# PRELIMINARY REFLECTION ON CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING ENGLISH IN A GLOBALISED WORLD

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## Abstract

CLIL has become synonymous with teaching English to non-specialist students in professional and academic (ex. universities) contexts. However, it should not be seen as a unique approach that could be applied to any situation. The present reflection aims to emphasise the importance of social and educational contexts in the shaping of CLIL as a tool for both research and teaching, as a research question. It proposes a plan for research that needs to be collaborative and comparative in its objectives and methodology (action research), which will be followed by the presentation of the expected outcomes.

## Keywords

CLIL • specialised English • contextualisation • comparative approach • action research

## Introduction

Higher education in the 21st century has entered a new phase, where universities worldwide are competing for recognition and funding. Their avowed aim is not only to provide knowledge but also to enhance the employability of its alumni. This resulted in the tacit adoption of one dominant language for the transmission of academic content and know-how [1, p. 122] and such role was predominantly given to English, which is now associated to the expression *lingua franca* and is still fast expanding. The present contribution is a reflection that aims to address the following issue: how the globalisation of higher education is carried out through the medium of English, and how it should be assessed in the field of didactic research, starting with the French higher education context.

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) should not be construed as a universal tool kit for language teachers: it is context-dependent, and varies according to the local institutional conditions, and to the variety of English that needs to be taught (Part 1). One way of assessing the efficiency of CLIL is to carry out a comparative research action in different contexts (countries) and in different branches of CLIL teaching curricula (Part 2). The reflection should ideally show that CLIL influences student motivation in a positive manner (Part 3).

## How CLIL works in France

Since 1999, the Bologna Process¹ has pledged to transform and harmonise the European universities so as to encourage mobility, student participation in the education process, foster the social conditions required to broaden the access to higher education, and promote employability. This paved the way for a two-tier reflection on the development of CLIL: first, the multiplication of syllabi taught through English and open to a wide range of students, and, secondly, the inclusion of foreign language teaching that would comply with the Bologna requirements and the tightening links between all European higher education institutions. For specialists in the didactics of English, the whole issue concerned the objectives of blending content and language acquisition dedicated modules, where language is no longer

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¹The objective of the Bologna Process is to establish a European Education Area - the Upper Bologna Process. Initiated in 1998 by France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom during the Sorbonne Declaration, the process developed in 1999 in Bologna around 29 signatory countries. There are now 48 countries, 5600 institutions and more than 37 million students participating in this European adventure. Designed to promote the mobility, readability and attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Bologna Process is built around 3 main principles: organise studies in 3 cycles (Bachelor - Master - Doctorate); develop tools for academic and professional recognition (ECTS; Diploma Supplement; EQF (European Qualifications Framework)); strengthen the quality approach (http://www.agence-erasmus.fr/page/Experts-de-Bologne).

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central, but becomes a tool that opens access to knowledge and know-how pertaining to other areas of expertise. In that perspective, researchers such as Taillefer, Hellekjaer & Wilkinson, Hellekjaer & Westergaard, Wolff, Stoller & Grabe [2-7] have shown that, in modules where language acquisition and expert knowledge are treated on a par, both benefit, but these endeavours have not become the norm in higher education. Marsh et al. [8] have shown the strong correlation between teaching and learning, which makes it difficult, even for research purposes, to dissociate language skills from teaching skills involved in the process, because they feed off one another in the highest degree. One positive conclusion [9, p. 22] is that such complex method, sustained by a thoroughly well-thought approach to teaching/learning, does not result in more complicated learning and teaching processes.

Academic interest for CLIL/EMILE (in French : Enseignement de Matières par l’Intégration d’une Langue Étrangère) in France is a relatively recent one, and discussions do not really focus on the qualitative aspect of such a teaching/learning process. Some research papers insist on the risk of marginalising languages in higher education, should CLIL be implemented in a haphazard manner. Besides, there has, to this day, not been any global assessment of foreign language teaching policies nationwide, even though this has recently become one major objective in the granting of chairs and positions of assistant professors in higher education. No major study of students and lecturers’ representations in that field has been carried out, so as to identify the needs for a coherent and harmonious public policy on language teaching. English for specific purposes (ESP), in its LANSOD (LANguage for Specialists of Other Disciplines) aspect, is connected to CLIL, and is situated at the crossroad between language and content. It is thus ideally placed as a transdisciplinary mediator between theory and practice. Consequently, implementing CLIL necessitates a thorough reflection on the major features of teaching and learning processes in a non-specialist context, notably on its objectives, and the role of language teachers involved in LANSOD.

**Field research: the ingredients of a methodology**

To start with, a thorough research on the ground should be carried out in the following way: “[…] action research is not so much a research methodology as a way of identifying research projects and priorities. Instead of starting with a “research question” based on previous research and theory, the action researcher starts with a problem with which he or she is faced” [10, p. 263], since “the closer the researcher is to practice, the more difficult the academic position will be” [11, p. 114] through the cycle of action research [11, p. 115]: a problem on the ground is identified, then reflection starts close to the manner in which Pierre Bourdieu defines it as an activity aiming at providing a necessarily simplified representation of reality through descriptors, focusing on relations between properties, for description, explanation or planning purposes [12]. It would help analyse contextualised situations, organise present knowledge and prompt further action and implementation of the results. This guideline will help to:

- identify basic components whose nature has to be defined or clarified;
- identify interfaces between these components, or “places for interaction”;  
- investigate the reflexive impact of interactions on the original nature of each component [13].

The focus will be on contextualisation in terms of “scale, level and object” [14], the three elements of contextualisation considered in interaction. As the observation scales used vary, as the levels of social realities aimed at exist and as the types of facts studied are different, a global view can be achieved [14, p. 227]. Here is the proposed framework for field research and investigation:

1. **Geographical scale**: as researchers and language lecturers, we have easy access to language lecturers intervening in specialised English, to lecturers who teach through English without any particular training to do so in law and science, where some knowledge of subject matter is needed, to students with whom needs assessment can be carried out. This will enable all participants to the present approach to review the local and regional state of the offer of English language.

2. **Level of social reality** (entailing representations, beliefs, knowledge and needs): as the different practices and representations of the actors in our contexts will be considered, an operation of contextualisation is necessary [14, p. 17-18]. In order to interpret the actors’ doings correctly, what the actors involve in their actions (past experiences as competences and dispositions to act, their beliefs) and how each context influences action, and the manner in which it will be taken into account. Then the practices of the actors should be contextualised in global or local contexts.

3. **Object**: it concerns specialised English in terms of language skills, intercultural competences (which includes the domain of specialised English, of the professional culture in which it is used and of didactic practice [2]). Five poles must be considered and further determined in relation to language and teaching/learning: the learner, the teacher, the domain of specialisation, the context, the language and the culture. When speaking about variables, what matters is not the variables *per se* but the connection between them because it is not obvious [15]. The objective of the research is to shape a common theoretical framework based on a comparative study of the
practice of CLIL in different countries with varied educational contexts and traditions. It is therefore a complex approach: the poles in interaction, the tensions, how the poles react/act on one another, how they are defined in relation to one another. The aim is to discover regularities and recurrences in a multidisciplinary approach, which should be used at a later stage to formulate pedagogical methods that would improve English language acquisition using CLIL.

Expected outcome

As discussed above, the whole project on CLIL aims to show that it may change teacher and learner’s perception of the language class in that it includes a variety of implementations, including project-based learning, an approach that is clearly learner-centred, but that also enables students to acquire methods that do not solely concern language acquisition but skills that are of value in a professional environment. Thus, CLIL blends language and communication skills, within the specialised area of study. This is clearly a shift from a traditional conception of the language class (learning English, for example) to a more inclusive context and objectives (learning through English) that imitates real life situations. In that perspective, our research project should ideally measure how CLIL is an incentive to language skills acquisition; moreover, a comparative survey, using questionnaires, interviews and class observations in at least three universities would also contrast several academic contexts across Europe. But achieving better competences is only one aspect of the question. Indeed if CLIL can help learners achieve their objectives, it can only be done if it also modifies their awareness of the acquisition process and measure how to bridge the gap between their current level and what they should do to improve it: this way, language acquisition must be distinguished from the acquisition of learning methods and the affective, psychological dimension that influences acquisition [11]. This leads us to the second aspect of the research project, which concerns societal representations about education and foreign language learning and teaching.

It would be naïve to consider that language learning only concerns they key players in the classroom, i.e. the teacher and the students. In fact the way we learn and teach is closely dependent on mental representations of what education means to the academic institution, society and “civilisation” at large, from a perspective exemplified by Yves Chevallard’s “anthropological theory of the didactic” (ATD). According to this approach, societies exchange, transfer and transform knowledge, data, information, which means that it is essentially didactic. However, each level in the social structure imposes its conditions and constraints on how this knowledge is passed on from one individual to another [16]. In other words, language acquisition does not solely depend on innovative teaching methods like CLIL, but also on the manner in which each country, each academic environment envisages the aims and the methods in that perspective. Given that all the case studies in the project will be based on the observation of CLIL-based teaching and learning, Chevallard’s ATD could be completed and compared to Geert Hofstede’s theory of the four dimensions of culture [17], which may help distinguish one country from another in terms of cultural, anthropological considerations and mental representations.

Conclusion

To conclude, what is at stake in the didactics of foreign languages is not only confined to pedagogical considerations, and research in that domain could benefit considerably from the adoption of a multidisciplinary and comparative approach to education, as exemplified by the Council of Europe’s interest in CLIL as a teaching resource to develop student and worker mobility across the continent of Europe and beyond.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

References


