

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

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Framing the Issue

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) describes a dual-focused approach of learning of content subjects alongside the development of skills in an additional language. Although the emphasis can in theory be on either the content or the language, generally CLIL is considered to be content-driven. While it has similarities to many other dual-focused approaches to content and language learning such as immersion programs, bilingual education, and content-based instruction, it has been argued that it is distinct from these due to its focus on cognitive and constructivist theories of learning which have emanated from general education theory. A counter argument is one that does not seek exclusivity but promotes inclusivity by using CLIL as an umbrella term for any integration of content and language (Ball, 2011). This last position highlights the flexibility, operational transferability, and the holistic nature of CLIL as its implementation is usually dependent on context and it is this context which will determine the method chosen to combine content and language learning. Whatever the context is, it is expected that both content and language will be taught within a single learning environment (e.g., a classroom). CLIL is particularly relevant in the 21st century where the increase in the international mobility of labor in an age of increased globalization means that it is useful and in some cases essential to learn and use additional languages. Although CLIL can apply to any language, the position of English alongside the growth of globalization means that it is often the language through which learners learn content (Graddol, 2006). When describing the context in which CLIL may be applied, one must not only consider the geographical location but also the needs of the learners, externally mandated policies, and the underlying philosophy of the institution or government that is applying CLIL. While this philosophy may be driven by political or economic necessities, from a pedagogical perspective it will emanate more from the underlying beliefs about how languages are acquired and, as part of that, how they should be learned. In addition, the question of when they should be

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learned will determine the extent to which the teaching will be driven by an inductive or deductive approach to language learning. For example, if a CLIL policy is applied in a kindergarten (KG) setting, it is perhaps more appropriate to use an immersion method of language acquisition with little explicit reference to lexical and grammatical terminology as learners are less likely to experience their acquisition as consciously as adult learners do. On the other hand, if the policy is applied in an adult learner environment a more explicit form of language support may accompany and support content study as learners are less likely to develop their language naturally. This may be due to the many filters based on previous learning experiences which can act as barriers to language acquisition.

Making the Case

The term, CLIL, was first used in 1994 in Europe as part of the European Union's ongoing steps toward political and economic integration across member states (Marsh, Maljers, & Hartiala, 2001). The goal of multilingualism in Europe was first mooted in the 1950s; teaching of content via an additional language was first encouraged in the 1970s; and CLIL was prioritized from the 1990s with a recommendation for its broad implementation being made in 2005 (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). However, the history of combining the learning of content and an additional language goes back much further. The Romans were known to study in Greek and traditionally elite universities used, and some would argue continue to use, elitist languages as a medium of instruction. Within the field of English language learning there have been various methods and approaches which have focused on natural acquisition of language via (quasi) authentic language use. These include the direct method employed in the early 20th century in Europe and its equivalent, the Berlitz method, in the United States. The Whole Language movement in the 1980s in the United States was a driver for the learning of authentic language with a focus on use and meaning rather than a focus on the learning of discreet lexical and grammatical items. This was further developed via the arrival of communicative language teaching (CLT) with its focus on communicative competence and from this grew the focus on content-based instruction, or CBI (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). CBI proposed that language could be learned as a by-product of learning content and this makes it perhaps the English language learning approach that is most closely aligned with CLIL and may be considered its immediate predecessor. As with CLIL, CBI did not look to overly prescribe methods and approaches but allow context to dictate implementation needs. Therefore, it included such approaches as immersion, an adjunct model where extra English classes were provided to support content classes, and sheltered language instruction for environments where those using English as an additional language would be taught content in a different way from those for whom English was their mother tongue.

This historical analysis of the origins of CLIL reflects various methods and approaches which were reactions to more didactic and behaviorist ways of

learning languages such as the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism. This mirrored what was happening in general education research in the 20th century where theories of cognitivism and social constructivism from luminaries such as Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner (Child, 2007) were changing the way that educators thought and practiced, moving the focus away from teacher-centered knowledge transmission delivered in isolated units to student-centered discovery models of education where learners built on existing knowledge by integrating their new knowledge via an inductive approach to learning. While the all-encompassing nature of CLIL may make it difficult to distinguish it from other content-related language learning methods, one aspect that it does seem to embrace more evidently than earlier approaches are these key general theories of education which focus on learning inductively. This brings it into line with skills which are considered to be essential for success within the socioeconomic environment of the globalized age. As societies converge socially, the need for a lingua franca means that the demand for English is buoyant. CLIL, in whatever manifestation it takes, allows learners the chance to use this essential language authentically while learning subjects which will provide them with the knowledge and skills that they will need in their working lives.

Pedagogical Implications

Research into the effectiveness of CLIL has given some indication of the potential issues that may arise if careful planning does not precede its implementation as there are many variables to consider. The emerging body of knowledge has aided the field in determining what must be in place for CLIL to flourish. Initially there must be an overarching understanding of the philosophy behind CLIL. Its promotion of social constructivist learning principles which promote the use of higher order thinking skills in the acquisition and use of knowledge are represented in a triptych of aspects of language (Coyle, 2002). These are language of learning (the language needed for the content area to be studied); language for learning (the language needed to interact with others to learn); and language through learning (the language needed to think cognitively about the subject matter). The fact that such learning promotes cognition and is often conducted in multicultural environments leads to another conceptualization of CLIL referred to as the four Cs (Coyle et al., 2010). Content, communication, and cognition align with the three elements of the triptych but culture is added as learners become more culturally aware on the road to becoming global citizens. Once these principles are in place the next key determinant of success is recognition of and sensitivity toward the context in which CLIL will be implemented. It is more likely that CLIL will motivate learners if they can see the socioeconomic benefit of using an additional language to study content. In such contexts they will be more likely to persevere with using authentic materials as they can conceptualize the benefits of doing so. This is particularly relevant in secondary and tertiary education. At KG or primary level it is to be expected that learners will be more open and able to acquire the language naturally and will not

need so many extrinsic motivators to succeed. In essence, they can learn in a similar way to how they might learn in their mother tongue (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). However, the later CLIL is employed, the more relevant learners' starting level of English becomes as this will determine the extent to which adaptations will need to be made to curricula, materials, and delivery to ensure that learners receive the necessary scaffolded support in language to facilitate content learning. How these adaptations occur is also affected by the make-up of the class or institution where CLIL is employed. For example, in a classroom where all learners share a mother tongue, implementation strategies will differ from a multilingual classroom where English is not the learners' mother tongue (L1). These factors of age, English language ability, and the linguistic make-up of the class are some of the key areas for deciding the extent to which content and language can be integrated without veering from an English L1-based curriculum.

When one considers levels of adaptation, a number of aspects of teaching and learning need to be taken into account. When deciding on the adapting of content materials, attention needs to be given to what content and functional language is needed to complete tasks successfully. This may require the careful selection of input materials in line with the language level of the learners. Working within Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), an application of Krashen's input hypothesis (1985) must ensure that materials are comprehensible but challenging. In certain situations, this may mean changing authentic texts into semi-authentic texts to facilitate understanding and avoid de-motivation. It is likely that the older learners are the more need there is for adaptation. This may be especially true as learners move through the secondary education years. However, once learners start to approach tertiary education, the expectation should be that content would be delivered as in English L1 environments. For those working in English-medium tertiary institutions where English is an additional language, the reality is often different as learners continue to struggle linguistically. In these situations, additional language teaching is often provided and this is a further implication that needs to be examined when employing CLIL.

Despite the tenets of naturalistic language development via the learning of content which CLIL promotes, it also accepts the pragmatic need to offer differing levels of language instruction depending on the context. While it may shy away from the grammar-translation tradition of explicit focus on forms which is still very common in many scenarios, it understands that a complete focus on meaning where language develops through interpretation and use may not be sufficient to aid learners in their content and language development. Therefore, it is worthwhile considering an element of focus on form in CLIL to support and facilitate language development and by association content learning as well. Such support may be offered in the content class or in additional classes offered outside the content classroom. However, to maintain validity for students, learning in the additional class would need to incorporate material from the content class. Over time this need to offer language support may dissipate but a failure to recognize its need at the right time can potentially affect both the learning and the motivation of students.

The concept of teacher talk—the use of simplified language to facilitate understanding—is also an important factor in ensuring that learning takes place in CLIL environments. To this one can add the simplification of written instructions. Practitioners need to be very conscious of how much their students are following what is being delivered. Even if materials are adapted to learners' level, if they do not understand what they are supposed to do, learning is compromised. While teachers of English as an additional language may be used to adapting delivery, content teachers might need training in this regard. Linked to the concept of teacher talk is the question of whether students' mother tongue should be used in environments where all students and the teacher share a language other than English. Again the flexibility of CLIL should help determine whether code-switching and translanguaging is appropriate to aid learners in comprehension and facilitate their progress.

The adaptation of assessment methods and design should also be considered; especially where L1-level language proficiency is still in the development stage. A variety of assessment methods should be selected so that holistically a learner is able to show the full extent of content knowledge attained. It is pertinent to design assessment in such a way that language ability is not the main factor in successful completion of the task. For this reason, discreet item questions or diagram/table completion are favored with more linguistically demanding methods being used as language competence increases. Finally, to avoid demotivating learners and taking their focus away from content, language error correction is best conducted as part of formative assessment so learners can try out new language forms safe in the knowledge that they can learn from their mistakes without being punished with low summative marks. A focus on formative assessment will also allow both teachers and learners to identify where learners need to focus as the program of study progresses and can lead to appropriate ongoing changes to materials, sequencing, and assessment to aid learners on their journey to attainment of the summative content learning outcomes. The final consideration to ensure successful implementation of CLIL is the employment of both content and language teachers who buy in to the philosophy of CLIL, can work in the target language, and are willing to work collaboratively for the good of the students. Where needed, teachers should receive appropriate support through targeted training so CLIL moves beyond a good idea toward a feasible and well executed option for learning in a globalized world.

SEE ALSO: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Content-Area Assessment; Content-Based Instruction; English as a Lingua Franca; English for Specific Purposes; Immersion; Sheltered Instruction

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Suggested Reading

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