

**Focus on Form in Content-Based Instruction:
Practical Ideas for Raising Language Awareness
in Primary School Arts and Crafts CLIL****Alexandra VRACIU¹ & Yolanda Capdevila TOMÀS**
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Abstract | Despite their alleged dual focus on content and language learning, CLIL classes are, more often than not, focused on meaning transmission and comprehension and promote an incidental approach to language learning. Yet, empirical evidence from second language acquisition research points out that a mere focus on meaning is not enough for learners to reach proficiency in the target language and some awareness of the linguistic form is necessary for language learning to occur. In order to foster simultaneous subject matter and foreign language learning, CLIL practitioners need to create opportunities for learners to notice the language of the content while performing content-related activities and tasks. We propose a series of pedagogical strategies to achieve this awareness of the form in the context of the CLIL class, drawing on empirical evidence from language learning research and our own experience as CLIL teachers and teacher trainers.

Key words | CLIL, focus on form, young learners, primary education, EFL, disciplinary literacy

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1. Introduction

Content-based language instruction has long crossed the Atlantic and settled on European ground predominantly in the shape of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) programmes, in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Certainly, one of the main arguments in favour of this transversal implementation of CLIL has been its potential to enhance the learning of foreign languages, mainly English, through the instruction of non-linguistic subjects in a language different from the language of schooling (Eurydice 55). CLIL is believed to overcome many of the weaknesses of the standard foreign language class, where the language is an object of study seldom used meaningfully and, hence, not learnt successfully (Muñoz 23). CLIL is assumed to encourage learners to engage in authentic communication in the context of non-linguistic curricular topics and tasks (Dalton-Puffer, "Discourse in Content"; Pérez-Vidal, "The Integration of Content") and to provide the necessary scaffolding for developing the language needed to internalise and verbalise new knowledge (Coyle, "Strengthening Integrated Learning" 90).

Nonetheless, when we cross the threshold of the CLIL class, teaching practices are much more content oriented than one would expect from a dual-focused educational approach which should devote balanced attention to content and language (Mehisto, Marsh & Frigols; Coyle, Hood & Marsh). In an observational study of CLIL programmes in primary and secondary education in Catalonia (Spain), Pérez-Vidal found that the CLIL teachers were particularly concerned with content comprehensibility and encouraging student output, but paid very little attention to the linguistic dimension of content learning (Pérez-Vidal, "The Need for Focus on Form" 49). This seems to indicate that CLIL teachers' understanding of the language learning mission of CLIL is, at least in the Catalan context, that this learning occurs incidentally, through exposure to input in the target language and through numerous language production opportunities.

Two major ideas can be invoked to question this understanding of language learning in CLIL. Firstly, second language acquisition studies have shown that incidental second language (L2) learning needs massive amounts of exposure for learners to experience observable gains in

the L2 competence (DeKeyser and Larson-Hall 101). In most European contexts, CLIL classes cannot offer the amount and intensity of exposure needed for substantial incidental L2 learning to occur. Secondly, recent models mapping the development of the L2 competence in content-based language instruction showcase the connection between progress in terms of content learning and progress in terms of subject-specific language use, the latter being fundamental for understanding and integrating new concepts and meanings (Meyer et al. 49). Deep content learning cannot occur without attention to the linguistic form because language articulates the development of knowledge in the different CLIL disciplines.

From a practitioner's standpoint, what seems to be a major hurdle in the deployment of "an effective teaching performance for language acquisition in CLIL" (De Graaff et al. 607) is the lack of practical strategies on how to carry out this language work within content-focused tasks and activities. According to Gajo, the content/language integration requires "precise reflection on the linguistic aspect of subject knowledge and on the role of discourse in the learning process" (568). In other words, CLIL teachers need to develop a language lens through which to scrutinise teaching materials and design classroom tasks and activities (Lindahl & Watkins 778). In this paper, we aim to provide CLIL practitioners with a series of strategies to create language learning opportunities in the CLIL class by enhancing learners' awareness of language use in relation to content. To achieve this, we bring together the insight provided by numerous studies in instructed foreign language learning and our experience as CLIL practitioners and teacher trainers.

Our proposal will be contextualised in primary school Arts and Crafts CLIL, a typical venue for CLIL implementation in Catalan primary schools. Arts and Crafts is supportive of low L2 proficiency levels in that input is not just verbal but also visual and manipulative, which increases its comprehensibility, and output is often non-linguistic (*e.g.*, crafts, experiments, performances). It is also a subject which is not literacy-dependent. Underdeveloped literacy skills have been identified as a challenge for the implementation of CLIL in early age education (Halbach 22) but, due to its limited reliance on reading and writing, Arts and Crafts CLIL can be taught even with very young

learners, whose literacy skills are only just emerging. Nevertheless, the activities and tasks that illustrate the different strategies proposed in this paper were designed for literate primary school learners, aged between 10 and 12 years old.

2. Discourse Genres in CLIL: Form Awareness for Content Learning

Second language learning research has provided robust empirical evidence that focusing exclusively on understanding meaning is not enough for learners to reach proficiency in the target language and to develop productive skills, and some attention or noticing of linguistic form is necessary for language learning to occur (Spada; Doughty). How do we get CLIL learners to notice the language of content-focused activities and tasks? It is important to bear in mind that the strategies used to raise students' language awareness in the CLIL class need to be different from the ones employed in the standard foreign language class. In the foreign language class, students are aware that the language is an object of study, no matter how communicative or meaning-focused the instructional approach is, and they are sensitive to noticing language forms and often expect metalinguistic explanations and an itemised treatment of the language, from simple to more complex structures. In CLIL, the language is instrumental to understanding and communicating about the content and, as such, it cannot be approached in an itemised way, in terms of grammatical categories or lexical items, or dealt with in isolation from the content without losing the spirit of CLIL. One should not forget that the CLIL class is timetabled as a content class (*i.e.*, Science, Physical Education, Arts and Crafts, etc.) and, as such, CLIL students are in a meaning-processing disposition, expecting to focus on discipline-specific concepts and topics. In this context, raising their language awareness means creating opportunities for noticing the linguistic "mesh" of the content while doing content-related activities and tasks. If we adopt a terminological distinction from applied linguistics, the foreign language class and the CLIL class differ in that the former often promotes a focus on forms, whereas the latter fosters a focus on form, namely it tries to divert learners' attention from meaning processing to the linguistic form in

activities or tasks where the meaning is the primary focus (see Ellis for a thorough discussion of the distinction between focus on form and focus on forms (Ellis, "Focus on form"). The strategies that we propose in this paper are strategies for doing focus on form in (Arts and Crafts) CLIL settings.

Additionally, we have to establish what form one needs to notice in the context of a CLIL subject. Following the recent reflection on the role of language in CLIL carried out by the Graz Group (Coyle "Strengthening Integrated Learning"), we believe that form (*i.e.*, language) in CLIL should be understood as disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan 44), namely the linguistic tools that inform knowledge construction and verbalisation in a given discipline, such as text genres and cognitive discourse functions (Dalton-Puffer, "Cognitive Discourse Functions" 29). Developing this literacy is intrinsic to deep content learning as it allows the students to think clearly about the subject matter and communicate about it effectively and in accordance with the conventions of the field (Vollmer 7). In our opinion, thinking about language in CLIL in terms of disciplinary literacy better aligns with the language expertise of content teachers than the Language Triptych (Coyle et al. 34) of language *of/for/through* learning, which draws on a conceptualisation of language as a collection of forms and functions and, as such, requires a type of expertise normally associated with language specialists. Working on disciplinary literacy is, for us, how content/language integration can be practically achieved in the CLIL class.

Discourse genres constitute an entry point into dealing with disciplinary literacy in CLIL. The genre refers to the types of texts or discourse that the students need to understand and produce in the process of learning the content. Each genre is associated with a series of cognitive discourse functions which, in turn, are encoded by means of specific lexis and language structures. Rose and Martin have put forward a taxonomy of the major genres in an educational setting (128), which we find particularly useful for identifying the discourse genres that underlie different CLIL subjects (see Figure 1). Once we have identified the relevant genres for a given subject, we can scrutinise them for their communicative intention(s) and match it (them) to the corresponding cognitive discourse functions, namely classify, define, describe, evaluate, explain,

explore, and report (we refer the readers to Dalton-Puffer's detailed discussion of each of these functions (Dalton-Puffer, "Cognitive Discourse Functions" 33-51). A text belonging to a given genre may cover more than one cognitive discourse function, for instance in a narrative we may report a series of events and evaluate their outcome. From here, the language needed to encode these communicative intentions can be scrutinised for temporal anchorage (present, past, future), dominant lexical categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs), recurrent grammatical forms (*e.g.*, gerunds, participles, comparatives and superlatives, etc.), among others. This genre-based treatment of the language in CLIL is a "pragmatic approach" (Coyle, "CLIL: Planning Tools" 7) to identifying the language that needs to be brought to students' attention in relation to content - the focus on certain forms and structures is driven by the characteristics of the genre and the communicative needs of the learners, not by their linguistic difficulty.

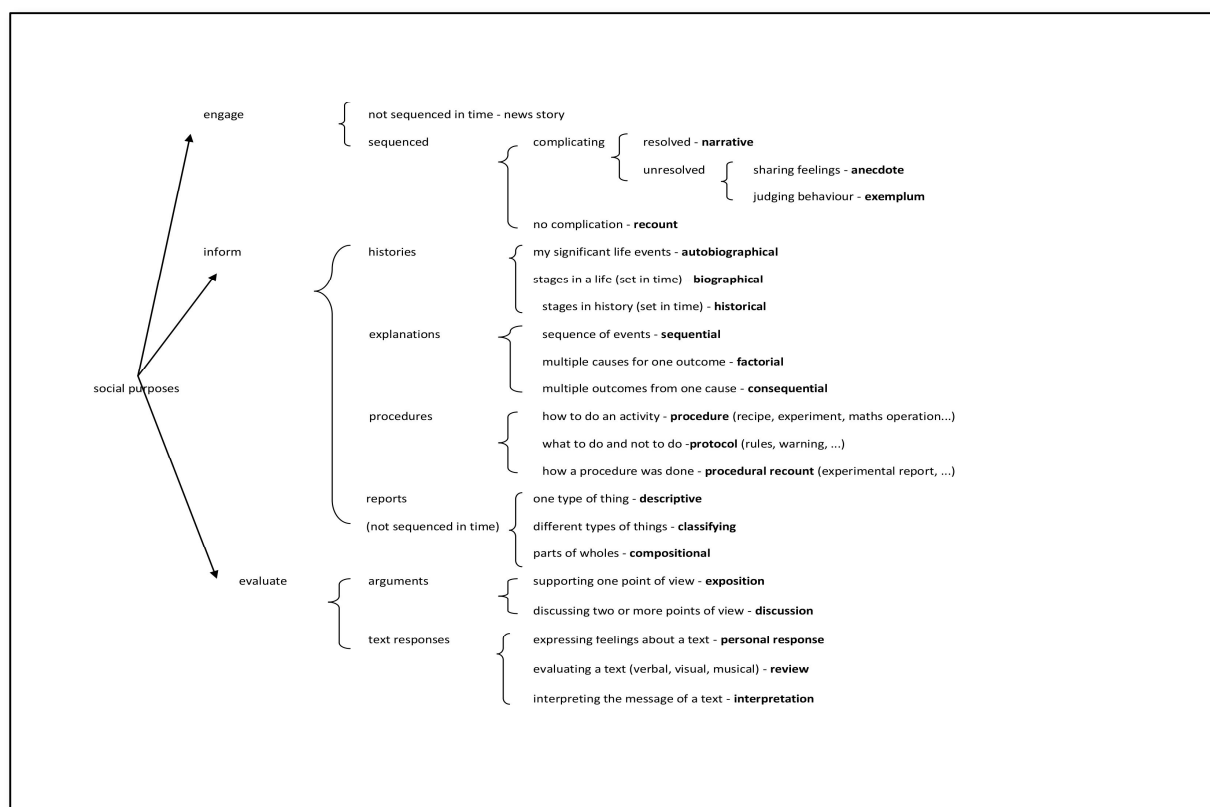


Figure 1 - Map of Genres in School (Rose & Martin 128)

In the case of Arts and Crafts, some relevant text genres could be reports (*e.g.*, descriptions of paintings), histories (*e.g.*, biographies of artists), procedures (*e.g.*, how to perform a given painting or drawing technique), or text responses (*e.g.*, personal responses about a drawing, an interpretation of a work of art, etc.). If we take, for instance, the description of a painting, the cognitive discourse functions we may encounter are, of course, describing the elements in the painting, but also exploring their meaning or evaluating their impact on the beholder. In terms of language, painting descriptions rely on an abundant use of descriptive adjectives related to colour, shape, size, texture, etc., alongside existentials (*there is/are*), prepositional phrases of location (*e.g.*, *in the foreground/in the background*), normally with a present temporal anchor, among others. The perusal of the texts used in a CLIL subject with this genre lens is, in our opinion, the foundation of content/language integration. This lens should also accompany the teacher in the implementation of the strategies for doing focus on form in CLIL contexts that we present hereafter.

3. Strategies for Doing Focus on Form in CLIL

Drawing on the typology of focus on form approaches established in language learning research (Ellis, "Investigating Form-Focused Instruction" 16-17), we suggest that CLIL practitioners can raise students' form awareness in CLIL classes in two different ways: either by intentionally creating the conditions for students to notice the language of the content (what is known as doing planned focus on form) or by reacting to students' performance in content-related tasks, when there is some kind of communication breakdown or because there is a problem of form and the teacher chooses to temporarily abandon his/her role as a language user in order to function as a language instructor (what is known as doing incidental focus on form).

With regard to the planned focus on form, two practical approaches seem to us feasible in the CLIL class. First of all, teachers can enhance the psycholinguistic processes that underlie learners' language processing during class activities. This can be achieved either by manipulating

the input learners receive in order to induce the noticing of predetermined language forms and structures or by harnessing the output so that students need to use a certain form or structure to complete a task (Ellis, "Investigating Form-Focused Instruction" 20-21). More specifically, input manipulation can involve, for instance, input enrichment (*e.g.*, increasing the frequency of use of a language structure in a text, or making certain structures salient by graphological enhancement) or input-processing manipulation (*e.g.*, encouraging learners to make better form-meaning connections by asking them to match paragraphs in a text with appropriate headings or re-organise jumbled texts). As for output harnessing, an example from the primary school Arts and Crafts CLIL class are picture dictation activities where learners describe a drawing to one of their peers who cannot see it and who has to draw it following the description. The completion of this activity requires the use of language forms and structures typically encoding the cognitive discourse function of describing.

The second strategy for doing planned focus on form in CLIL is to create focus on form opportunities through lesson planning and task/activity design. Once more, evidence from second language learning research points at the fact that learners are more likely to pay attention to the language in meaning-focused instruction when the lessons are organised around tasks (Ellis, "Task-Based Language Learning"). We understand by task a real-life activity in which meaning is primary and there is a goal to be reached which involves some kind of outcome or "product" (Skehan 38). Tasks push learners to negotiate for meaning and, in so doing, they become more prone to notice gaps in their linguistic resources when verbalising their knowledge and understanding. Hence, tasks create opportunities for both content and language learning, the ultimate objective of CLIL instruction.

Task-based lesson planning involves three principal phases: 1) the pre-task stage, 2) the task, and 3) the post-task stage (Skehan 53-54). Opportunities for focus on form can occur in each of the stages of a task-based lesson. We can normally plan these opportunities in the pre- and post-task stages. In the pre-task stage, the teacher can try to guide learners' attention to

preselected language features that are useful for the completion of the task or model the task for the learners, with attested benefits for students' L2 fluency (Ellis *ibid.*). Likewise, the teacher can use the post-task stage to plan opportunities for task repetition, which has been shown to have a positive impact on the learners' L2 complexity, accuracy and fluency (Wang). During the task stage, if we abide by the definition of task as a meaning priming activity (Skehan 38), the focus on form should be incidental, for example by dealing with communicative breakdowns or inaccuracies of language use arising during the performance of the task.

Discourse genres can be interwoven in the task-based CLIL lesson to generate opportunities for focus on form. The teacher could identify the discourse genres that are related to the learning objectives and the content topic and then introduce the students to these genres in the pre-task stage through focused communicative activities (Ellis, "Investigating Form-Focused Instruction" 21) targeting language features and functions characteristic of the genres. Moreover, the genres could also be used to create (oral and/or written) output activities in the post-task stage.

To illustrate this point, we present a task sequence from an Arts and Crafts CLIL unit on the technique known as action painting. The task proposed to the primary school learners consisted in painting a feeling or an emotion using the technique of action painting, to be carried out in small groups. The pre-task stage was used to familiarise the students with the painting technique and the life of its main exponent, Jackson Pollock, as well as to model the connection between feelings and painting. For the former, a video presenting Pollock's life and explaining how Pollock performed the action painting technique was played in class. As can be seen in the following excerpt from the transcript of the video, one of the genres used in the video was the procedural recount:

Now in the studio, let's see exactly how Pollock worked. Placing the canvas on the floor, Pollock no longer remained in physical contact with the canvas while painting. Instead of using conventional artist brushes to push or smear paint across the surface of the painting, Pollock now used things like sticks, even turkey basters and dried paint brushes, hard as a rock, that he variously dripped, drizzled, poured,

or splashed paint onto the canvas below him from. Pollock used very fluid alkyd enamel paints, the kind of paint you could paint your car with, the kind of paint you could paint your radiator with. Because the paint was so fluid, Pollock essentially drew in space, so that drawing elements would happen quite literally in the air, before falling down to the canvas below, sometimes thick, sometimes thin, a rhythm of poured paint would develop across the surface of the painting. (The Museum of Modern Art)

The procedural recount is characterised by the past time anchorage and the use of activity verbs, in our case referring to different ways of using paint (*e.g.*, "draw", "push", "smear", "drip", "drizzle", "pour", "splash"). A focused communicative activity was designed around these linguistic cues, which were believed to be relevant for the subsequent task sequence. Students were asked to create a Pictionary with an entry for each of the verbs, including a visual representation and the infinitive and past forms of the verb. According to Skehan, this anticipated language work also increases the salience of the selected language for the learners and, with it, the likelihood that it will be incorporated into their oral/written output as they perform the task (53).

The second pre-task activity consisted in partially modelling the main task by means of a quick activity in which the learners had to decide on a colour to represent feelings such as anger, happiness, or sadness. The students were given dictionaries to look up the English translation of feelings whose name they only knew in Catalan/Spanish. Modelling a task in the pre-task stage is an effective strategy for fostering focus on form because it decreases learners' meaning processing load in the main task stage and frees up attentional capacity for noticing the language that is being used (Van Patten).

In the post-task, the different groups displayed their paintings on the board, next to a number assigned by the teacher. Each group then observed their peers' paintings and wrote on a sheet the feeling they thought each painting represented. After this, the authors of the paintings explained which feeling they had represented in their artwork and how they had achieved this representation (*i.e.*, choice of colours, forms, shapes, technique). The initial predictions were, then, validated or refuted, leading to a debate among the students on the feeling-colour

associations used in the paintings. In our sequence, the post-task stage contains an oral output activity which draws, among others, on the genre of procedural recount that was introduced in the pre-task stage. It creates opportunities for CLIL learners to recycle the lexis of activity verbs and the regular and irregular forms of the past while focusing on meaning transmission. Note, though, that this activity is not a controlled practice of the language features highlighted in the pre-task stage - whether the learners will actually seize the opportunity to use the intended activity verbs in the correct past form is not under the control of the teacher. The focus on form approach is about enhancing the conditions for the learners to notice the language features of the content, with the risk that these features may not come into focus when the learners perform the task. We believe this risk needs to be taken if we want to preserve the dual focus of CLIL instruction and, with it, the meaningfulness of the language learning experience.

Not only the sequence but also the type of tasks that go into it can enhance learners' form awareness in the CLIL class. Research on task-based language learning has shown that production tasks with one or more of the following characteristics promote focus on form: 1) they involve an information gap, 2) they require a two-way exchange (*i.e.*, each of the participants holds some information that the other participant needs to complete the task), 3) they have a closed goal or outcome (*i.e.*, they require students to reach a single, correct solution or one of a small finite set of solutions), 4) they involve collaborative and convergent dialogue between peers (*i.e.*, pair or group work), and 5) they involve different output modalities (*i.e.*, speaking and writing) (Ellis, "Task-Based Language Learning"). Some examples of tasks that comply with these characteristics are "find-the-difference", jigsaw reading, dictogloss or text reconstruction, problem-solving tasks, decision making tasks.

Let us now turn to the second main category of focus on form approaches listed at the beginning of this section, namely incidental focus on form. As already mentioned, this refers to unplanned reactions to linguistic or communicative problems that may arise during the completion of an activity or a task sequence. We outline two strategies of incidental focus on form: pre-

-emptive and reactive focus on form (Ellis, "Investigating Form-Focused Instruction" 22). Both approaches have been shown not to interfere with the primary focus of the lesson on meaning and to induce learners to notice linguistic features that lie outside or at the edges of their developing L2 competence (Lyster and Ranta; Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen).

In the case of pre-emptive focus on form, the teacher (or a learner involved in pair/group work) takes time out from a meaning-focused activity to draw attention to a form that could be problematic. The following is an example of pre-emptive (incidental) focus on form from our Arts and Crafts CLIL class:

"Teacher: If you touch this piece of sandpaper, you will feel it is coarse. *Do you know what coarse means?*"

The reactive focus on form involves providing either implicit or explicit language correction in reaction to inaccurate language use. Typical examples of implicit correction are clarification requests and recasts (*i.e.*, reformulations). We provide an illustration of the two techniques from our Arts and Crafts CLIL class:

1. Clarification request:

Student: I feel hungry.

Teacher: *Do you feel hungry* (putting her hand on her tummy) *or do you feel angry* (showing an angry face)?

Student: Ah! Yes, yes...I feel angry.

2. Recast:

Student: The painting show five children playing in a garden.

Teacher: *shows*.

Student: Yes, it shows.

Finally, explicit correction can also be a reactive (incidental) focus on form technique. An alternative to using metalinguistic explanations is to approach correction in an inductive way, letting learners discover the language problems and attempt to solve them among themselves. In our Arts and Crafts class, the teacher often asked a student to dictate a sentence that contained an error that she would write on the board and then she encouraged the whole class to spot the error and correct it.

4. Conclusion

We hope that the strategies proposed in this paper can be of help to CLIL practitioners everywhere in the challenging task of facilitating both content and language learning. This is no doubt an arduous task but we believe that the focus on form strategies outlined here lead to sustainable content/language integration in CLIL classes. The type of linguistic insight that is needed for their implementation is linked to the disciplinary literacy a content specialist has, as a member of a given field of knowledge. To a certain extent, this type of literacy is "the turf" of the content specialist, more than it is of the language specialist, though the latter may find it easier to activate the necessary language lens. We want content specialists teaching CLIL to feel empowered to address language in their subjects after having read this article.

Maximising the opportunities for focus on form in the CLIL class, whether planned or incidental, is a way to understand how language learning occurs in meaning-focused contexts. Without this understanding, we might be missing out on the language learning potential of CLIL instruction.

Note

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