

THE INTRODUCTION OF CLIL (CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING) TO ENGLISH TEACHING AND LEARNING AT UNIVERSITY OF ECONOMICS HO CHI MINH CITY

Vo Doan Tho, M.A.

In the past decades, alongside a great demand for teaching and learning English as a foreign language, there has been an increasing number of learners studying content subjects through English across the globe. This has resulted in the emergence of a new educational approach called CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) in which a foreign language is used for the learning and teaching of content and language with the objective of enhancing both. For that reason, the use of CLIL, which is considered as a methodological approach particularly suitable for contexts where students are required to master some subjects through the medium of English, is exponentially increasing these days.

I. Introduction

In Vietnam, University of Economics HCMC (UEH) has always been seen as one of the most prestigious universities, where there are thousands of students majoring in different fields of economics such as banking, accounting, international business and so forth. Every year, UEH provides the society with a great deal of professional graduates who are well-qualified enough to compete in the instable economy as well as to contribute to the development of our country. In addition, in recent years, the emergence of the information age together with a surge of demand for global integration is placing a new responsibility on the mission of UEH: offering students both expert knowledge and language skills. This profound change has enhanced the importance of teaching English as a foreign language at UEH. In the near future, with the vision of altering the educational objective, all students at UEH are expected to be able to study most of their subjects in English. Consequently, the ways and means by which English is taught and learnt has come under scrutiny, which can upgrade students learning outcomes. Both content of the subjects and the English competence are now being placed under the same emphasis. It leads to the creation of innovative approaches and methods that help teachers and learners adapt to the needs of the new objectives. And as a typical recommendation to such situation, CLIL has emerged in order to support professionals in exploring the types of good practice which students can use to learn both language and authentic content.

II. Literature review

1. Background

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a new pedagogical model for second language education, developed in Europe in the mid-1990s. The approach is based on the success of the Canadian immersion model that began in the mid-1960s, in which mainstream curriculum content (e.g. Mathematics) is taught through the medium of the students' non-native language (e.g. French). As Krashen (1984, p. 61) has argued: Canadian immersion is not simply another successful language teaching program - it may be the most successful program ever recorded in the professional language -teaching literature. No program has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no program, to my knowledge, has done as well.

However, outside of the Canadian education system within which it evolved, immersion has been tremendously difficult to replicate successfully, especially at a system-wide level.

Nationally, Victoria has been a leader in Australian bilingual education initiatives, establishing the Victorian Bilingual Schools Program in 1997, based largely on principles underpinning the Canadian immersion approach. As of 2011, there were 14 bilingual programs running across 12 Victorian government schools, catering for 1727 students at primary level. Languages include Chinese, French, German, Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Macedonian, Vietnamese, and Auslan (Sarwo Rini, 2011).

However, despite nearly three decades of the Victorian Bilingual Schools Program, it has not been possible to scale the program up beyond a few select schools, and remains unviable as a model for system-wide innovation. Even with significant compromises to the conventional immersion model, for example, delivering only 7.5 hours (or 30%) in the target language per week, as opposed to the minimum 50% required to meet the Canadian definition of at least a 'partial' immersion program (Baker, 2006), the resources and expertise needed for successful immersion schools make it untenable for mainstream Language education reform across the education system.

Recognizing that immersion offers the most effective approach to language teaching available, while also being cognizant of the difficulties in replicating the model outside of the conditions within which it evolved in Canada, CLIL was developed by distilling its key principles to offer a more flexible pedagogical model better suited to the range of school contexts within the European Union. As Coyle (2008, p. 101) has described, whereas immersion is rather defined, 'there is neither one CLIL approach nor one theory of CLIL.' Instead, teachers work with guiding principles for language and content integration to achieve positive language learning outcomes across different settings and teaching environments.

2. CLIL - Pedagogic framework and guiding principles

The framework on which CLIL is built mainly involves four key 'building blocks' (Coyle, 2006, p. 9), known as the 4Cs Framework:

Content: The subject matter, theme, and topic forming the basis for the program, defined by domain or discipline according to knowledge, concepts, and skills (e.g. Science, IT, Arts, Economics).

Communication: The language to create and communicate meaning about the knowledge, concepts, and skills being learned (e.g. stating facts about the sun, giving instructions on using software, describing emotions in response to music).

Cognition: The ways that we think and make sense of knowledge, experience, and the world around us (e.g. remembering, understanding, evaluating, critiquing, reflecting, creating).

Culture: The ways that we interact and engage with knowledge, experience, and the world around us; socially (e.g. social conventions for expressing oneself in the target language), pedagogically (e.g. classroom conventions for learning and classroom interaction), and/or according to discipline (e.g. scientific conventions for preparing reports to disseminate knowledge).

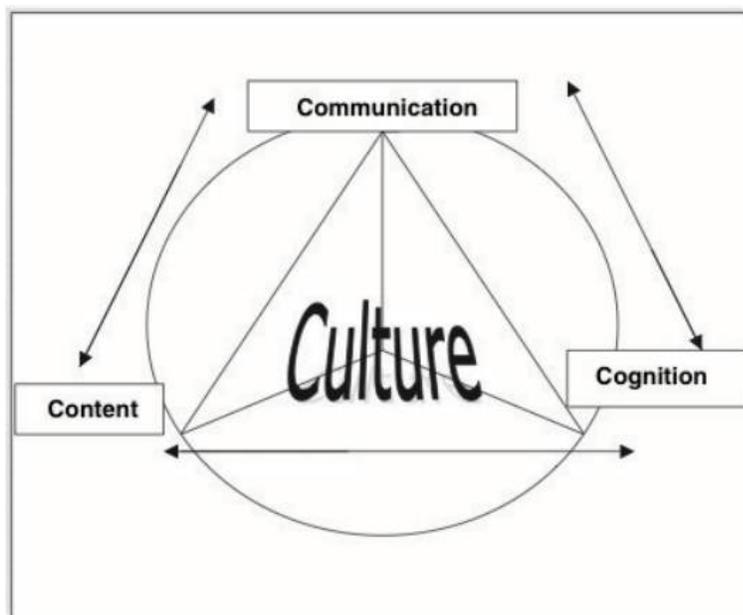


Figure 1. The CLIL 4Cs Framework (Coyle, 2006 in Coyle, 2007, p. 551).

As Coyle goes on to elaborate:

The 4Cs Framework supposes that it is through progression in knowledge, skills and understanding of the content, engagement in associated cognitive processing, interaction in the communicative context, developing appropriate language knowledge and skills as well as acquiring a deepening intercultural awareness through the positioning of self and ‘otherness’, that effective CLIL takes place. From this perspective, CLIL involves learning to use language appropriately whilst using language to learn effectively. (p. 9) Whereas methodology relies heavily on specific conditions for successful implementation (e.g. see Baker, 2006, for a list of ‘core’ and ‘variable’ features of immersion), CLIL is instead instructed by six relational (and therefore more contextually sensitive and flexible) pedagogical principles for integrating language and content that work across different contexts and settings, while incorporating all four key elements of underlying 4Cs framework:

- Subject matter refers to more than acquiring knowledge and skills. It is about the learner constructing his/her own knowledge and developing skills which are relevant and appropriate (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978).
- Acquiring subject knowledge, skills and understanding involves learning and thinking (cognition). To enable the learner to construct an understanding of the subject matter, the linguistic demands of its content as the conduit for learning must be analysed and made accessible (Met, 1998).
- Thinking processes (cognition) require analysis in terms of their linguistic demands to facilitate development (Bloom, 1984; McGuinness, 1999).
- Language needs to be learned in context (i.e. learning through the language), which requires reconstructing the subject themes and their related cognitive processes through a foreign or second language e.g. language intake/output (Krashen, 1985; Swain, 2000).
- Interaction in the learning context is fundamental to learning. ‘If teachers can provide more opportunities for exploratory talk and writing, students would have the chance to think through materials and make it their own’ (Mohan, 1986, p. 13). This has implications when the learning context operates through L2 [second language] (Pica, 1991; van Lier, 1996).
- The relationship between cultures and languages is sophisticated (Byram, 2001). The framework puts culture at the core and intercultural understanding pushes the boundaries towards alternative agendas such as transformative pedagogies, global citizenship, student voice and ‘identity investment’ (Cummins, 2004). (Coyle, 2007, pp. 550-551)

As a result, the educational experiences promote greater opportunities for authentic and purposeful meaning-making through language, by facilitating the development of new communicative skills while learning new content, understanding, and knowledge.

In effect, CLIL provides the basic conditions under which humans successfully acquire any new language: by understanding and then creating meaning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006).

For first language acquisition, this occurs as infants are gradually exposed to new language in their first four to six years of life, matched against corresponding levels of early cognitive development. In contrast, traditional second language lessons typically focus (often exclusively) on elements of language — such as grammar, vocabulary, and other mechanics (spelling, pronunciation, etc.)—while deliberately seeking to avoid exposure to what might be perceived as difficult or challenging content.

Intuitively, this conventional separation of language/content seems reasonable, given that the learner’s ability to use new language is often fundamental in comparison to what they can already understand and do in their mother tongue. However, by separating the 4Cs, the successful language acquisition would be hindered rather than enabled.

As a pedagogy, CLIL provides a comprehensive framework in which the relationship between language and content for genuine language development is really necessary in spite of its complexity. It does this together with a theoretically rich and robust set of principles to help guide teachers on how this can actually be achieved in practice, across a range of educational settings.

III. Discussion and recommendation

1. The benefits of CLIL

Consistent with research on immersion and other approaches in teaching language and content, CLIL has been shown to have numerous linguistic, academic, and social beneficial outcomes.

Firstly, CLIL students will be typically more engaged than students in regular second language programs, due to the authenticity of the content that drives the learning experience. Likewise, CLIL students do better on tests of second language competence compared to students in regular second language programs because they have opportunity to acquire the language during the CLIL lessons.

Secondly, CLIL students academically cover the same curriculum content as those in a corresponding monolingual program, with a focus on grade-equivalent / age-correspondent knowledge, skills, and concepts, rather than ‘dumbed-down’ units of work. However, despite studying the same curriculum in their non-native language, CLIL students can perform, on average, at least as well on tests of content knowledge as those learning the same curriculum material in their first language.

Finally, CLIL students can also demonstrate higher levels of intercultural competence and sensitivity, including more positive attitudes towards other cultures. Intercultural competence makes an important contribution to students’ overall educational experiences, including skills to better understand oneself and others, and to appreciate and use diverse ways of knowing, being, and doing. Such capabilities assist learners to live and work successfully as linguistically and culturally aware citizens of the world.

In addition, there are a numerous array of reasons to prove that CLIL tends to produce so many positive outcomes for learning. In CLIL, learners benefit from higher quality teaching and from input that is meaningful and understandable so that they may strengthen their own ability to process input, which prepares them for higher-level thinking skills, and enhances cognitive development. Moreover, studying in a relatively anxiety-free environment, learners are provided with higher motivation to learn content through the foreign language, which may foster and sustain motivation towards learning the foreign language itself.

2. How to implement CLIL into the classroom effectively

As mentioned above, CLIL has a great influence on students’ ability to think critically, enriching the comprehension of concepts and increasing their motivation towards learning a language. In reality, how to introduce CLIL in our classroom will deeply rely on the enthusiasm of the teachers. However, following are some of the suggestions that may help all teachers in the process of implementing CLIL in their lessons.

Choosing CLIL material

In fact, teaching a subject through a foreign language requires creativity. Thus, it is vital that the teacher should evaluate and select an appropriate course book in order to make it more learner-friendly. If we relate the subject to students’ everyday experiences, including brainstorming and questionnaires, they will have more opportunities to use the target language. So we should bear in mind the positive effect of using the material that is truly relevant to our students even though sometimes the amount of authentic material is quite limited. No one can deny that authentic material will engage students’ interest, intrinsic motivation, which will result in better learning and achievement. However, preparing our own material suitable for CLIL is really challenging and time-consuming. After all, teachers can simply adapt their existing textbook by covering the textbook’s content by following the proposed topics and then adding or designing activities so as to make them more student-challenging (arouse a debate about their current use of Social Network, bring genuine articles about the success of Facebook in business world...)

Using Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

With the classroom equipped with an interactive whiteboard, an overhead projector and Internet access at school, we should show our gratitude by making use of these hi-tech tools. Equally important, they help us to quickly go deeper in knowledge, and as students are completely good at using such tools, assigning them the tasks which involve the use of ICT will motivate them. For example, using *Prezi* to conduct the lessons or ask students to make presentation can certainly add a visual support which allows students to understand and remember the content better.

Conveying culture through CLIL (cross-curricular content)

Generally learning a second language entails the studying of a second culture. Hence, introducing another culture in our lessons will awake students to think of more meaningful aspects than written words or irregular verbs in a language. The idea of referring a cross-curricular content through English will give our lessons a sense of usefulness. In addition, in CLIL lessons, students are provided with an opportunity for learning through acquisition rather than through explicit teaching, allowing peripheral learning to take place; in other words, students acquire the language incidentally.

Creating a safe and natural environment

Traditionally, we as language teachers try to make students understand the nuts and bolts of the language; grammar, syntax and vocabulary for instance. Under the pressure of time, we rarely go beyond this essential part of teaching. For that reason, performing CLIL ensures that students are exposed top-down to the foreign language structures, while they are relaxed, concentrated on different things. On the other hand, students need scaffolding until they feel safe and confident enough to dare to speak. CLIL can offer students the feeling of being immersed in something practical, related to their own experiences and interests. As a result, this natural use of the language can boost students' motivation towards learning the language.

IV. Conclusion

CLIL can be considered as a major development step in the field of English teaching and learning. Even though it undermines the certain fundamental values about the nature of language, it acts as an opportunity for acquiring the subject knowledge more effectively together with using the foreign language naturally. Consequently, CLIL involves the implementation of a specific methodological approach which suits contexts where a dual learning focus is required.

As a matter of fact, being a CLIL teacher will be usually more time-consuming since a great deal time has to be spent on adjusting and creating appropriate material, or designing and assigning tasks with the use of ICT, or conveying cultural content through language and providing students with safe and natural atmosphere. Nevertheless, in the end, when we see our students' motivation increasing and the improvements they do in their learning, it is worthy.

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