

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL): Considerations in the Colombian Context¹

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Abstract

The present article seeks to encourage reflection on the characteristics and considerations when implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in a diverse context such as the Colombian one. Initially, the general aspects of an innovative and changing education in a globalized world are presented by stating the need to innovate. Secondly, Content and Language Integrated Learning is defined along its implications by critically addressing CLIL dimensions. Lastly, the article offers a broad view about the inclusion of CLIL in the Colombian context. In general, the article presents the implications about the use of CLIL, specifically its dimensions and influence in Colombia.

Keywords: CLIL, Content Based Instruction, CLIL dimensions

Resumen

El siguiente artículo tiene como finalidad motivar a la reflexión sobre las características y consideraciones para implementar el aprendizaje y enseñanza de lengua a través de contenido (Content and Language Integrated Learning) en un contexto tan diverso como el colombiano. Inicialmente se presentan las generalidades de una educación innovadora y cambiante en un mundo globalizado que exige docentes que incorporan metodologías apropiadas a las necesidades e intereses de los estudiantes. Seguidamente se define el aprendizaje y enseñanza de lengua a través de contenido y sus implicaciones para así abordar sus dimensiones de manera crítica. Finalmente, el texto ofrece una visión más amplia con respecto a la inclusión de CLIL en el contexto colombiano. En general, a lo largo del artículo se reflexionará acerca de las implicaciones del uso de CLIL, específicamente sus dimensiones y su influencia en Colombia.

Palabras claves: CLIL, enseñanza y aprendizaje por contenidos, dimensiones CLIL

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Resumo

O seguinte artigo tem como finalidade motivar à reflexão sobre as características e considerações para implementar a aprendizagem e ensino de língua através de conteúdo (Content and Language Integrated Learning) em um contexto tão diverso como o colombiano. Inicialmente se apresentam as generalidades de uma educação inovadora e cambiante em um mundo globalizado que exige docentes que incorporam metodologias apropriadas às necessidades e interesses dos estudantes. Seguidamente se define a aprendizagem e ensino de língua através de conteúdo e suas implicações para assim abordar suas dimensões de maneira crítica. Finalmente, o texto oferece uma visão mais ampla com respeito à inclusão de CLIL no contexto colombiano. Em geral, ao longo do artigo se refletirá acerca das implicações do uso de CLIL, especificamente suas dimensões e sua influência na Colômbia.

Palavras chaves: CLIL, ensino e aprendizagem por conteúdos, dimensões CLIL

Introduction

Language teachers have used many influential methods and approaches that have made their mark on the field of English Language Teaching. The historical progression of foreign language teaching and every one of its methods and approaches have taken place within a framework where the term innovation is fundamental. The world has changed radically, globalization has gathered pace rapidly, and the English Language has come to dominate the way new ideas, methods and approaches have grown out of reactions to the dominant paradigms of previous periods. Due to this, it seems strange now to think that many educators ignore or disdain the significance of being innovative in their practice which means to be proactive, creative and dynamic.

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In a straight response to these changes many teachers in Colombia are adapting methodologies to improve their teaching practices in such a way that they motivate and engage students while reaching language standards. In this sense, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been used in the Colombian context as a way to teach content through English.

Towards a Definition of CLIL

Although CLIL has been used in Europe or in the United States labeled as Content Based Instruction (CBI), in Colombia it is a new paradigm shift in the field of language teaching since it entails innovation in methods and approaches. The acronym CLIL was originally defined in 1994, and launched in 1996 by UNICOM, University of Jyväskylä in Finland and the European Platform for Dutch Education. According to Marsh (2002), it describes educational methods in which “subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language.” This definition clearly shows how CLIL not only implies the teaching of Content through English but remarks the importance language has when teaching content. That is to say, educators need to pay close attention to the fact students are learning content through a language that demands instruction and background knowledge. As a result, it is advisable that educators plan content lessons that include a target language goal.

If one considers the dual focus expressed in the previous paragraph, the term CLIL becomes an umbrella term to cover “learning through any language that is not the first language of the learner” (Ball, 2006). In consequence, the educational community needs to be aware that using a foreign language when teaching content incurs in language learning since structures, vocabulary, and pragmatics, among other linguistic features, are implicit in the topic being taught. CLIL entails teaching the foreign language while students learn subject – matter.

Marsh (2003) adds that CLIL also includes procedure when it is implemented effectively. For instance, when students learn a subject; namely, history, geography and/or science through the medium of a foreign language; the foreign language acts as a vehicle for learning, thus educators plan integrating not only content and language but also procedures by stating how content will be addressed in such a way that it is meaningful for every learner, no matter their proficiency level. As a result, CLIL is also an instructional approach.

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) refers to any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content. It is dual-focused because whereas attention may be predominantly on either subject-specific content or language, both are always accommodated. (Marsh, 2003, ELC Information Bulletin 9)

CLIL is focused on interdisciplinary curriculum or cross curricular planning. In this regard, educators teaching English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI), Language Across the Curriculum (LAC), Content Based Instruction (CBI), Content Based Language Teaching (CBLT), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or any form of Bilingual Education, are all applying CLIL. English has turned out to be the dominant language in our society, therefore a need for language and content integrated learning arises in order to prepare future professionals to face this changing world. This situation gives the learning of a foreign language the importance that it had never had before in the curriculum, as it provides innumerable advantages if we are to accompany the new trends in the world we are living in. Apprentices need to learn a language to confront the demands of a new society; the studied language may provide a better status and the possibility to use it for different needs. In order to show the use of language, learners may do cross curricular connections by doing project work, for example.

In summary, when using CLIL, both language and content are simultaneously given attention and they are both essential in the learning process. The language is used as a tool to learn the contents of the subject, and those contents are used as a meaningful medium to learn and use the language communicatively.

CLIL, Dimensions and Focuses

Marsh et al. (2001) mentioned five fundamental dimensions that characterize CLIL as an instructional approach:

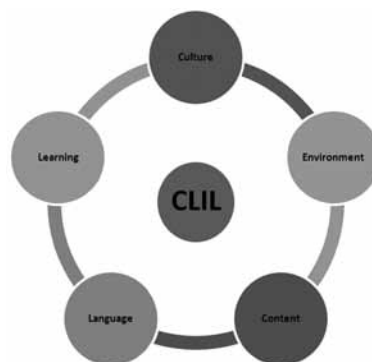


Figure 1. CLIL Dimensions

Ball (2006) thinks that these dimensions are the basis for CLIL. Keeping in mind content and language imply both communication and knowledge, it is certain to consider these five dimensions provide a framework for the approach. First, Culture dimension contributes to the growth of intercultural knowledge resulting in most of the cases in cultural understanding. Likewise, culture dimension helps to introduce wider cultural context, learning at the same time about specific neighboring countries, regions and minority groups. It emerges as a means to handle issues relating to regional-political conditions where even if cross-border contact has been minimal in the past, the future invites much greater contact. Colombia as multicultural and diverse as it is, offers a wide spectrum to assume a cultural position in regards to one's own perception and the foreign language. CLIL is used to promote understanding and awareness through language-enhanced methodologies.

Second, regarding the Environment, CLIL prepares for internationalization which is nowadays one of the main goals of the educational system in Colombia. The programme curriculum may be heavily influenced by specific environmental needs or opportunities identified in the institution. In the same way, thanks to this internationalization, there is an international certification access. Students have preparation for future studies or work that involves different languages, so they are ready to face any culture with all the necessary skills to take an exam in which their proficiency is valued. When integrating content and language, students have the opportunity to acquire both Basic Interpersonal Communications Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALPS) with the former being all the social language skills and the latter the language skills to cope with academic requirements (Cummins, 2000). Being able to communicate academically and socially opens new borders and encourages students to explore and travel around the world.

Third, in terms of Content, CLIL is seen as helping to provide opportunities to study content through different perspectives. Marsh et al (2001) claim that "Languages, and the cultures associated with them, sometimes reveal differing world-views that can be seen in the ways in which some content is taught." One obvious example lies in how educational curricula in different countries may describe shared historical events. However, traditions in the different disciplines can lead to significantly diverse ways of approaching and understanding similar phenomena. CLIL enables learners to study through these different perspectives that can lead to achieving a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Tackling a topic from different perspectives

undoubtedly fosters critical thinking and broadens students' perspectives on different issues. The Content dimension even offers access to specific target language terminology. Students acquire new lexicon in order to understand concepts or express academic language accurately. CLIL is suitable for all levels of education, from elementary to graduate or vocational to professional education.

Fourth, Marsh (2001) affirms that in terms of Learning Dimension, CLIL complements individual learning strategies. CLIL is specifically geared to learner-centered methodologies that attempt to improve learning by giving attention to individuals' needs in terms of social and thinking skills. One broad issue relates to how the brain processes information (Sousa, 2006). Recently, it has been posed relevant to how the brain learns; for instance, brain differences among boys and girls, different learning styles or even how the arts influence learning. Likewise, this Learning Dimension suggests that CLIL helps to increase learner motivation which is at the heart of all education.

Lastly, in terms of Language Dimension, CLIL is a significant approach to improve overall target language competence. Using Marsh's (2001) words, this is one of the most common reasons, both historically and more recently, for the introduction of CLIL. This focus stresses language competence in general and therefore includes reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. CLIL furthers the language experience through the integration of language and non-language teaching. In the same way, this Language dimension proposes that the practicing of oral skills can be done in a 'utilitarian' way that is to provide opportunities to use the language as a tool to communicate. This means that methods to be used are the ones that lead to a high degree of interaction within the class. In such cases, even if desirable it is not necessary for a teacher to have native-like competence in the target language; what it truly matters is the ability to interact and transmit knowledge by means of the target language.

Finally, these five dimensions build students' profile and attitudes by being competent in the foreign language. This focus often involves a learner being able to use a language for specific purposes while developing cultural, personal and social understanding. Marsh et al. (2001) pointed out that the dimensions are idealized and should not be viewed as standing alone, because they are usually heavily inter-related in CLIL practice. It is useful to distinguish the dimensions because it allows to identify the separate, yet inter-locking reasons why CLIL is implemented in diverse contexts.

Considerations when Implementing CLIL

Many scholars claim that for CLIL to work effectively there are a number of conditions to be met. Rodríguez-Bonces (2011) affirms that there are four areas that researchers, educators and anyone else involved in the field need to work on in order for CLIL to suit the Colombian scenario. Those aspects are the following: 1) Language learning approach; 2) Teacher training; 3) Materials Development; 4) Cultural and Intercultural Competence. (p. 85)

with Teacher Training being one of the most applicable. Subject teachers must be adequately trained in the target language while language teachers teaching content need to be trained in the core subject. It may be said that CLIL promotes real cooperation between teachers from different areas or departments, as well as collaborative teaching.

The implementation of CLIL encourages careful analysis of existing methods and appropriate adaptation. For instance, bilingual models such Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) advocate for careful planning, meaningful learning, gradation of content and assessment according to students' background and educational needs. In CLIL all these factors play a pivotal role at some point or another.

CLIL is a coherent way of doubling the amount of exposure to the language, without the necessity of adding more room in the timetable for language (only) lessons. In the long term, using CLIL from primary school would be beneficial since it would allow those students to study other languages in high school or university. Students increase language instruction time while acquiring new concepts. The language can be acquired by natural means, leading to authentic use of it. CLIL is based on language acquisition rather than enforced learning. Furthermore, teaching subject content in the foreign language makes the use of that language more contextualized, real and meaningful for students. As language is used to fulfill real purposes, its use is authentic and much more meaningful for the students; as a consequence, motivation is increased.

The use of innovative materials and methods can be an engaging factor for students and teachers. By using materials that address topics that students are familiar with and, if possible, that they have recently studied in their mother tongue, students are able to learn more as they will already know a lot of the content and context. This familiarity enables them to pay attention to details that they would otherwise miss. As previously mentioned when explaining the CLIL dimensions in

terms of language, content and environment, materials need to be chosen according to social contexts and students' level and interests. Materials should consider existing knowledge, contextual clues and thinking skills and if possible the inclusion of interdisciplinary experiences that bring active engagement.

Implementing CLIL demands that schools provide teachers with plenty opportunities for professional development and enhanced teaching practice. As it can be inferred, classes following a CLIL approach differ from EFL (English as a Foreign Language) ones. In typical EFL, the topics are pre determined by interest or age related factors. In one unit, students can be talking about friendship and in the next one about global warming. The contents are disposable, they serve to introduce or practice a linguistic objective, and they are not goals themselves. Nevertheless, with CLIL students are using the language meaningfully and higher cognitive skills are being developed: analyze, argue, compare, judge, categorize, etc. It develops oral communication skills and cultural awareness. Educators need to be trained on how to address different topics, on how to plan lessons for diversity or multilevel skills. Besides, teachers need guidance on how to assess students when the focus is content but the means is language. Moreover, we all know that for the new technologies, Internet, the World Wide Web and other ways to be connected with the outside world, English is the *Lingua Franca*, so CLIL also provides the opportunity of social inclusion and a wider cultural consciousness. However, not many teachers have the knowledge of how to incorporate the information communication technologies (ICTs) in the classroom. It is evident that topics such as lesson planning for CLIL, ICT's in the classroom, differentiated instruction, scaffolding techniques, and assessment, among others, should be part of any professional development program.

No method or approach can work well if instructors are not supported in their work by educational authorities who believe in teachers' expertise and their capacity to successfully implement changes.

Implementing CLIL in Diverse Educational Contexts

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CLIL may be used not only in elementary or high school settings; it may also be applied in undergraduate programs since students take some of the subjects of their major in English. In fact, some universities are offering bilingual teacher preparation programs. Similarly to high school, in many institutions all the students in the different programs have to take and pass four or six compulsory levels in order to get their degree. At this point, educational background influences learning

approach. In fact, many students find English very difficult because they did not have good training in secondary school. Bearing this situation in mind, CLIL has to be implemented gradually. It may be initially used in a couple of courses towards the end of the students' programs once learners have had the chance to catch up with their knowledge of the language.

In the same way, students' background influences the learning context and teachers' educational background affects teaching approach. As regards teachers, core area teachers with an acceptable level of English could perfectly deliver their classes in the target language and students could benefit from such an approach. However, it is difficult to imagine language teachers delivering highly specific contents at university level unless, of course, backed up by the subjects' teachers. Such implementation would require both subject and language teachers working hand in hand in order to complement each other in the same class.

Another distinction needs to be made between rural and urban contexts. Although CLIL has been used in Europe, conditions in Latin America, specifically Colombia are different: for instance, in terms of students' mobility or school resources. Another consideration to bear in mind is about the professional training teachers receive. CLIL requires subject teachers with foreign language skills and vice versa, unfortunately, this characteristic is not fulfilled by the majority of the educators. In fact, in Colombia there are some areas where teachers are not equipped with adequate training and even resources. It seems most of the educational capacity is in the big cities, with small towns or villages being isolated in the implementation of new approaches such as CLIL.

There is also a divergence between the context of private and public institutions. Alvarez and Ayala (2005) point out that

Public institutions teachers differ from private institutions teachers. One main difference is the professional training teachers receive. Specially, in reference to foreign language education, private schools teachers often are experts and hold an undergraduate or graduate degree in the subject they teach. In addition, they are offered more training and methodological updating, for example publishing houses train teachers on how to use textbooks as part of the teaching methodology - even in other subjects different to English-, but they are also teaching them using English as the vehicle for learning. In contrast, in public education teachers from different subject matters such as social studies, literature and others usually have to teach for instance the subject of English (or vice versa) without previous training.

Obviously some adjustments have been introduced by the government last year, although there is still a lack of more professional development training.

Alvarez and Ayala (2005) also note, in regards to logistics, private schools are funded independently; they are not subject to the limitations of state education budgets and have more freedom to invest in new technologies and materials. Opposite to that, public schools must follow all state and local laws in education. These laws also include regulations about program and curriculum development different from private school regulations which are freer in their curriculum design. As a consequence, these two settings (private and public schools or institutions) need to be considered as two separate worlds. Perhaps this is another reason that would make the use of CLIL impossible in some specific contexts. It is true educators need to make some adjustments in the curriculum and programs in the teaching courses in order to succeed, no matter if they belong to public or private systems.

CLIL suggests and requires a large degree of language exposure. The correlation with the proficiency levels proposed by the Common European Framework (CEF) is another aspect to consider. The CEF asserts that C1 language proficiency level is attained after one thousand hours or more of independent work and exposure to the target language. Our contextual characteristics and educational system are not ready yet for such a challenge. The average number of hours of a foreign language class in a public school in Colombia is four hours per week while in private schools it is eight hours. Therefore, variation in the number of hours of English language instruction will inevitably affect proficiency levels.

In terms of language policies, authorities need to consider the contexts described above. Many teachers have complained about the conditions in which they try to teach languages and the blindness or deafness of education authorities to teachers' claims and/or suggestions. It is absolutely essential that governmental policies acknowledge the importance and value of CLIL through their national education plans (long and short-term). If the national educational authorities do not clearly spell out how the bilingual plan is going to be implemented, most likely local education ministries or boards will not easily accept changes in the current curricula, thus blocking the way to any initiative that may later prove beneficial for all the actors in this complex context.

The last aspect to take into account is the diversity of curriculums. CLIL appears as a very interesting proposal to promote interdisciplinary curriculum or co-teaching. However, this approach

is difficult to implement due to the fact that some subject teachers are not even basically prepared in a foreign language. One option to solve this issue would be co-teaching by having language teachers teaching parts of the different subjects of the curricula. For instance, the English teacher may invite the art teacher to do a hands on activity about the topic being studied. The art teacher speaks in English, he/she gives the corresponding instructions to follow in order to create the mask; subject integration supports the learning experience.

In conclusion, in order to implement CLIL in diverse contexts, everyone involved in the educational process needs to consider the following aspects:

1. Adequate target-language competence.
2. Adequate subject-knowledge.
3. Adequate materials in the target language.
4. Explicit institutional and national policies
5. Teacher co-operation.

Conclusion

Innovation in education implies the adoption and adaptation of approaches and methodologies. CLIL as an instructional approach that fosters content knowledge through language involves careful planning according to the different contexts and current times.

There are many considerations when implementing CLIL; for instance, language proficiency, subject knowledge, intercultural communication, teacher training and policies among others. English teachers have to work closely with subject teachers to ensure that language development is appropriately catered to, in other words, to guarantee that content and languages are truly integrated. This article is an invitation to reflect about what is needed to implement instructional approaches so that students and teachers succeed by engaging in academic performance, critical thinking, collaboration, and multiculturalism through different interactions in the classroom.

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As English becomes an essential add-on to any curricular program around the world, it is moving into a position where it becomes a subject that students learn in order to do something else. CLIL, with its dual-focused aims, encapsulates perfectly this utilitarian view of the English language. “CLIL is about using languages to learn... It is about installing a ‘hunger to learn’ in the student. It gives opportunity for him/

her to think about and develop how s/he communicates in general, even in the first language”

(Marsh, Marsland & Stenberg, 2001). All in all, CLIL views language as a vehicle to learn through English.

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