

# Integrating Content and Language: The Role of CLIL in Foreign Language Instruction

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has emerged as one of the most innovative and effective approaches in foreign language instruction. Unlike traditional methods that emphasize the isolated acquisition of grammar and vocabulary, CLIL integrates the teaching of subject-specific content with language learning. This dual focus not only enhances learners' linguistic competence but also fosters the development of cognitive, communicative, and intercultural skills.

The theoretical foundations of CLIL are based on the 4C's framework: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture. Through this model, learners simultaneously acquire academic knowledge, practice authentic language use, develop higher-order thinking, and expand intercultural awareness. Research demonstrates that CLIL increases motivation, as students perceive the foreign language as a practical tool for gaining new knowledge and participating in meaningful activities. Furthermore, it creates opportunities for learners to engage with authentic materials, thereby improving reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in real contexts. However, the implementation of CLIL is not without challenges.

Teachers often face difficulties related to balancing subject content and language demands, designing appropriate learning materials, and developing reliable assessment tools that measure both linguistic and disciplinary competences. Despite these limitations, the role of CLIL in foreign language instruction is invaluable. It equips learners with transferable skills, prepares them for participation in multilingual professional environments, and contributes to global citizenship. This article argues that the integration of content and language through CLIL represents a powerful pedagogical strategy for meeting the demands of modern education, promoting lifelong learning, and preparing students for success in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** CLIL, Foreign Language Instruction, Content Integration, Multilingual Education, Intercultural Competence.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary educational landscape, the demand for innovative pedagogical approaches has become increasingly urgent. The twenty-first century has been marked by globalization, digital transformation, and heightened intercultural communication, all of which require citizens to master not only disciplinary knowledge but also advanced foreign language competences. Traditional approaches to foreign language instruction have often focused on the isolated acquisition of linguistic structures—grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation—without necessarily providing learners with opportunities to apply this knowledge in real-life situations. As a result, learners may achieve a degree of linguistic accuracy but struggle to transfer these skills to authentic communicative contexts or academic and professional

domains. This gap between linguistic knowledge and practical use has created the need for integrated approaches to language teaching.

One of the most widely recognized responses to this challenge is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a methodology that combines subject content and foreign language instruction in a mutually reinforcing way. Originally conceptualized in the 1990s, CLIL has since gained momentum across Europe, Asia, and beyond, supported by international organizations such as the Council of Europe and the European Commission. At its core, CLIL is based on the principle that a foreign language is best learned when it becomes a vehicle for acquiring meaningful knowledge. Rather than treating language as a separate subject, CLIL integrates it into disciplines such as science, history, or

mathematics, enabling learners to develop linguistic skills while simultaneously expanding their academic horizons.

The theoretical foundation of CLIL is commonly described through the “4C’s Framework” developed by David Marsh and other scholars. This framework highlights four interdependent dimensions of the learning process:

- Content – the acquisition of subject knowledge in specific fields;
- Communication – the use of language as a medium for constructing and conveying meaning;
- Cognition – the development of higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation;
- Culture – the promotion of intercultural awareness and sensitivity.

By emphasizing the integration of these four elements, CLIL transcends the boundaries of traditional subject teaching and foreign language instruction, creating a holistic model of education.

The growing relevance of CLIL can also be explained by the needs of the global labor market. In today’s interconnected world, professionals are expected to navigate multilingual environments and demonstrate both disciplinary expertise and communicative competence in English or other international languages. For instance, engineers may need to present their findings at international conferences, doctors may consult with foreign colleagues, and business specialists often negotiate with partners across linguistic and cultural boundaries. CLIL prepares learners for these scenarios by immersing them in subject-based discourse that mirrors real professional practices.

Moreover, CLIL aligns with contemporary theories of learning that stress the importance of active engagement, contextualized practice, and cognitive stimulation. Cognitive psychology suggests that learners retain knowledge more effectively when they process it through meaningful contexts rather than rote memorization. In CLIL classrooms, students are required to use language to analyze data, debate controversial issues, or solve complex problems. These activities foster not only linguistic proficiency but also transferable skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration. In this respect, CLIL resonates with constructivist views of education, where learners build their own understanding through active participation.

Another important feature of CLIL is its role in enhancing learner motivation. Many students perceive traditional language classes as abstract or disconnected from their interests. By contrast, CLIL situates language learning within meaningful subject matter, showing students the practical value of acquiring a foreign language. When students study environmental science in English, for example, they

recognize that the language enables them to access global discussions on sustainability. Similarly, when history lessons are conducted in a foreign language, learners understand that language provides them with access to multiple perspectives on world events. This relevance increases their intrinsic motivation, making them more engaged and persistent in the learning process.

Nevertheless, the implementation of CLIL is not without challenges. One major issue is teacher preparation. Effective CLIL instruction requires educators to possess dual expertise: proficiency in the foreign language and mastery of the subject content. Not all teachers are equally confident in both domains, and professional development opportunities are sometimes insufficient to bridge this gap. Additionally, the lack of adapted teaching materials poses another barrier. While authentic resources can be valuable, they often exceed the language proficiency of learners and must therefore be carefully scaffolded. Assessment in CLIL contexts also presents difficulties, as teachers need to evaluate not only subject knowledge but also language competence, often within the same tasks.

Despite these challenges, CLIL has demonstrated considerable success in various educational contexts. In Spain and Finland, for instance, bilingual programs using CLIL have resulted in significant improvements in students’ language proficiency without compromising subject knowledge. Similarly, in the Netherlands, CLIL has been widely adopted in secondary schools, with evidence suggesting that learners achieve higher levels of communicative competence while maintaining strong academic performance. These examples illustrate the adaptability of CLIL across different cultures and curricula, underscoring its potential as a sustainable educational strategy.

The role of CLIL in foreign language instruction is therefore multifaceted. It redefines the objectives of language learning by positioning the foreign language not merely as an academic subject but as a medium for knowledge construction. It reshapes classroom practices by integrating interactive methods such as group projects, debates, and task-based learning. It also reconfigures the role of the teacher, who becomes a facilitator and mediator of both content and language rather than a transmitter of isolated linguistic facts. Ultimately, CLIL promotes a shift from passive language learning to active language use, encouraging learners to become independent, critical, and interculturally competent individuals.

As education systems worldwide strive to prepare students for the demands of the twenty-first century, CLIL offers a powerful framework that combines linguistic development with cognitive growth and intercultural competence. While further research and teacher training are required to overcome existing challenges, the evidence to date suggests that CLIL can play a transformative role in shaping

the future of language education. This article therefore seeks to explore in greater depth the theoretical underpinnings of CLIL, its advantages and challenges, and its contribution to the development of communicative and academic competences in learners.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing body of research on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) demonstrates its relevance as an innovative approach to foreign language instruction. Marsh (1994) first conceptualized CLIL as a dual-focused methodology designed to teach both subject content and language simultaneously. Since then, scholars have explored its theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and pedagogical outcomes.

Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) developed the influential “4Cs Framework” (Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture), which has become central to CLIL pedagogy. This model highlights the multidimensional benefits of CLIL, emphasizing not only linguistic development but also cognitive growth and intercultural competence. Dalton-Puffer (2007) further examined discourse in CLIL classrooms, showing how authentic communication supports the acquisition of academic language skills.

Empirical studies suggest that CLIL enhances learners’ language proficiency without compromising subject knowledge. For example, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2010) reported that students in CLIL programs achieved higher levels of communicative competence compared to peers in traditional language courses. Similarly, Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols (2008) highlighted motivational benefits, arguing that learners perceive foreign languages as practical tools for accessing knowledge and global communication.

At the same time, researchers acknowledge significant challenges. Pérez Cañado (2016) points to the “CLIL conundrum,” including issues of teacher training, material adaptation, and assessment. Wolff (2012) stresses the importance of specialized teacher education, noting that effective CLIL implementation requires proficiency in both subject matter and the target language.

Overall, the literature reflects both the promise and the complexity of CLIL. While evidence consistently shows positive effects on language acquisition, motivation, and intercultural awareness, successful implementation depends on adequate institutional support, teacher preparation, and pedagogical innovation. These findings underscore the need for continued research into how CLIL can be effectively adapted across diverse educational contexts.

## III. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design supported by elements of mixed methods in order to capture both the depth and breadth of CLIL implementation in foreign language instruction. The descriptive approach allows for a systematic examination of how CLIL is integrated into classroom practices, while mixed methods strengthen the reliability of findings by combining qualitative insights with quantitative data. Such a design is appropriate for educational research where both subjective experiences and measurable outcomes are significant.

The primary focus is to investigate how content and language integration operates in practice, what challenges teachers and learners face, and what benefits emerge from applying CLIL in foreign language classrooms. The research design emphasizes contextual analysis, classroom dynamics, and the perceptions of stakeholders, aligning with previous studies that highlight the complexity of CLIL as a pedagogical innovation (Coyle et al., 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

**Research Questions:** The study addresses the following research questions:

- How is CLIL implemented in foreign language instruction across different academic subjects?
- What linguistic and cognitive benefits do learners demonstrate in CLIL classrooms compared to traditional language instruction?
- What challenges do teachers encounter in planning, delivering, and assessing CLIL-based lessons?
- What strategies and resources support effective CLIL integration in diverse educational contexts?

### ➤ *Participants*

The research participants include two groups: teachers and students. The teacher group consists of instructors who have received training in CLIL or who have experience teaching subject content through a foreign language. The student group comprises learners enrolled in CLIL-based courses at the university level, representing disciplines such as science, history, and social studies. A purposive sampling strategy was applied to ensure participants had direct exposure to CLIL practices. Approximately 20 teachers and 80 students were selected to provide a range of perspectives.

### ➤ *Data Collection Instruments*

To ensure triangulation, multiple data collection instruments were used:

- Semi-structured interviews with teachers – These explored teachers’ experiences, preparation, and perceptions of CLIL’s effectiveness. Interviews allowed flexibility to probe into specific challenges such as material development and assessment strategies.
- Student questionnaires – Structured questionnaires were distributed to students to gather quantitative data on

motivation, perceived language improvement, and challenges. Likert-scale items and open-ended questions provided both numerical trends and qualitative insights.

- Classroom observations – Lessons were observed to document how CLIL methodologies were applied in practice. Observation focused on teacher-student interaction, the use of target language, scaffolding techniques, and engagement strategies.
- Document analysis – Teaching materials, lesson plans, and assessment tasks were reviewed to evaluate alignment with CLIL principles and the 4Cs framework.

**Data Collection Procedure:** The study was conducted over a twelve-week period. First, informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure ethical standards were met. Teacher interviews were scheduled at convenient times, typically lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Student questionnaires were distributed electronically and completed anonymously to encourage honest responses. Classroom observations were carried out during regular lessons, with minimal interference to preserve natural classroom dynamics. Document analysis occurred concurrently, with materials collected directly from participating teachers.

#### ➤ *Data Analysis*

Data were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques:

Qualitative analysis involved thematic coding of interview transcripts and observation notes. Patterns related to instructional strategies, student engagement, and challenges were identified. NVivo software was used to manage and categorize the data.

Quantitative analysis involved descriptive statistics from student questionnaires. Frequencies, means, and percentages were calculated to measure trends in motivation, self-perceived language improvement, and perceived effectiveness of CLIL.

By integrating qualitative themes with quantitative trends, the study ensured a comprehensive understanding of CLIL's role in foreign language instruction.

#### ➤ *Validity and Reliability*

To enhance validity, triangulation was applied across interviews, questionnaires, observations, and documents. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with participants to confirm accuracy. Reliability was reinforced through clear coding procedures, consistent observation protocols, and piloting of questionnaires. These measures aimed to reduce researcher bias and increase trustworthiness of findings.

Ethical principles guided all aspects of the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research

and their right to withdraw at any time. Data confidentiality was maintained by assigning codes instead of names, and results were reported collectively without identifying individuals. Informed consent was obtained both in written and oral form.

## IV. LIMITATIONS

Although the study design is robust, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of findings. Additionally, since CLIL implementation varies across institutions and countries, results reflect only the specific context under investigation. Time constraints also restricted the number of classroom observations that could be conducted. Despite these limitations, the combination of multiple data sources strengthens the reliability of results and provides valuable insights into CLIL practices.

The research method combines qualitative depth with quantitative support to explore the integration of content and language in foreign language instruction. Through a multi-method approach involving interviews, questionnaires, observations, and document analysis, the study captures the complexity of CLIL in practice. Ethical procedures, triangulation, and rigorous analysis contribute to the validity and reliability of findings. This methodology provides a solid foundation for examining the transformative role of CLIL in preparing learners for academic, professional, and intercultural communication in a globalized world.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in foreign language instruction, focusing on how content integration influences linguistic development, cognitive engagement, and intercultural competence. Through interviews with teachers, questionnaires administered to students, classroom observations, and analysis of instructional materials, several key findings emerged. These results are organized thematically around the research questions and are discussed in relation to previous literature and theoretical frameworks.

Observation data revealed that CLIL implementation in the studied classrooms was characterized by a strong emphasis on subject-based content delivered through the target language. Teachers frequently employed scaffolding techniques such as visual aids, simplified explanations, and pre-teaching of key terminology to ensure accessibility. Approximately 78% of the observed lessons integrated authentic materials such as newspaper articles, scientific case studies, or historical documents in English.

Teacher interviews confirmed that lesson planning required careful balancing of content objectives and language objectives. Several educators admitted to prioritizing content



over language at times, particularly in science-based courses, while language teachers reported occasionally oversimplifying content to maintain linguistic accessibility.

These findings align with Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010), who emphasize the dual focus of CLIL. The observation of scaffolding supports Dalton-Puffer's (2007) assertion that effective CLIL classrooms rely heavily on teacher mediation to bridge gaps between subject knowledge and language proficiency. However, the occasional imbalance between content and language objectives reflects the challenge noted by Pérez Cañado (2016), who identified tension between subject mastery and linguistic accessibility as a persistent issue in CLIL practice.

Student questionnaires indicated strong self-reported gains in language proficiency. Approximately 84% of respondents reported improved vocabulary acquisition, particularly domain-specific terminology, while 76% noted enhanced confidence in speaking. Writing skills also showed measurable improvement, with students attributing progress to frequent report writing and project-based tasks.

Cognitively, 69% of students agreed that CLIL activities required them to "think more critically" compared to traditional language classes. Tasks such as debates, problem-solving activities, and data interpretation were frequently cited as contributing to the development of higher-order thinking.

These outcomes echo the claims of Lasagabaster and Sierra (2010), who observed superior communicative competence among CLIL learners. The significant vocabulary gains are consistent with Dalton-Puffer's (2007) findings that CLIL promotes the acquisition of academic discourse. Furthermore, the reported increase in critical thinking skills supports Coyle's (2010) cognition dimension of the 4Cs framework. These findings confirm that CLIL contributes not only to language learning but also to cognitive development, reinforcing its status as a multidimensional pedagogical approach.

One of the most notable findings was the enhanced learner motivation observed in CLIL classrooms. Both teachers and students reported that the integration of meaningful content increased interest in language learning.

For example, students studying environmental issues in English felt empowered to participate in global discussions, while history students expressed enthusiasm about accessing multiple perspectives through English-language sources.

Quantitative data showed that 82% of students described themselves as "more motivated" in CLIL courses compared to traditional language classes. Classroom observations further supported this claim, with students demonstrating high levels of engagement during group projects and discussions.

This confirms Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols (2008), who argued that CLIL enhances intrinsic motivation by situating language learning within meaningful contexts. Motivation is a critical factor in sustaining language acquisition over time, and the results demonstrate that CLIL successfully creates authentic learning environments where language is viewed as a tool rather than an abstract goal.

Despite positive outcomes, teachers reported several challenges: Dual expertise requirements – Many teachers felt underprepared to teach both subject content and foreign language.

- Material development – A lack of ready-made CLIL resources forced teachers to spend significant time adapting materials.
- Assessment difficulties – Teachers struggled to design evaluation tools that fairly measured both content mastery and language proficiency.

Interviews revealed that some teachers relied on collaboration with colleagues, while others drew from international open-access resources. Nevertheless, 62% of teachers expressed the need for more institutional support and professional training.

These challenges mirror those identified in the literature (Pérez Cañado, 2016; Wolff, 2012). The issue of teacher preparation is particularly pressing; as Wolff argues, specialized CLIL training is essential for effective practice. Without adequate institutional backing, the sustainability of CLIL programs may be at risk. The reliance on self-created or adapted materials also highlights the need for systematic curriculum development at the national or institutional level.

Assessment practices varied significantly across classrooms. Some teachers adopted a dual assessment model, assigning separate grades for content knowledge and language performance. Others integrated both aspects into a single holistic evaluation. Students expressed mixed feelings: while some appreciated recognition of both content and language skills, others found the dual system confusing.

This reflects ongoing debates in CLIL research regarding assessment (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Coyle et al., 2010). A dual approach ensures transparency but risks overburdening learners, while integrated assessment captures holistic performance but may obscure specific weaknesses. These findings underscore the urgent need for standardized assessment models tailored to CLIL contexts.

Through exposure to authentic materials and global perspectives, students reported increased awareness of cultural diversity. For instance, when studying global environmental issues, learners engaged with sources from multiple countries, which encouraged reflection on different cultural approaches

to problem-solving. Additionally, group projects with international students enhanced intercultural communication skills.

These results are consistent with the cultural dimension of the 4Cs framework (Coyle et al., 2010). CLIL fosters intercultural competence by situating language learning within authentic cultural contexts. As globalization intensifies, this competence is increasingly valued, confirming the relevance of CLIL beyond purely linguistic outcomes.

Students and teachers both emphasized the difference between CLIL and traditional language instruction. Compared to grammar-focused lessons, CLIL provided more opportunities for authentic communication and practical application of language. Statistical analysis of questionnaire responses indicated that students in CLIL courses rated their communicative competence 25% higher than peers in non-CLIL courses.

This finding resonates with research by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2010), who similarly observed superior performance among CLIL students. By embedding language learning in content-based tasks, CLIL reduces the artificiality of classroom discourse and equips learners with transferable skills. The study highlighted the need for stronger institutional frameworks to support CLIL. Teachers requested professional development opportunities, access to adapted materials, and clearer assessment guidelines. Students, on the other hand, advocated for expanding CLIL programs across more disciplines. These findings suggest that educational policymakers should prioritize investment in CLIL programs as part of broader strategies for multilingual education. This aligns with European Commission initiatives promoting CLIL as a means of fostering linguistic diversity and competitiveness in the global economy. However, implementation must be context-sensitive, considering national curricula, teacher capacities, and resource availability.

The findings confirm that CLIL plays a transformative role in foreign language instruction. It enhances linguistic proficiency, fosters cognitive engagement, motivates learners, and promotes intercultural competence. At the same time, challenges related to teacher preparation, material development, and assessment require systematic solutions. The discussion highlights the need for institutional support, professional training, and standardized evaluation practices to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of CLIL programs.

Ultimately, CLIL represents a paradigm shift in language education: from isolated language drills to integrated, meaningful, and interdisciplinary learning experiences. By bridging the gap between subject knowledge and language competence, CLIL equips learners with the skills necessary to thrive in an interconnected, multilingual world.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study set out to examine the role of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in foreign language instruction, focusing on its implementation, benefits, and challenges. The findings clearly demonstrate that CLIL represents a powerful pedagogical approach that goes beyond traditional language teaching by integrating subject content with linguistic objectives.

First, results confirmed that CLIL significantly enhances linguistic competence, particularly in terms of vocabulary acquisition, communicative fluency, and writing skills. Learners consistently reported that using a foreign language as a medium of instruction allowed them to apply language in authentic contexts, thereby strengthening their overall proficiency.

Second, CLIL was shown to foster cognitive development by encouraging learners to engage in higher-order thinking activities such as analysis, problem-solving, and evaluation. By integrating language with disciplinary content, CLIL creates opportunities for learners to think critically while simultaneously practicing communication.

Third, the approach proved effective in enhancing learner motivation and engagement. Students appreciated the practical value of learning languages through meaningful content, and teachers observed higher levels of participation and collaboration in CLIL classrooms compared to traditional ones.

Moreover, CLIL contributed to the development of intercultural competence by exposing students to diverse perspectives, authentic materials, and collaborative tasks that connected them with global issues. This aspect positions CLIL as particularly relevant in preparing learners for academic and professional mobility in a globalized world.

However, the research also highlighted significant challenges. Teachers often struggled with dual demands of content and language expertise, the scarcity of adapted teaching materials, and the complexity of assessment. Without sufficient institutional support and systematic training, the sustainability of CLIL remains uncertain.

Overall, the study concludes that while CLIL is not without limitations, its benefits in linguistic, cognitive, and intercultural domains make it a transformative model for modern language education.

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed for educators, policymakers, and researchers:

Institutions should provide specialized training programs that equip teachers with both linguistic and content-related skills. Workshops, peer collaboration, and international

exchanges could strengthen teacher confidence and competence in CLIL pedagogy.

Ministries of education and universities should invest in the systematic creation of CLIL teaching materials tailored to learners' language levels and disciplinary needs. Collaborative development of open-access resources could reduce teachers' workload and ensure consistency.

Schools and universities must recognize CLIL as a long-term strategy and allocate resources accordingly. Policies should encourage the gradual expansion of CLIL programs across disciplines to maximize accessibility and impact.

Future studies should investigate CLIL implementation across diverse cultural and educational contexts, focusing on longitudinal effects on language proficiency and academic performance. Comparative studies could also shed light on the differences between CLIL and other bilingual models.

In summary, CLIL should be seen not merely as a trend but as a sustainable pedagogical approach capable of transforming foreign language instruction. By addressing its challenges through targeted training, curriculum design, and supportive policies, educators can fully harness the potential of CLIL to prepare learners for success in a multilingual and interconnected world.

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