



Nº9 Abril 2012

CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

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RESUMEN

Después de definir lo que es el Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (CLIL, por sus siglas en inglés), se mencionarán algunas ventajas y desventajas de él y la autora dará su opinión personal acerca de cada una de ellas. Se tratará de encontrar una respuesta a la pregunta: ¿Es realmente “CLIL” el enfoque del futuro?

Lo anterior se tratará de hacer presentando un juicio justo donde tanto las posturas locales como las internacionales sean tomadas en cuenta y la autora relacionará éstas a su experiencia actual vinculándolas con el lugar donde trabaja en México.

ABSTRACT

After having defined what CLIL is, some of the advantages and disadvantages will be mentioned and the author will give her personal opinion about each of them. An answer to the question: Is CLIL really the approach for the future? will try to be found.

The above will try to be done by presenting a fair trial where both local and international settings are taken into consideration and relating them to her current experience where she works in Mexico.

KEY WORDS

Approach, Content, Advantages, Disadvantages, Teaching

PALABRAS CLAVE

Enfoque, Contenido, Ventajas, Desventajas, Enseñanza

1. INTRODUCTION

CLIL, or Content and Language Integrated Learning, “is an umbrella term covering teaching contexts in which subject content is taught through another language.” (Kay Bentley, 2009:9). It has a lot to do with language immersion. The term was created by David Marsh in 1994 and consists in learning a foreign language through learning a subject in that language, for example, learning History in English in a Spanish-speaking country.

It is a very effective way of developing communicative competence. Which is why this approach is growing so fast in so many European countries, but the question is if it is appropriate to use it in Mexico. In the following text, I will try to answer that question.

2. QUICK OVERVIEW OF CLIL NOWADAYS

There are many different types of CLIL programs, ranging from full immersion (Canada) through partial immersion, about 50% of the curriculum (parts of Spain), to language showers and regular 20-30 minute subject lessons in the target language (parts of Germany). In Secondary schools, subjects are usually taught in the target language by non-native speaker subject or language teachers. In Primary context, CLIL programs are commonly delivered by non-native subject specialists or by English language teachers. In some countries native speaker classroom assistants support the learners too. There are also contexts where native speakers teach English to non-native learners (often from minority language groups) to enable them to integrate into mainstream classes. Examples of these programs are EAL (English as an Additional Language in

Britain) and CBI (Content Based Instruction in the US). Taken from: Teaching Knowledge Test – Content and Language Integrated Learning.

3. CLIL's ADVANTAGES

3.1 Learners' Advantages of adopting a CLIL approach include:

- Increasing motivation as language is used to fulfill real purposes to learn the substantive material.- It is not the same to learn a language with no real purpose in mind as that as to know a second language, than to have the need to do it. This makes it more purposeful and therefore more motivating for the learner.
- Introducing learners to the wider cultural context.- Learning a subject such as History makes the learner understand the L2 culture far too much.
- Developing a positive 'can do' attitude towards learning languages.- Learning not only grammar, but personalizing the language through teaching something meaningful might lower the affective filter.
- Developing student multilingual interests and attitudes.- Knowing more about a language increases sometimes the learners' interests in different cultures such as the one they are learning the language from. It also broadens their horizons.
- Preparing students for further studies and work.- Knowing a language and subjects and culture in L2 can increase the learners' opportunities in life.
- Access subject specific target language terminology.- Which may be difficult otherwise to acquire or even to be exposed to.

- CLIL creates conditions for naturalistic language learning.- By having to communicate in the target language, to fulfill some of the tasks or even to understand the subject is how this kind of learning takes place.
- CLIL provides a purpose for language use in the classroom.- Since learners need to communicate among each other in order to help cooperative learning.
- It has a positive effect on language learning by putting the emphasis on meaning rather than on form.- By having non-disposable contents, it focuses on meaning, grammar is embedded. Some of my students absolutely hate grammar learnt as it, so this will help them cope with grammar in a more meaningful way and help them acquire it more than “studying” it.
- It drastically increases the amount of exposure to the target language (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2007).- By teaching a curricular subject which is already going to be taught but in the target language, it might double or more the time of exposure to it.
- It takes into account the learners’ interests, needs and cognitive levels.- As we have read, the level of the learners is closely related not to their level of knowledge of L2 but to their cognitive level, making it better suited for what they are supposed to know in their own language according to their age.

3.2 Teachers’ Advantages of adopting a CLIL approach may include:

- The use of innovative methods, materials and e-learning.- This is something also I will state as a disadvantage but right now, I will consider it as an advantage.

- Individual and institutional networking opportunities and professional mobility.- Teachers knowing something more than just a “language”, I mean, mastering a curricular subject are more likely to get more opportunities and in this case the opportunities might happen abroad because of the reasons just mentioned.
- The development of good practices through cooperation with teachers in other departments, schools and countries.- Very similar to the last point where the networking takes place but in this case within their community or even abroad.

4. CLIL’s DISADVANTAGES

- One of the main problem of CLIL is that language teachers lack knowledge on the subjects while subject teacher have minimal knowledge of foreign languages.- I can talk about this problem in Mexico, since I have taught at different levels, even at a University one and most of my colleagues there have not studied a Major. This is a problem that has to do with our educational system. A few years ago, there was not a Major such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language and this led to having teachers who just knew English because they had traveled or lived abroad. They did not need to have finished any Major in order to be able to teach. This is why most teachers in Mexico do not have the necessary knowledge to be teaching a subject through an L2. More than that, we do not have any courses where they tell us how to teach CLIL. The only exam there is in Mexico right now is TKT (Teaching Knowledge Test) for CLIL given by the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations, and there is not a preparation course for it, you will have to study on your own.
- Another main concern is undeniably the lack of materials there is to teach CLIL. Publishing houses have not yet come up with such thing because

they will have to be personalized for each country and each subject according to their curricula and culture. Therefore, for a teacher to create their own materials it will be time-consuming and will overload him/her. They would need to personalize them to suit their learners needs so as to enable them to develop until they are working at high levels of cognitive and linguistic challenge. Anyway, the lack of materials could be a problem but I do not know to what extent because as we have seen, books or materials are only a help but not the whole course could be based on them.

- Each country or school has a clear objective when defining a language teaching program. According to Hugh Baetens Beardsmore, no one version of CLIL is “exportable”. It may sound as a disadvantage but this argument just reinforces the notion that CLIL has been purposefully designed by a board of Education or school coordination and should reflect the thought of a National Educational Program. Each country has its own needs, deals with its own reality and will establish its own way of implementing CLIL as a methodology or not.

So, CLIL can be applied taking into account a local reality and it will fit into a particular school context, which is surely an advantage. The possibilities of building an exclusive material are enormous, even the possibility of choosing a weak or strong version of it, according to each needs.

As you can see here, I disagree with “exportability” being a disadvantage.

- As in the readings is mentioned, where CLIL is not well implemented, it might be very difficult for students to catch up with a subject in a language they do not have the level to understand.

In my own experience, at the University where I work, there is a high rate of students who fail subjects related to their own Major. The reason for this is unknown to me, it can be the curricular design, it could be the teachers, it could be many things. But if this happens in the learners’

mother tongue, I am not so sure how prepared they are to do this in an L2.

Culturally speaking, I think in Mexico we are not prepared to have a curricular subject in a second language because the system is so badly designed, it would be in detriment of the students.

- Reflecting upon content and the level of proficiency, another important issue to be considered is the fact that it is still unknown how well a student can transfer knowledge from a second language to his/her mother tongue. We still do not know if when learners are transferring that knowledge will do it conceptual-linguistically correctly. Without a doubt, one of the main advantages of CLIL is to promote students awareness of the value of transferable skills and knowledge, which is the result of an intense acclimatization work. In order to have it successfully done, I must say students would have to slowly get used to the teaching approach before “traditional” CLIL can be introduced.
- It is said that CLIL can be used for non-orthodox linguistic purposes serving as an agent to impose political domination through language. When more traditional languages are the only ones to consider, for example English, is when this argument can be true. However, CLIL can also be a tool for teaching non-dominant languages, spoken by minority groups, such as Sorbian in Germany or Breton in France that are geographically minor languages. An example of this, is the use of Turkish in Germany technical-professional schools, in subjects such as Economics. In Switzerland, other national languages are taught through CLIL.

Thus, from my point of view, the “Trojan Horse” argument isn’t totally valid once CLIL does not intend to take out any “unwanted” language but to offer the chance to teach relevant content through the use of a relevant language, sometimes the main one spoken in that country, expanding students’ knowledge.

- As far as for function, there is a problem between the balance of BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency), as CLIL is mostly focused on an academic subject, there is a tendency on losing BICS towards CALP. But we as teachers if we create good lesson plans, might help overcome this problem by creating a nice atmosphere where cooperative learning takes place. This way learners will have to communicate with each other by using an L2 appropriate to sooth their social requirements.
- The linguistic range may be a problem since there are certain subjects where the linguistic range required for learners to use or study is very limited. Therefore, the “amounts” of vocabulary or structures learnt by the students will be limited as well.
- Last but not least, there comes assessment. I have seen that one of the main problems in an academic setting with the use of CLT in Mexico is the assessment and CLT is not a new trend. What will happen then with assessment in CLIL? Will we take into account the linguistic level acquired by the student or will we grade the academic level? How will we do it? I do not think there is a solution to this problem yet. That is why at least in Mexico with our educational system, CLIL will work at higher levels, maybe in elementary schools where as a matter of fact this is sometimes done with great success.

5. CONCLUSION

Having exposed the advantages and disadvantages of CLIL I came up to the conclusion that CLIL is still not the approach for the future, at least not for Mexico. We still need to patch all these problems mentioned above and to see if the advantages overcome the drawbacks in our setting.

Currently, I would not use it in my working environment since the University where I work would need to change the whole curricula.

This will take time and money and huge efforts that maybe are worth it but we and our students are not culturally prepared.

The lack of teachers and trainers and materials would be a big drawback. CLIL has very good points but it is not appropriate for every country or system. Efforts and studies should continue to be made in order for it to be successful.

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