

# An overview of Content and Language Integrated Learning: origins, features and research outcomes

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to provide an overview of Content and Language Integrated Learning over recent decades. We will focus on its origins as well as on the European initiatives prior to the implementation of CLIL programmes. Different features and modalities existing in CLIL will be discussed and the present situation in Spain will be tackled. Finally, current empirical research on CLIL will be offered in order to shed some light on the improvement of teaching methods in CLIL classrooms.

**Resumen:** Este trabajo pretende ofrecer una visión general del Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras durante las recientes décadas. Nos centraremos en sus orígenes, así como en las iniciativas europeas antes de la implementación de los programas AICLE. Se describirán los rasgos y las modalidades existentes en AICLE y se abordará la situación actual en España. Finalmente, se ofrecerán resultados de investigaciones empíricas recientes sobre AICLE, los cuales deben ser tenidos en cuenta de cara a la mejora de los métodos de enseñanza en el aula de AICLE.

## 1. Introduction

As Coyle (2010: vii) states, ‘we are entering a new era in the development of content and language integrated learning (CLIL)’. Over the last decade, we have witnessed an explosion of interest in CLIL in Europe. In fact, a quick search in Google for the term CLIL obtains over 354.000 results.

To understand CLIL we should have a look at its origins, features/modalities, as well as at its already existing research outcomes. In the following sections, our main aim will be to outline the main ideas concerning CLIL and to view specific demands in terms of effective teaching and learning in the light of research findings.

## 2. Origins of CLIL

The term CLIL was first coined in 1994 in Europe. According to Mehisto, Marsh and Frigols (2008: 9), ‘CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language’.

Even though CLIL seems to be somehow new, it has a much longer history. The first known CLIL activities date back to the age of the Akkadians who conquered the Sumerians (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008). The local language (Sumerian) was used as a medium of instruction to teach the Akkadians several subjects, including theology, botany and zoology.

A similar example is found with the use of Latin. For centuries, Latin was the language of instruction in European universities and became the primary language of law, medicine, theology, science and philosophy.

More recently, we find some precursors in the twentieth century such as the immersion programmes in Canada, the content-based language teaching in the US and bilingual education (see Pérez Vidal, 2005). The immersion programmes in Quebec were devoted to English-speaking children who needed to learn French, the official language in Quebec. From the first day of school in Kindergarten children were instructed entirely in French. Later on, in grade 2 they started with their L1, English. By grade 6 half the curriculum was taught in French and half in English.

Content-based language teaching was an approach to language teaching in the US around the 80s whose aim was to offer alternatives to the classroom practices used with learners from immigrant communities (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989; Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989).

Bilingual education was the term used both in the American continent and in Europe during the 80s and 90s. As every citizen was to benefit from the single market in a united Europe, more and more importance was given to language teaching and learning. All member states agreed on a resolution seeking improvements in the quality and diversity of language teaching/learning throughout the EU (Grenfell, 2002). Bilingual education was recommended to promote higher levels of language proficiency and greater cultural awareness, which were seen as the key to the construction of Europe.

In the 1990s, the term CLIL emerged as an umbrella term encompassing different forms of learning in which a language carries a special role alongside the learning of any specific subject or content. This term has been adopted by various European researchers and agencies as a generic term for such programmes.

### 3. CLIL initiatives in Europe

As claimed by Eurydice (2006: 8), several initiatives have been launched by the EU in the field of CLIL. The 1995 Resolution of the Council<sup>1</sup> refers to the promotion of innovative methods and in particular, to 'the teaching of classes in a foreign language for disciplines other than languages, providing bilingual teaching'. It also proposes improving the quality of training for language teachers by encouraging the exchange with

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1. Council Resolution of 31 March 1995 on improving and diversifying language learning and teaching within the education systems of the European Union, Official Journal C207 of 12.08.1995.

Member States, endeavouring to give priority to prospective teachers or those called upon to teach their subject in a language other than their own.

The European Commission's (1995) White Paper on education and training (Teaching and Learning-Towards the Learning Society)<sup>2</sup> focused on the importance of innovative ideas and the most effective practices for helping all EU citizens to become proficient in three European languages (for ex. CLIL) (Eurydice, 2006). In this respect, European programmes such as Erasmus, Socrates-Erasmus or Comenius have had a positive effect on the development of CLIL.

In 2001, the European Year of languages certainly helped draw attention to the fact that the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity may be achieved through a wide variety of approaches, including CLIL. The Commission in 2003 launched its Action Plan 2004-06<sup>3</sup>, where CLIL provision is cited as having a major contribution to make to the Union's language learning goals (Eurydice, 2006).

At the May 2005 Education Council, the Luxembourg presidency reported on the results of the symposium entitled 'The Changing European Classroom: The Potential of Plurilingual Education'. The need to ensure that pupils and students are involved in CLIL type provision at different levels of school education was emphasised, as was the desirability of encouraging teachers to receive special training in CLIL (Eurydice, 2006).

Other ventures that support CLIL type approaches include the European Label for innovation in language teaching and learning and the European EuroCLILC network which includes teachers, researchers, trainers and others interested in the implementation of CLIL (Eurydice, 2006). Other initiatives such as congresses like the CLIL conference held in Tallinn in 2009, or the CLIL Cascade network are also of great importance.

#### 4. Features and Modalities

Johnson and Swain (1997) identified key features that define a prototypical immersion programme. Some of those features describe the main characteristics of CLIL programmes:

- (i) The L2 is the medium of instruction
- (ii) Overt support exists for the L1
- (iii) Learners have a limited knowledge of the L2
- (iv) Teachers are sufficiently competent
- (v) The L2 curriculum parallels the L1 curriculum
- (vi) The classroom culture is that of the L1 community, not that of the L2 community.

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2. European Commission (1995). White Paper on Education and Training. Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society. Brussels: European Commission.

3. 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004-2006', Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions of 24.07.2003, COM (2003) 449 final.

As for the different modalities, we cannot forget that the essence of CLIL is integration. The integration has a dual focus (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols, 2008):

- (i) Language learning is included in content classes (e.g. maths, history, geography, etc).
- (ii) Content from subjects is used in language-learning classes. The language teacher incorporates the vocabulary, terminology and texts from other subjects into his or her classes.

According to Pérez Vidal (2005), CLIL programmes can be classified along a continuum with content at one end and language at the other against which each particular program can be categorized. CLIL can have many faces. With content at one end, we can find international schools where students are tested on content and received extra-curricular classes on language. If the focus is language, students are tested on language in English classes where thematic units are a way to develop language competence with meaningful activities. Another possibility is when the focus is on content as well as on language. Content and linguistic objectives are explicit in the curriculum and in the syllabus, so students are both tested on content and language. The latter is the typical situation with CLIL programmes.

## 5. CLIL in Spain

Foreign language learning has traditionally been a weak point in Spanish education (Fernández Fontecha, 2009). The Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2005 on the Europeans' perceptions about their command of foreign languages reveals that only 36% of the Spanish respondents aged 15 and over replied that they were able to participate in a conversation in a language other than their mother tongue (European Commission, 2005).

Bearing this in mind, the current Spanish education is particularly sensitive to European initiatives. CLIL is nowadays receiving increasing attention in Spanish education (Fernández Fontecha, 2009). In article 157 from the LOE (BOE, 2006), the law refers to the establishment of programmes focused on reinforcing foreign language teaching. In this legal context, the different Spanish communities have been developing a series of projects and programmes with the same main objective, i.e. to achieve communicative competence in second and foreign languages across the curriculum (Pérez Vidal, 2005; Fernández Fontecha, 2009). These models vary significantly from one region to another but can be divided into two main contexts (Ruiz de Zarobe & Lasagabaster, 2010): monolingual communities where Spanish, the official language, plus one or two foreign languages are vehicular languages and bilingual communities where Spanish and the other co-official languages (Basque, Catalan or Galician) together with one or two foreign languages are the languages of instruction. In both contexts, CLIL has been found to be one of the most rapid ways to promote multilingualism and language diversity, key aim of European policies in the last decade. Even though a lot of CLIL programmes and initiatives have emerged in the last decade, all of them are different (see INEBI and BHINEBI in the Basque Country; The Orator

Project and the Foreign Language Experimental Plan in Catalonia; Plan de Fomento del Plurilingüismo in Andalusia, among others). The teacher training programmes are as well heterogeneous in the different autonomous communities.

## 6. Research outcomes

Previous research on the age factor in second language acquisition has concluded that 'the earlier the better' is not the case in foreign language acquisition (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006). If hours of exposure and intensity to the target language are facilitators in the second/foreign language acquisition process, CLIL programs are the only way to improve those two conditions in otherwise overcharged school curricula (García Mayo, 2003).

Studies conducted in immersion programmes in Canada have concluded that intensive use of the L2 as the language of instruction is very effective for the development of communicative competence (Genesee, 1987; Snow, Met & Genese, 1989; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Lightbown & Spada, 1997).

Recent research conducted in Europe has revealed that CLIL learners usually outperform NON-CLIL learners in general proficiency (Admiraal, Westhoff & De Bot, 2006; Jiménez Catalán, Ruiz de Zarobe & Cenoz, 2006; Lasagabaster, 2008; Loranc-Paszylk, 2009; Navés & Victori, 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). Admiraal, Westhoff and De Bot (2006) analysed the impact of CLIL on the overall English proficiency of secondary students. When compared to NON-CLIL learners, those in CLIL programmes were found to obtain higher scores in their oral proficiency and reading comprehension. In the Basque Country, Jiménez Catalán, Ruiz de Zarobe and Cenoz (2006) analysed the acquisition of English by primary school children in CLIL programmes with respect to the acquisition of English as a school subject. Those children enrolled in CLIL programmes outperformed children in traditional programmes when taking a cloze test designed to measure lexical, grammatical and discursive competence, as well as when taking a reading comprehension task, a receptive vocabulary level test and a writing task. Similarly, Lasagabaster (2008) compared a CLIL group and a NON-CLIL group in their fourth year of secondary education. Students were tested on grammar, listening, speaking and writing by means of four different tests. The CLIL group significantly outstripped the NON-CLIL group in all the tests. In Poland, Loranc-Paszylk (2009) compared CLIL and NON-CLIL students from International Relations. Between-group comparisons showed that CLIL learners obtained significant gains in academic reading and writing tests as well as in general proficiency tests in English. In Catalonia, a study conducted by Navés and Victori (2010) on writing skills with students from CLIL and NON-CLIL grades 5 to 12 concluded that CLIL learners' writing at lower grades was observed to be as good as or even better than that of older learners a few grades ahead. Finally, in a similar fashion Ruiz de Zarobe (forthcoming) compared a NON-CLIL group in the Bacclaureate year and a CLIL group in the third year of secondary education, both of which had had similar hours of exposure to English. There was a difference in programme (CLIL vs. NON-CLIL), in grade

and in the age of the participants, as the CLIL group was three years younger than the older group. The results from a written composition task showed that the CLIL group, despite their grade and age difference, obtained significantly better results in the five scales analysed (content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics). What these studies seem to suggest is that CLIL learners outperform NON-CLIL learners in general proficiency even when they are compared to learners one, two or three grades ahead.

With respect to the influence that CLIL may have on the particular areas of language competence such as pronunciation or morphosyntax, in the last few years we have observed a growth in this type of research (see the series of papers compiled by Ruiz de Zarobe & Jiménez Catalán, 2009 and Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). As claimed by Ruiz de Zarobe (2011), the following are areas where clear gains are observed: reading, receptive vocabulary, writing, some morphological phenomena and emotive/affective outcomes. However, the areas of syntax (see Martínez Adrián & Gutiérrez Mangado, 2009 and Villareal Olaizola & García Mayo, 2009), productive vocabulary (see Jiménez Catalán, Ruiz de Zarobe & Cenoz, 2006 and Moreno Espinosa, 2009), and pronunciation (see Gallardo del Puerto, Gómez Lacabex & García Lecumberri, 2009) are not favourably affected by CLIL. In fact, several contributors in the volume edited by Lasagabaster and Ruiz de Zarobe (2010: 286) point out 'that CLIL programmes should incorporate not only a focus on meaning but also a focus on form, as available evidence seems to indicate that little focus on form is found in teachers' input addressed to their learners'. As Lyster (2001) also claims for the case of immersion programmes, learners' attention has to be drawn to form during communicative interaction.

Nevertheless, research concerning the influence of CLIL on the specific language areas is still at its infancy and more studies are required in order to reach more definite conclusions. Most of the studies mentioned above were carried out without a matching in the number of hours of exposure to the L2 for CLIL and NON-CLIL groups, so the significant gains that may be perceived in some cases may be the result of a higher number of hours of exposure on the part of CLIL groups (Sierra, Gallardo del Puerto & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2011). As stated above, there are already existing studies which have tackled this issue and which have compared CLIL learners to NON-CLIL learners one, two or three grades ahead with respect to general proficiency (Lasagabaster, 2008; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Navés & Victori, 2010). These studies have concluded that CLIL learners perform as well as or even better than NON-CLIL learners at higher grades. Despite the significant gains obtained in general proficiency, this trend should be verified regarding specific language areas such as pronunciation or morphosyntax (Gallardo del Puerto & Gómez Lacabex, in preparation; Martínez Adrián & Gutiérrez Mangado, in preparation).

## 7. Conclusion

CLIL has been one of the key concepts to foster multilingualism in the last decades all over Europe. Due to the need of a more extensive use of a foreign language in the

majority of European countries and due to the fact that schools already have tight schedules to increase the number of hours of instruction in the foreign languages, CLIL-type provisions have been adopted as the most effective way of foreign language teaching (Ruiz de Zarobe, Sierra & Gallardo del Puerto, 2011).

Among the European countries to put CLIL into practice, Spain together with Estonia are the only countries where national and/or regional governments have taken the lead in creating and financially supporting coherent policies for CLIL implementation (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). In the Spanish context, we have a great diversity in the implementation of CLIL programmes, but even so, all of them share the aim of achieving communicative competence in second and foreign languages across the curriculum.

We have also observed a rich bulk of research concerning CLIL in recent years, particularly in Spain. The investigations conducted in this context seem to suggest that CLIL learners usually outperform NON-CLIL learners in general proficiency. When CLIL and NON-CLIL learners are tested on specific language areas, CLIL gains are not so significant. The reason may lie in the focus on meaning that CLIL lessons usually take on. A focus on form should also be incorporated in CLIL lessons. What we can infer from these studies is that cooperation between researchers and teachers should exist in order to obtain a better practice in CLIL classrooms (Sierra, Gallardo del Puerto & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2011).

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