinking skills and cultural awareness, which are crucial for a well-rounded education.

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Сажетак

СПОЈ ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗМА И CLIL МЕТОДЕ У НАСТАВИ ГЕОМИТОЛОГИЈЕ

Овај рад се бави интеграцијом постмодернизма и интегрисаног учења садржаја и језика (CLIL) у контексту образовања на студијама геологије, посебно кроз наставу геомитологије. Утицај постмодерних идеја на образовање не може се занемарити, јер изнова доводи у питање традиционалне појмове знања и ауторитета. У настави језика, постмодернизам и CLIL приоритизују значај културе и интердисциплинарног знања. Ова студија показује како CLIL може ефикасно да споји учење геологије са усвајањем језика, подстичући разумевање оба кроз митолошке наративе. Осим тога, применом постмодерних начела, овај приступ преиспитује традиционалне научне наративе, промовишући критичко размишљање и културолошку разноликост. Испитана је практична примена геомитологије у учионици где се предаје геологија, а рад представља резултате квалитативне студије о перцепцијама студената о употреби геомитологије у настави, са циљем процене аспеката мотивације и побољшаних комуникационих вештина и вештина дебатовања. Резултати наше студије јасно указују на генерално позитиван став према активностима интердисциплинарне природе и показују повећано учешће и мотивацију студената у комуникативним активностима.

Кључне речи:
постмодернизам, CLIL, геологија, геомитологија, комуникација