

НАУЧНИ СКУП СА МЕЂУНАРОДНИМ УЧЕШЋЕМ

АЛТЕРНАТИВА И ОБРАЗОВАЊЕ

алтернативно образовање и алтернативно у образовању

ЗБОРНИК РАДОВА

THE IN-LEARNING PARADIGM OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

Challenging conventional ways of thinking and doing at the time of global changes is particularly tangible in the world of education. Instead of mere recipients of information, students are perceived as reflective co-creators of learning. Since their individual knowledge, needs and abilities represent the essence of their learning potential, promoting students' **IN**dependent study and **IN**vestigative spirit makes the first half of the altered educational paradigm. Its other half is derived from the teaching side of the process. Coupled with shared experiences in flipped classrooms, students' potentials are better honed through **IN**teractive tasks and **IN**tegrative learning experiences.

Relying on the fundamental aspects of the Constructivist, Humanistic and Connectivism learning theories, this paper aims to present alternative approaches to academic foreign language use within an **IN**terdisciplinary curriculum. It demonstrates how some of the most effective modern approaches to language and content teaching (Communicative Language Teaching, Language for Specific Purposes, Project-Based Learning, English Medium Instruction, etc.) are applied at the Faculty of Education in Belgrade to provide students with a bilingual educational setting supportive of their talents and strengths. A descriptive method is used to present a selection of activities within these English-based courses, while excerpts from an empirical study will provide feedback on the benefits and challenges of the presented **IN**-learning educational paradigm.

Keywords: independent, investigative, interactive and integrative learning, interdisciplinary curriculum, English language, contemporary education, educational paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

Global changes and the pace of developments in the world have urged us to adopt a new perspective on many aspects of our lives. Challenging conventional ways of thinking and doing is particularly tangible in education. Given a much more active role than in traditional classrooms, learners are now encouraged to be not only the recipients, or mere participants in education, but reflective co-creators of their own learning. Their individual knowledge and skills can be seen as their potential for developing a more critical way of thinking and reasoning, and for assuming more personal responsibility for the learning outcomes. Therefore, promoting students' **IN**dependent study and **IN**vestigative spirit makes the first half of the altered educational paradigm. Its other half is derived from the teaching side of the process. Coupled with shared experiences in flipped classrooms, students' potentials are better honed through **IN**teractive tasks and **IN**tegrative learning opportunities. With the technological advancements on their side, and such altered approaches to learning, today's students can reap the fruits of education more easily than past generations. By accepting the challenge themselves, teachers can also boost the process, and enhance the learning and teaching outcomes. Although requiring an additional dose of commitment, it may be a welcome step forward for the teachers too as the flagship bearers of contemporary education.

Academia has always been the central arena of human knowledge, which takes time and effort to build. Apart from knowledge, humans are also characterised by feelings and needs, talents and abilities. If their learning is done in a stimulating atmosphere, which enables them to realise their full potential, there is higher likelihood of success than when feeling disconnected. Communication with others in the educational process, as well as with a variety of modern sources of information, is hardly conceivable without language. In today's world of blended cultures and industries, a lot of shared human activity, scientific work and artistic endeavour largely depends on the use of other languages. As a long-established *lingua franca*, English has found its way not only as a means of communication among people and nations, but also as a medium of instruction in educational institutions. With its own history of development, applied linguistics has evolved through different methodological approaches to teaching. The ones deemed most useful today are those that enable fulfilment of the above-mentioned learners' needs and teaching objectives.

Relying on the fundamental aspects of the Constructivist, Humanistic and Connectivism learning theories, this paper aims to present an alternative **IN**terdisciplinary approach to academic foreign language use. Rather than offer a new theory, it demonstrates how a blend of the most effective ways of contemporary language teaching (Communicative Language Teaching, Task- and Project-Based Learning, Language for Specific Purposes, etc.) and content delivery (English Medium Instruction, Content and Language Integrated Learning) is applied at the Faculty of Education of the University of Belgrade, to provide students with a bilingual educational setting supportive of their talents and strengths. A descriptive method is used to present a selection of activities within these English-based academic courses, while excerpts from an empirical study provide feedback on the benefits and challenges of the presented **IN**-learning educational paradigm.

RELEVANT LEARNING THEORIES

When a new curriculum is being developed, the way we perceive the purpose of education, the objectives of teaching and the expected outcomes of learning, will determine our educational paradigm¹, as a theoretical framework that underlies our teaching practice. As stated above, the cognitive aspect of students' learning is not the only one to be taken into consideration during course creation. Students' multiple skills and strengths can be better utilised if a holistic approach complements their academic endeavour (Janković & Buđevac, 2024: 172-3), and if we move away from the traditional, subject-centred approach towards an integrated curriculum (Smith & Karr-Kidwell, 2000: 1).

Faced with new challenges posed by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, education systems also evolve and need to adapt. According to Pradeep and Lok Boon, to nurture future-ready graduates, capable of complex problem-solving and active learning, "higher education curriculum must be designed to become more fluid and organic, promoting more personalized and interdisciplinary learning" (Pradeep & Lok Boon, 2020: 67). The best driving force for positive learning outcomes is students' self-motivation and their active knowledge construction

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/paradigm>; <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paradigm>;

through effective interactions. The following chapters present the fundamental aspects of the learning theories that have contributed to the initial conceptual design, development, and further improvement of such an integrative interdisciplinary curriculum.

The Constructivist learning theory

The constructivist learning theory rests on the belief that human development and learning are active processes in which our previous knowledge and experience provide the basis to be further built upon. When acquiring and processing new information, we actively build or “construct” our knowledge about the world around us. However, the ways in which we perceive things or events differ and thus determine our own perception of reality (McLeod, 2024). A group of children, students, or adults need not experience the same situation in the same way.

Piaget considered that by manipulating objects, transforming them and understanding the way they are constructed, children engage in operations that make the essence of their learning (Piaget, 1964: 176). With a less individualistic and more sociocultural vision, his theory echoed in Vygotsky’s and Bruner’s social constructivism, placing the imagery of learning within the former’s *zone of proximal development*, and the latter’s *assimilation, scaffolding, and spiral curriculum* (Janković, 2015; Prakash Chand, 2023).

Seeing cognitive development as a result of constant inquiry and interaction with the world, John Dewey also emphasised the need for students’ active learning in real-life contexts, by observing problems as educational experiences, and their consequences as objects of meaningful, emotional and reflective reasoning. Otherwise, this pragmatist thought, the students might not be able to construct new habits, or adapt and revise the old ones (Dar, 2021: 15).

The Humanistic learning theory

The humanistic learning theory redirects one’s thoughts from the more formal to the more essential reasons for learning. Emerging as a response to previously firmly established educational theories of behaviourism and psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology turns to the human as a rational and emotional being. Humans are perceived as individuals

driven by feelings in their learning and not as objects of study. Instead of exposure to stimuli, rewards or punishments, space is provided for students' personal choice, their self-esteem, self-evaluation, affective as well as cognitive learning, and a feeling of physical, mental and emotional safety (Cloke, 2024). Learning is associated with the "acquisition of new knowledge, behaviors, skills, and values through a process of study, practice, and/or experience" (Madsen & Wilson, 2012).

Abraham Maslow devised a hierarchy of needs, ranging from the basic survival needs to the more creative, intellectual ones, such as *self-actualisation*. In order for students to reach the stage of self-actualisation, the teachers' role is to help them meet as many of their needs as possible. Carl Rogers also emphasised the importance of *unconditional positive regard* and *empathetic understanding*, i.e., enabling the learners to feel motivated to achieve their full potential, and seeing the process of education through their eyes (Nelson et al., 2012: 8).

Learners' autonomy is more easily reached in student-centred teaching, where the student assumes a considerable degree of authority and control of their own learning. With a holistic approach to students' personalities and activities, teachers can help them meet their learning needs, in line with the humanistic learning theory.

The Connectivism learning theory

As an innovative theory, connectivism is based on the standpoint that in the era of digital connectivity, effective learning requires integration of thoughts, theories, and information that one experiences when using modern technology. Its effects are especially noticeable in modern education, both in and out of the classroom. Students are given space for collaboration, not only among themselves, but also with digital tools, which extends their opportunities to share ideas and solutions. Thus, learning becomes decentralised and more dynamic, as students can connect to various databases or communicate through platforms such as social media, online communities, etc. (Kurt, 2023).

Since the early 2000s, the digital revolution has made information more accessible and the learning experience more interactive, with artificial intelligence facilitating the experience (ibid.). Siemens finds informal learning an important aspect of our learning experience, in which the 'know-where' (understanding where to find knowledge needed)

becomes an important supplement to the old 'know-how' / 'know-what' paradigm (Siemens, 2005).

Compared to the previous theories, connectivism adds one more dimension to the students' active role – distribution of knowledge across networks. A truly connectivist environment presupposes integration of digital learning experiences not only by means of online courses and webinars, but also through a variety of platforms, AI generative and other applications, and social networks. A special advantage of using such platforms or applications lies in the possibility to establish connections and networks with teachers and students from other parts of the world. The teachers then assume the roles of guides and facilitators, and the students become explorers in their digital learning environment (Kurt, 2023).

AN INTEGRATIVE INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

An interdisciplinary curriculum offers a more comprehensive approach to teaching and learning than subject-centred curricula. In discipline-specific study courses, since the focus of each subject is on a single content area, students may not feel the need to draw connections between diverse areas of knowledge, unless so prompted by the teacher. Their reflection on a certain problem, topic or unit of learning, therefore, is also single-sided. Interdisciplinary pedagogy encourages them to reflect on the object of analysis from multiple perspectives by making meaningful connections, just as they do in complex life experiences.

Interdisciplinary curricula are "explicitly integrative seminars and experiences", characterised by linked courses, genuinely collaborative team teaching and planning, collaborative theme-, problem-, or project-based learning, integrative learning portfolios, etc. (Klein, 2005: 9-10). By synthesising knowledge, students develop critical thinking skills, and the ability to solve complex problems in innovative and creative ways. Integrative interdisciplinary approach is a form of active and often inquiry-based learning, with questions, problems or scenarios shared or negotiated among the students, and the teacher rather directing than dominating the process (Croydon Hills Primary, 2024). However, the learning outcomes result from both teachers' and students' cognitive, motivational and social characteristics and their constructive interactions (Hoidn & Reusser, 2021: 33).

INTEGRATIVE CONTENT AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Foreign language teaching in academia has its own purpose, and is not to be regarded as 'just another' subject in any curriculum. It is there to prepare students for life and for work.

The young people of today and tomorrow need to be able to apply higher order thinking skills to real-life problems, and to manage cultural complexity effectively, which they can achieve by being "agents in their own learning, critical inquirers, able to collaborate, [...] and to make meaningful connections across disciplines" (Mansilla, 2008: 31).

Based on an integrative pedagogy, with a variety of strategies at students' disposal, the use of other languages provides them with better opportunities towards these goals than any other curricular area.

Why is this so?

- a) Because modern teaching is based on the key "4Cs" skills for 21st century learners: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity (Pardede, 2020: 71), and language learning provides an abundance of opportunities to practise them.
- b) Because HE curricula often include courses of Languages (e.g. English) for Specific Purposes (LSP/ESP), which incorporate both linguistic and content area knowledge specific to the students' specialised needs (Trace et al., 2015: 2).
- c) Because many in-service teachers around the world already base their work on the principles of Content and Language Integrated Learning following the European Framework for CLIL Teacher Education (ECML Resources).
- d) Because universities have seen growth in academic subjects taught through English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) in non-Anglophone countries, with many teachers wishing to obtain competences beyond general language proficiency (Macaro et al., 2020: 1).
- e) Because contemporary generative knowledge, so much reliant on other languages, provides people with a sense of engagement, purpose and direction, which in turn, supports the development of different types of capacities (Peet, 2016).
- f) Because languages are so highly constructive, humanistic, and connective that they are perfectly suitable for developing an integrated interdisciplinary curriculum.

THE INTERDISCIPLINARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE MODULE OF THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION

The work of preschool and primary school teachers requires highly specialised pedagogical and methodological approaches to young learners. To work with them, teachers need to understand child psychology, and to be stable and well-organised, patient and considerate, communicative and creative. Aware of such personal skills, many opt for the teaching career, possibly sacrificing their other talents.

Gifted students deserve special opportunities. To help such students cherish multiple talents and skills, the Faculty of Education of the University of Belgrade established a unique English Language Module (ELM) – an integrative interdisciplinary curriculum for those who want to ‘go an extra mile’ and complete part of their study programme in English, parallel with the major courses studied in Serbian. To join the module, they must pass a standardised placement test, with a minimum CEFR level required being B1*. The module spans the five years of their study, during which these students progress to the B2 and C1 language levels. It consists of three compulsory language courses and 12 elective courses, most of which integrate contents from students’ major disciplines with English as a medium of instruction.

Introduced in 2017, this module has evolved, adapting its contents, and enabling students to hone pedagogical skills by building upon the existing core knowledge within each year of study, and by making methodological links with their majors from one year into another. Some of the elective courses are based on applied linguistics as a distinct content area, focusing on children’s language learning pedagogy and English teaching methodology. They are taught by English teachers only. A course of psychology devoted to early native and foreign language acquisition is also taught in English, by a professional psychologist and the EL teacher. Each of the other four integrated electives begins with several introductory ESP lessons in which the EL teacher familiarises the students with the key concepts and themes pertaining to the other two disciplines relevant to the course. After that, the subject becomes an EMI course. One after the other, the two content experts take over the class, and guide pre-service teachers through the basic elements of their disciplines important for young learners.

Students’ collaboration is realised both in and out of the classrooms, in either face-to-face or online interactions. The classroom

discussions, practical tasks, materials, and assessment procedures are all in English. The English teacher is present too, to facilitate the process during practical activities if necessary, and to encourage dynamic collaboration in the classroom. Sometimes, both of the content experts and the English language expert work with the students together. Throughout the course, students are prompted to maintain an interdisciplinary approach to task completion. Out of the classroom, they are encouraged to do their own research and prepare materials which incorporate elements of all content areas integrated in a course, which will be presented in the following chapter.

THE IN-LEARNING PARADIGM OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE MODULE

Based on the above-mentioned '4Cs' skills, and now already standard strategic approaches to student (language) instruction, such as task-, topic-, and project-based teaching; blended learning, and flipped classroom (Vuletić & Janković, 2023), the interdisciplinary ELM courses particularly encourage:

- a) **independent** and **investigative** learning out of the classroom, and
- b) **interactive** and **integrative** learning experience in the classroom.

After being presented certain models or themes in class, students are regularly given opportunities to choose topics that suit their interests, and encouraged to search and study, explore and compare, and use various resources in order to complete assignments. For instance, in the course which integrates Music and Physical Education with English, they are supposed to find their own action songs which suit the vocal range and physical ability of different age groups of children to demonstrate how such action songs could be introduced to young learners in any of these three subjects taught to (pre)school children. Such forms of **independent** learning inspire them to show initiative and come up with diverse solutions.

Their **investigative** spirit particularly comes to the fore in their group presentations on the proposed gems of children's literature. Through individual investigation and collaborative creation of the final product, they synthesise their existing knowledge of Literary Theory,

and Linguistics, especially in terms of promoting young learners' speech culture and functional literacy. To write academic essays which accompany their group presentations, students find inspiration in the characters they chose and their unusual settings, exploring the rules and relationships in Wonderland, Jungle, Neverland, School of Wizardry, or other exotic places. Such ways of task completion boost students' intrinsic motivation and self-esteem and improve their performance in the integrated content areas and the English language itself.

Back into the classroom, there is even more collaborative work in action. Upon initial instruction and reflective discussion on various Art forms, techniques and materials, and Educational Technology tools and applications, several groups of students are given the same task to complete through a shared effort, which should result in a creative product. To accomplish this, they will rely on different past experiences and personal talents within their groups, yielding similar, yet completely unique creative products. Their jointly watercoloured backgrounds, with tempera-grown branches and colourful felt-tip-pen birds that adorn their artistic tree collages will be given a breath of life with a digital Stop Motion Animation. Collaborating on these four-week-long **interactive** episodes, which end with just one-minute-long animated videos with integrated (or often self-composed) music and imaginative opening and closing credits, these young directors and editors of their own learning normally feel proud of their accomplishment.

Finally, our story of **integrative** learning experience would not be complete without a touch of science. Measuring time and objects, calculating values, studying and comparing things and living beings, etc., all make a regular part of our lives. If, at the same time, we raise our students' – and through them, young learners' – awareness of the importance of environmental protection and preservation of natural habitats and renewable resources, we may consider our mission accomplished. The course which integrates the basic elements of Mathematics and Natural and Social Sciences by means of a foreign language not only consolidates students' science knowledge and advances their language skills, but it also enhances their critical thinking, which they should later instill in their own learners.

The presented holistic approaches to learning, which activate both the affective and cognitive domains, are particularly important in teacher education, as pre-service teachers' learning and practice are

focused on children's development. Now our students, they will become somebody else's teachers one day, with their academic EMI education remodelled into school CLIL practices.

REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERDISCIPLINARY ELM CURRICULUM

Self-reflection is an important feature of all practitioners, especially in education. By constantly examining and re-examining our own teaching practices, we can improve our working methods and our students' learning outcomes. That is why receiving feedback from them matters. A study conducted by the above-mentioned professor of psychology and the English language professor revealed their attitudes towards the EMI psychology course and the English Language Module, which helps them develop as academic bilinguals (Janković & Buđevac, 2023: 169). Due to the space limitation, only some of the comments will be presented here, offered by students from different years of study (pp. 178-183):

II/K.M.: *We need to have knowledge in order to teach, and then we need to have didactical and psychological knowledge. So we need proper tools for doing proper work.*

III/D.B.: *If there is anything I have learned through *this three years of studies is that every single subject is connected with each other, [...].*

IV/M.R.: *The most valuable aspect of these classes, in my opinion, was the discussions, [...] as everyone has some kind of experience or knowledge to share about a certain topic.*

V/M.V.: *The whole module inspired me to be a better preschool teacher. I am most looking forward to your classes, because we learn a lot through interaction.*

V/M.P.: *It helped me to understand children's way of thinking and taught me to think about my personal teaching practice, and in what way I will utilise the knowledge I have gained.*

Nothing is ideal, and this module also has its challenges and limitations. They primarily lie on the administrative side of its application and in the lack of its broader recognition. Otherwise, we can be satisfied with its effects, as students' comments have shown. The teachers who collaborate in the programme are all enthusiasts, and that is what

keeps the ELM running. And it will remain so as long as we are inspired by our students' progress and genuine smiles.

CONCLUSION

Learning experience in educational settings should resemble experiential learning in real-life situations. Therefore, what our teaching approaches should provide is more space for concretisation and reflection than for abstraction and memorisation.

Based on the fundamental tenets of the three presented theories, and the examples from our teaching practice, we may conclude that students progress under the conditions which enable their active knowledge construction in a dynamic humanistic environment that keeps them connected in ways they are accustomed to.

Since its introduction in 2017, the integrated interdisciplinary curriculum of the Faculty of Education in Belgrade – the English Language Module, has been using English as the medium of instruction, enabling pre-service teachers who participate in it to develop as academic bilinguals. Apart from following modern principles of education, this unique study programme also brings an alternative approach to language use in higher education, as it combines different practical approaches to integrated content and language learning.

What this curriculum particularly encourages is reliance on the **IN**-learning paradigm, which means **IN**terdisciplinarity in the first place, as well as students' **IN**dependent and **IN**vestigative learning, and **IN**teractive and **IN**tegrative experiences. With shared responsibilities in a dynamic and collaborative atmosphere, both students and teachers can feel motivated to contribute to successful learning, because today's students will be teaching tomorrow's generations of young learners.

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IN-learning paradigma učenja u savremenom obrazovanju

Rezime: Izazovi sa kojima se suočavamo u načinu razmišljanja i delovanja u ovo vreme globalnih promena posebno su osetni u oblasti obrazovanja. Učenici više nisu puki primaoci informacija, već aktivni stvaraoci u procesu saznanja. S obzirom da znanje, potrebe i sposobnosti pojedinaca čine osnov njihovog daljeg razvoja, podsticanje samostalnog (eng. *independent*) učenja i istraživačkog (eng. *investigative*) duha predstavlja prvu polovinu alternativnog pristupa učenju. Drugu polovinu čine pedagoški pristupi nastavi. Kroz zajednička iskustva stečena radeći po principu obrnute učionice, potencijali učenika mogu daleko kvalitetnije da se oblikuju u okviru interaktivnih (eng. *interactive*) zadataka i integrativnih (eng. *integrative*) pristupa nastavi.

Oslanjajući se na osnovne postulate konstruktivizma, konektivizma i humanističke teorije učenja, ovaj rad ima za cilj da predstavi alternativne pristupe akademskoj primeni stranog jezika. On prikazuje i kako se najefikasniji savremeni pristupi nastavi jezika (poput komunikativnog pristupa, projektnog učenja, upotrebe engleskog kao jezika nastave, itd.) primenjuju na Fakultetu za obrazovanje učitelja i vaspitača u Beogradu radi pružanja bilingvalnog okruženja koje podržava razvoj njihovih talenata i veština. Deskriptivna metoda je korišćena da se prikažu neke od aktivnosti u sklopu ovog Modula engleskog jezika. Dati su i izvodi iz jedne empirijske studije u vezi sa prednostima i izazovima predstavljene paradigme učenja (eng. *IN-learning educational paradigm*).

Ključne reči: samostalno, istraživačko, interaktivno i integrativno učenje, interdisciplinarni kurikulum, engleski jezik, savremeno obrazovanje, obrazovna paradigma.

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