# Investigating the Use of Code Switching in CLIL

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## Abstract

*Language learning is much more effective when linked to meaningful content. Among all the language learning approaches resting upon the notion of CLIL (content and language integrated learning) it has been proven that the benefits of bilingual or even multilingual education are great in number - whether it is the promotion of dual or multiple literacy, an intensified empathy, openness, tolerance or acceptance of cultural and linguistic diversity. Some areas in this field remain to be explored or raise controversial questions.*

*This paper explores the status and use of code switching in content and language integrated learning and teaching.*

*The issue is whether code switching, a moderate use presupposed, can be integrated in an intelligent way to foster the students' L2 acquisition process.*

*Learning a second language presumes being exposed to a constant input in the L2. This certainly applies to the second language learning classroom as well. Nevertheless L2 input can be halted to enhance understanding when conveying meaning sometimes seems to lead to a cul-de-sac due to a lack of certain bricks in the second language system. In such a context codeswitching can be time-saving and maintaining students' motivation.*

*Code switching can also be helpful for all those learners with a low self-esteem and an anxiety to perform in the foreign language. Over a certain time the L2 is considered to be a constant 'partner' in the learning process but the anchor of L1 is helpful and affirming.*

*The paper investigates the issue with regard to my own experience in the CLIL setting of a primary school in the South-Western part of Germany. Additionally, language teachers' opinions towards code switching in L2 learning have been evaluated at several schools in this region.*

## 1. Introduction

In 2011, Primary School St. Laurentius initiated a bilingual German/English program and since then has attained a remarkable level of L2 achievement of their students learning English as a foreign language. The topic of this paper, i.e investigating code switching (henceforth CS) in CLIL, raised more and more interest as the bilingual program at St. Laurentius evolved. Beyond that, it seems to be a phenomenon in many foreign language classrooms. And the question that inevitably comes to the fore refers to the issue as to how language teachers actually cope with this phenomenon.

In this context, a strong controversy can be found. Proponents of the L2-only argument claim that the foreign language is best taught monolingually, and that switching between the codes intervenes in a negative way in the overall L2 acquisition process.

But there is another side of the coin as well. There is also quite a number of researchers and professionals in the field who bring to the fore the benefits of code switching in the foreign language classroom. The following assumption should be central to the discussion:

*Code switching, a moderate use presupposed, can be integrated in an appropriate way to foster students' L2 acquisition process.*

It is hoped that teachers and professionals with a pejorative or adverse attitude towards CS will re-evaluate their opinion and recognize the values of CS in the acquisition of a foreign language.

The main focus of this paper will be laid upon the functions and valuable outcomes of teachers' CS, The arguments for underpinning my assumption are based on my own experience in the foreign language classroom with regard to the school setting mentioned before. Additionally, language teachers' opinions towards code switching were examined by means of a questionnaire. Its results will be briefly summarized at the end.

## 2. Background
### 2.1 Code switching and L2 input in a bilingual CLIL setting

According to Pfaff [1], code switching can be defined as "the use of more than one linguistic variety (language or dialect) by a single speaker in the course of a single conversation" (1997: 344).

With regard to the foreign language classroom, CS can be considered one of the interlanguage communication strategies which learners use to organize their message appropriately in order to avoid communication problems [2, (p.6)]. Furthermore it should be kept in mind, that CS is a natural phenomenon in any bilingual or multilingual society. Some of the functions of CS in a natural context are similar and applicable to the language learning classroom (cf. Sert [3]).

As Gass and Mackey state, L2 input is the "*sine qua non* of acquisition" ([4], 2007: 177). Generally, in a bilingual classroom setting the role of the first language, L1, and the role of the foreign language, L2, are certainly of equal importance and can be easily combined into one single teaching lesson. CLIL education, defined as Content and Language Integrated Learning, uses the L2 to learn the subject matter rather than learning the L2 per se. ([5], 2012). The foreign language serves as the medium through which subject matter is attained. Nevertheless L1 is also embedded depending on the context. For example, in so called tandem lessons, when two teachers (L1and L2) act in class, L1 is used by the L1 teacher for further clarification.

The role of CS in a bilingual CLIL language learning context is particularly important when there is a high ratio of L2 to L1 input, which is the case most of the time. Should we then consider CS as interference or enrichment?

## 2.2 Controversy

When it comes to CS in a CLIL context a lot of researchers and teachers firmly adhere to the monolingual principle. They oppose any form of L1 use in the foreign language setting. As Rosa M. Fernandéz [6] points out, very often "code switching, [...], is interpreted as a linguistic deficit that reveals the lack of proficiency of the speaker in both languages." (2002: 3). Teachers likewise hold a similar position in a sense that they consider monolingual input the only viable way towards learning a foreign language.

It seems to be the case that the functions of CS in social domains (family, work place, peer-group, etc.) are similar to what can be identified in the foreign language classroom.

Following, I would like to discuss some of the major functions of CS which can be observed on the part of the teacher's performance (cf. [7], 1999, Mattsson and Burenhult).

## 3. Functions of CS in the bilingual CLIL classroom

### 3.1 Topic switch

Teachers may use CS when new or complex topics such as grammatical or lexical forms are introduced. They alternate their code to attract students' attention and to build a bridge from "the known to the unknown" as Sert puts it [3, p. 2]. Teachers thus ease the communicative challenge by trying to help students not to miss important subject matter content.

### 3.2  Affection

When teachers code switch they often do so to build rapport or solidarity and intimate relations with the students ([8], p. 128). Thus they avoid the emergence of negative emotions for the students which may influence the motivation to learn ([9], p. 209). Furthermore, fear to fail in expressing oneself properly in the L2 or of making mistakes may cause cognitive processes that reduce the necessary attention to fulfill a task in L2. This kind of reduced attention in turn impairs information processing ([9], p. 210). To avoid such effects it is reasonable for teachers to engage in code-switching in order to affirm the respective student and instill confidence over time.

## 4. Repetition - Reiteration

Sert [3] explains that teachers use CS in a repetitive way to transfer the necessary knowledge for the students for clarity. In this way he stresses importance on the foreign language content to be properly processed and comprehended ([3], p. 3). Sert admonishes negative behavioral consequences on the part of the students. It is generally known that second language learners who are expecting a translation of L2 content by the teacher will show less effort to concentrate on L2 input ([5], p. 3). This will surely have negative consequences on L2 acquisition due to a reduced L2 input that principally has to be rich. A moderate use of CS therefore may be a prerequisite to attain positive outcomes.

When ideally using CS as a sandwich method - which means reiterating in L1, and immediately switching back to L2, repeating the same word, phrase or sentence again - this line of action can have positive results on the L2 item or content. Although the cognitive processing load is higher, students are afforded "deeper processing opportunities" than when they are only provided with L2 definitions ([10], Marcaro 2009). In a study by Macaro and Tian 2012 (quoted in Lin [11], 2013: 13) they investigated the effect of teacher CS on L2 vocabulary acquisition during listening comprehension activities in a lexical Focus-on Form context. The results of the study showed that focus on form to

more proficient vocabulary learning is more of an advantage than a mere incidental exposure ([11], p. 13,14).

### 4.1 Time saving and motivation

In every CLIL education classroom the situation inevitably occurs that conveying meaning sometimes seems to lead to a cul-de-sac due to a lack of certain bricks (phonological, grammatical, lexical) in the second language system. The teacher quickly has to decide whether to paraphrase L2 content or reiterate it by switching to L1 as the anchor of learners' experience. Furthermore, the students' emotional and psychological condition is important in such a context. When there is an overall small level of tolerance towards anything that comes up to them in such a context, then CS may become time-saving and also maintain students' motivation. A situation more than once could be observed when students responded to teachers' L2 input saying: "Können Sie das bitte auf Deutsch sagen!"

A number of questionnaires were distributed to teachers of CLIL education in order to comprehend their practices towards the status and use of CS.

### 4.2 Colleagues assumptions

The Findings of the questionnaires can be summarized as follows.

The majority of the questioned teachers agree to the general assumption, that CS, a moderate use presupposed, can be integrated in an appropriate way to foster students' L2 acquisition process.

Some remain uncertain and differentiate between the situations when CS might be of advantage and when not. Others reject the integration of CS in the CLIL classroom setting.

Referring to the question whether CS can be time-saving and maintaining students' motivation the proponents consented to this assumption. The aspect of saving valuable time to continue learning was very important to some. For others, saving time should not be top priority. Sometimes it is worth losing time, because the gain is much more sustainable. The students will learn to be tenacious and make an effort. This aspect is important and is in accord with this paper's assumption that CS should be used moderately.

As far as the affective aspect of CS is concerned different opinions can be found. Basically all of those questioned and positively disposed of CS agree to the above mentioned effects. But they do also claim that the use of CS for affective reasons has constantly to be decreased during the learning process and the different levels of L2 performance. Furthermore it is claimed that not the teacher should use CS for affective reasons but the other classmates, who have a good level of speaking performance and a strong self-esteem.

Moreover a number of teachers think that the reiteration function of CS plays a key role. They list some of the reasons shown above why reiteration is important. Above all, reiteration is used to reinforce L2 important input. Additionally reiteration is used to work out technical terms in L1 that are important to know.

The results of the questionnaire were a little unexpected when considering the general attitude towards CS in language learning settings. More practitioners have to be asked to get a better insight in the actual integration of CS in foreign language learning. But the statements of the questioned teachers confirm the assumption of this paper.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has shown that CS is considered to be a viable strategy in bilingual discourse and especially for the purpose of foreign language instruction. CS is not detrimental to a child's cognitive development in either of the two languages. On the contrary, a modest amount of code switching is considered to be enriching the student's performance in a foreign language. Concluding, CS is not an impediment but instead a resource for learning a new language.

My own teaching experience in bilingual CLIL classrooms has shown that a free choice of language has stimulated more and more students to voluntarily and spontaneously switch into L2 (English) although it would have been much easier for them to relay their message in L1. This shows that my way of handling CS in the CLIL classroom was appropriate.

Let me conclude by referring to a quote by Cole ([11], p.11) which summarizes the issue truly suitable: "A teacher can exploit students' previous L1 learning experience to increase their understanding of L2".

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