



The Benefits of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) to Higher Education

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Abstract

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is the approach endorsed by the European Commission to teach content through a second language. Therefore, this methodology has boosted within bilingual contexts at all educational levels across Europe. The 4C's that define CLIL (Content, Cognition, Culture and Competence) must be deeply interwoven for a successful implementation of the approach. Nevertheless, its accomplishment within Higher Education is still a long way from positive outcome due to the inherent features of University teaching: syllabuses where content is prioritised; coordination among lecturers, departments and knowledge areas, which is difficult to achieve; and the lack of implementation of Integrated Didactic Units (IDUs). This paper will analyse the benefits of overcoming such difficulties for European bilingual University Degrees.

Keywords: CLIL, Higher Education, benefits

1. Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is the European methodological approach for bilingual education, officially endorsed by the European Commission. Marsh defined CLIL as: "... a generic umbrella term which would encompass any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint curricular role." (Marsh, 2002: 58) [1]. This approach to bilingual education promotes the teaching of content through a foreign language, where the interaction of 'the four Cs' (Coyle, 2008) [2] - *Content, Cognition, Communication and Culture* - makes both effective and efficient the learning process (Marsh, Maljers and Hartiala, 2001 [3]; Coyle, 2007 [4]).

This study will analyse the CLIL approach in Higher Education (HE, henceforth) through teaching, learning, and the implementation of programmes. We will pay special attention to the special features and the difficulties they convey in this educational stage. Our main conclusions will be drawn from such analysis, stating the benefits that the implementation of a CLIL approach entails for HE within 21st century society.

2. CLIL teaching and CLIL teachers in HE

The teaching process is one of the key elements at every educational process, whose quality is essential for the accomplishment of its goals. Chen *et al.* (2014: 37-38) [5] discuss largely the quality of teaching in HE, establishing the rationale of their argument as: "... the quality of higher education should be planned to execute its operation and management systematically".

Teaching under a CLIL approach is, by far, a more difficult task in HE than teaching in the first language (if/when the context is not a bilingual country). Martín del Pozo (2013: 202) [6] identifies three main complexities that affect the job of HE CLIL teachers:

- a. The overwhelming predominance of the English language;
- b. HE teachers teach mostly content, not the language;
- c. A high level of heterogeneity can be found regarding the implementation of CLIL programmes in HE. Such heterogeneity can be found, even, within the CLIL approach. For example, Greere and Räsänen (2008) [7] distinguish between 'partial CLIL' (courses that are offered by subject specialists where language learning is expected to take place due just to exposure), and 'adjunct CLIL' (courses in which language studies are coordinated with or integrated in subject studies). These terms describe different degrees of integration and stages that can be met at Higher Education.

Another factor that must be taken into account within this new paradigm is the internationalisation of HE, which meets the educational goals for the 21st century as well as the educational policies at supra-national levels, including culture and intercultural skills (Knight, 2003) [8]. To prepare students for an international mobility, HE teachers need to be aware that linguistic skills need to be interwoven

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with the knowledge of the content subjects they deliver; this, inextricably attached to intercultural skills, is to a great extent what students will need to pass their subjects abroad successfully. Kahn and Agnew (2015: 10) [9] state: “An increasing number of universities specifically pursue global learning as a component of their internationalization plans. However, if global learning is a strategic priority for institutions of higher education, then a new way of doing academic work must evolve”.

Finally, lesson planning within a CLIL context demands a high level of coordination among teachers, where the joint acquisition of linguistic and non-linguistic skills must be the academic objective. One of the main difficulties herein is that such coordination is not an easy task in HE, as Universities and Colleges are generally large places where second language teachers and content teachers do not share a common space. This hampers the design of Integrated Didactic Units (IDUs) (Gómez *et al.*, 2017) [10].

Finally, lecturing in CLIL is just one of the teaching methods, but being this a learner-centred approach, a more participative role of the students is usually recommended.

3. Learning within CLIL contexts

Learning within a CLIL context entails a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic skills, as well as a big dose of motivation by the learner, though studies in this area are still scarce. The learning process becomes a complex factor, which Llinares and Morton (2017: 3) [11] describe as: “... the practical problems of language, communication, content and learning in the context of CLIL can be identified, analysed and potentially solved by applying theories, methods, and findings of linguistics.” One of the four Cs that describe CLIL corresponds to cognition, which makes reference to the variety of learning styles that CLIL teachers need to take into consideration. It entails the coordinated work of teachers to devise appropriate criteria and devise purposeful materials for their lesson planning. This is, once again, an added difficulty for CLIL within HE, as lecturing is the most common and traditional teaching method among content teachers, who do not understand: a. why they must teach a language; b. how they will teach a language, as they lack the necessary training to do it properly (Martín del Pozo, 2013) [6].

Connected to this we find communication, one of the 4 Cs described by Coyle (2008) [2]. Cooperative Learning (CL) is one of the most recommended strategies within CLIL, as it fosters communication, empathy and the development of intercultural skills among students (= culture as another C from Coyle, 2008 [2]). HE CLIL teachers generally lack the time to implement such techniques as the delivery of content is prioritized to that of the language. But data show that “... with CL techniques students got better global results because they acquired a deeper understanding of the material.” (Estébanez, 2017: 1331) [12].

4. The implementation of CLIL programmes

The implementation of CLIL programmes in HE faces the difficulty of the heterogeneity described by Martín del Pozo (2013) [6]. Most European countries lack a national educational policy that can offer common and institutionalized guidelines for the implementation of a HE CLIL programme. Its most direct consequence is that HE students hardly find a uniform CLIL University Degree; rather they choose isolated subjects for their curricula that are delivered in a second language (mostly English) (Gámez Fernández, 2016) [13].

5. Discussion

The scenario described up to now seems quite pessimistic and, in fact, it is. The good news here is that a lot can (and should) be done to improve. The benefits of the implementation of CLIL in HE can be summarized as:

- I. CLIL requires coordination among teachers. This process can help to solve overlapping and repetition of contents in the curriculum of University Degrees, which is a common issue for many European HE institutions (Rué, 2007: 50) [14].
- II. CLIL entails the use of a second language to the teaching of content subjects. The commandment of a second language within the context of a specific University Degree will improve:
 - a. Internationalization for both institutions and students.
 - i. The institutions will find a coherent and standardized way to establish purposeful mobility programmes.
 - ii. Students will benefit from a better knowledge of their professions in different languages and cultures. This will also improve their intercultural skills.



- b. **Job opportunities** for students, who will be able to access the international job market due to the commandment of the linguistic skills to develop their profession abroad.
- III. CLIL requires an institutionalized implementation in HE, which provides the desired homogeneity in the approach to offer “a clear and coherent pedagogy” (Cenoz, Genesee and Gorter, 2013: 13) [15] among the European HE institutions.

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