

CLIL, English teachers and the three dimensions of content

I'm a CLIL militant, and I confess that militants can be a tiresome breed - spreading their educational gospel and chivvying those around them to see the light. CLIL - an acronym conceived in the deep forests of Finland in 1994 and delivered to the world by an ever-expanding but largely voluntary band of teacher enthusiasts - has suffered ever since for this very reason, as if its converts and sirens were so convinced of its efficacy that they really had no need to prove their point. As a consequence, the world of language teaching has often sailed by regardless, without even strapping itself to the mast. Nevertheless, beware of the CLIL sirens. They're always around. There are tales of language teachers swimming for the shores of CLIL, to never return. Whatever happened to the poor things once they reached the shore and disappeared into the strange world of content and language, seduced by false claims of pedagogic wonders and wizardry?

Like an awkward truth that we would prefer not to acknowledge, CLIL still exists on the margins of ELT consciousness, never quite convincing the mainstream, occasionally acknowledged by IATEFL and TESOL, but more often than not remaining huddled in some corner of the conference, minding its own business and doing its own thing. The bigger publishers have made some inroads, risking a few niche-market subject textbooks in those countries where CLIL is extending by virtue of top-down political legislation (e.g. Italy and Spain), but by and large the ELT version of CLIL remains a tepid phrase tacked onto the back-cover blurb of English language textbooks – a speculative nod to the market but rarely a clear and true representation of what CLIL could really be for language teachers. And it could be something significant, if only the two worlds (subject teaching and language teaching) could build a few secure bridges over which practitioners could pass every day, learning from each other. Indeed – there is still a lot to learn. If CLIL has taught us anything, it has lain bare the worrying existence of a chasm in understanding between language and subject teachers. As Captain Jack Sparrow remarked on various occasions – ‘not good’.

The title of this article may make the prospect of reading it rather frightening, but fear not. At least it should have tickled your curiosity. CLIL is in dire need of de-mystification, and its alleged threat to the jobs of English teachers should be burned on the bonfire of myths that this little four-letter acronym has engendered since its eclectic birth twenty years ago, hauled from the melting-pot of content-based approaches that had been developing during the 1980s. And what is CLIL really? Why can't it just go away and leave us all in language-textbook peace? Why should it be of any interest to the language-teaching world? We're doing very nicely thank you. Why come along and complicate matters so?

CLIL and Competences

The reason is the emergence of competences. Whatever competences are – and there is precious little agreement as to their precise nature – we know that they represent our future. We know that previous paradigms of education are unlikely to be of use to the emerging generation, because of the complex and unpredictable challenges it will face. Parsing sentences may be attractive to some, and a series of lessons on the distinction between the Past Simple and the Present Perfect may stimulate others, but none of it

will save the world. What we need are students who can *perform*, who can *act* – in accordance to a given situation. They will need to identify objectives, adjust their message to the nature of their audience, and employ the appropriate media. Such is the framework of a competence, and CLIL-based methodology is much closer to this practice than is conventional language teaching. That much is obvious, because CLIL was never intended to be a language-teaching approach in the first place. It still isn't. CLIL is the incarnation of what David Graddol called a 'core skill' in 1996, in his prescient book 'English Next'. Graddol wrote that English – because of its spread and dominance - was no longer a language but a core skill whose absence in the repertoire of learners 'disabled' them, not only in terms of their employment prospects but also in the simple matter of their chances of getting along in the world - of being able to access information and communicate.

Graddol was right, but the world has changed again since 2006. People are no longer learning languages for the love of being multilingual, but rather, to use Graddol's own phrase, 'to do something else with'. We live in instrumental times, and English, as is the case with other languages, is a vehicle for our existence and our prospects, more so than in any other period of human history. Multilingual people have always prospered, given a reasonable set of conditions, but now we are moving into a phase of human development where we recognise not only the practical use of speaking several languages, but also the cognitive and pragmatic abilities that this condition might confer. This is surely what we mean by *competences*.

Doing things with languages

When CLIL eventually disappears as an acronym, probably within the next ten years, then it will be a good sign. It will mean that the simple competence of '*doing things with language(s)*' has finally arrived. It will mean that of the original eight key lifelong competences proposed by the European Parliament in 2006, the rather vague and old-fashioned key competence 'communication in foreign languages' will also disappear, and then the world will change. Languages are no longer things to be picked apart, dissected and talked about (except in academic circles, where it is perfectly valid) but rather to be used. As a retired Uruguayan English teacher once told me over coffee at a conference on CLIL in Montevideo, her eight year-old grandson had told her the previous day that he 'liked' English at school. On asking him why he liked it, the boy declared '*¡Porque hacemos cosas!*' (Because we do things!). Precisely. That's what happens in CLIL. The learners 'do things'.

12 year-old CLIL students in the Basque Country also 'do things' in English lessons!



8 Planning activity 'WE'VE GOT TALENT' MUSIC CONTEST: PLANNING

What are we going to do at the end of this unit? Hold a music contest at your school, of course!



WHAT?

1. What will you have to do? Here are the main things you will need to do for the contest. Put the sentences into the correct columns of the table.

- a) Introduce yourselves 'live' on stage
- b) Adapt a song
- c) Form a group of 3 or 4 persons
- d) Record a video of your group's autobiography
- e) Perform the song that you have adapted
- f) Be the jury for another group's performance
- g) Be the audience for the performance

Why do they do things? Because when you're teaching what is called 'Hard CLIL' (teaching a school subject entirely through an additional language), you immediately realise that you cannot do it in the same way as you teach in the L1, for all that you may be an enlightened practitioner. You begin to talk less in the L2, because you realise that you may not be understood, and the axis of the lesson shifts from you to the students. It's the first methodological step that a CLIL teacher takes. From thereon, all didactic considerations swivel on the axis of this truth. The less the teacher speaks, the more the students intervene – as long as the conditions are right. The teacher begins to understand the crucial role of *language support*. But we're talking about the biology teacher, the history teacher, the science teacher. They are up and 'CLIL-ing', and they never look back. They understand, often better than language teachers, the role of language in cognition. They do not become language teachers themselves – that is not what they are paid to do – but they do understand how to make key language *salient*. They understand that to explain the process of photosynthesis, the students will need the language of process. They understand that if they ask their students to discuss the importance of Marxism, they may need to provide them with some political discourse (and concepts!). They understand that if they want their students to suggest how to save the world from global warming by pretending to be 'President for a day', then the students will require the 2nd Conditional with which to frame their proposals:

'If I were president of the world, I would reduce carbon emissions. I would reduce the consumption of meat, and I would legislate to stop the cutting down of the rainforests....etc'

In effect, the objective of this 'Hard CLIL' science lesson above is to save the world, by using the 2nd Conditional. Getting the structure right, and explaining yourself clearly to your peers (with all those annoying 'prosodic features' that Cambridge exams insist on) suddenly takes on a new importance. 'Saving the world' is a good objective.

And that is where we return to language teachers. In an ELT textbook, the chapter on Global Warming will undoubtedly exist, because it is topical at almost every cognitive and linguistic level. However, the objective of the lesson/sequence will invariably be described in the contents map at the beginning of the book as 'The 2nd Conditional'. This presumably means that the students will be assessed on their ability to use this structure. Fair enough for the purposes of the end-of-term exam, but the student may well reflect - who cares about saving the world from global warming? I can use the 2nd Conditional accurately and appropriately. What else matters?

All language teachers are content teachers

It remains an interesting irony that subject teachers have been exhorted, ever since the famous Bullock Report in 1975, to become proto-language teachers in the 'Language across the curriculum' movement, whilst language teachers have never been exhorted to understand the world of content. We will examine in a moment what we mean by 'content' – because it is far from a simple matter and it has been a weakness in CLIL's armoury (up to now) that it not been able to define this word satisfactorily – but the fact remains that language teachers remain in the dark when it comes to subject teaching. It makes the notion of 'Soft CLIL' (allegedly 'language-led) something of a misnomer. Why would we want to make something 'language-led'? Why not make it 'concept-led'? Just use the language to help.

This problem of ‘Soft CLIL’ is less true for teachers of young learners, who have always recognised the importance of topic content by default, since their learners are unlikely to spend their days fruitfully engaged in bouts of meta-linguistic reflection – but further up the cognitive ladder the skies get a good deal cloudier. Why can’t all learners ‘do things’ with language, to quote the Uruguayan boy? If subject teachers are being asked to understand language, why cannot language teachers be asked to understand (and use) content? After all, there is a huge *smorgasbord* of content out there, just waiting to be used.

There are two questions to answer in relation to this point, and they are crucial to the future of language teaching and of education in general. It seems odd that nobody has bothered to ask these questions, up to now. Perhaps it is because the truth that they reveal is an awkward one, but if we confront the issues they underpin, then CLIL will no longer be seen as an enemy but as a friend.

1. What do we mean by ‘content’?
2. What should language teachers do with it, and should they assess it?

What do we mean by ‘content’?

Let’s look at the first issue by admitting that the CLIL acronym is actually rather odd. Content has always required language, and language has always required content. So what’s the big deal? Well – teachers of subjects know that ‘content’ comes in a double guise. There is *conceptual* content, often called ‘declarative’ content – that which one can declare – for example ‘Columbus sailed to the Americas in 1492’ or ‘Jupiter is bigger than Mars’. Then there is what we call *procedural* content, which relates to the cognitive skills which derive from different subject areas.

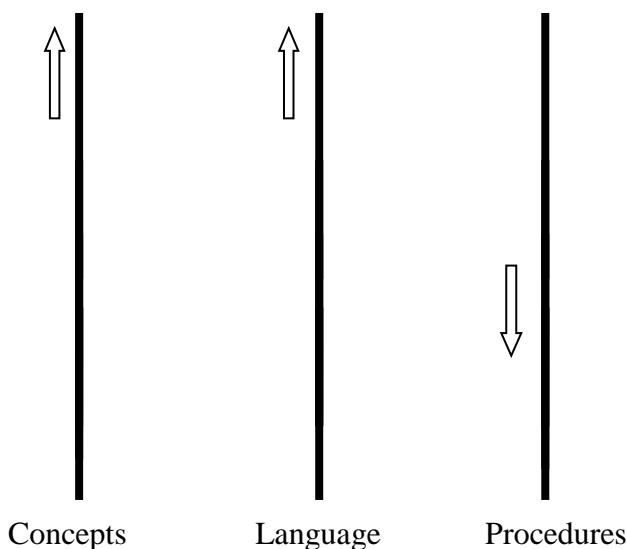
Of *procedural* content - if we asked the question ‘What were the implications of Columbus’ discovery of the Americas, and what is your opinion with regard to these implications?’ then we would require the learners to employ higher order thinking skills and different learning procedures to answer the series of demands in the question. As for the planets, if we asked which of the two mentioned above was more appropriate for sustaining future colonies of humans we would be asking the students, as with the Columbus example, to apply their conceptual knowledge to a greater cognitive (procedural) purpose.

To introduce a third element, in both cases above the *linguistic* demand will have been greatly extended by the procedural choice of the teacher. The skills required of both questions will cause language demands that require the teacher to support them – in a variety of ways. This is as true of L1 teaching as it is of L2, but in CLIL the issue is simply more salient. The language is not simply the vocabulary inherent to these subjects but rather the range of discourse required by both questions. This is CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency – Cummins 1979) and it both defines and distinguishes CLIL from conventional language teaching. A biology teacher knows that the word ‘photosynthesis’ is going to crop up, and that it will need defining and illustrating by dint of process language. The Maths teacher knows that ‘hypotenuse’ will also occur, and that it will need to be confronted by using paraphrase, exemplification, simplification...you name it. This world of subject-specific language, and the way to support and deal with it, is far removed from the world of language teaching. ESP and EAP are cousins to CLIL, but they are language-led approaches.

CLIL is not. CLIL throws its learners into the deep end of the conceptual and procedural pool, then throws in the linguistic arm-bands. Language teaching takes learners to the shallow end, in the vague hope that someday they might swim. Far too many never get anywhere near the deep end.

CLIL in three-dimensions

If language teachers want to understand and contribute to CLIL, for example in a bilingual school context or in any school dabbling with the approach, then the first thing to understand is the three-dimensional aspect of ‘content’. The world of CLIL is basically *conceptual*, *procedural* and *linguistic*. Language is also content, when viewed from this perspective. At any point in a lesson, the teacher may find that one of these dimensions is more prominent than the other. If the *conceptual* dimension (demand) is high then the *linguistic* demand is probably similar. In this case, the teacher, as in a mixing-studio, can turn down the *procedural* volume, and make the ‘how’ the quieter/easier of the three dimensions. The combinations are various, but this is good teaching –adjusting the ‘volumes’ according to the shifting demands.



It’s a powerful idea – that we employ conceptual content, by means of procedural choices (cognitive skills), using specific language derived from the particular discourse context. It is the interplay amongst the dimensions that lies at the heart of CLIL practice. The concepts are ultimately understood by doing something, using a certain type of discourse. It was probably what the Uruguayan boy was doing.

A good way to combat scepticism (and thus spread the good word) is to emphasise that the twin core features of CLIL are basically these:

- supporting language learning in content classes (Hard CLIL)
- supporting content learning in language classes (Soft CLIL)

If these things happen, all the rest can follow. And it may even be worth changing the above two sentences to read:

- supporting language *awareness* in content classes
- supporting content *awareness* in language classes

Subject teachers are always being implored to take on board language-teaching methodology, and indeed they can benefit from its rich traditions. But language teachers are rarely asked to observe subject teachers, to see what they actually do. There's an interesting world to be discovered. Subject teachers *orientate, complicate, resolve, stage, synthesise, demonstrate* – and if through CLIL they become more aware of how to make language salient, of how to vary classroom interaction and of how to make their classes 'language enhanced' then it is difficult to understand why language teachers would not want to do this too. Subject teachers are professionally obliged to make their students think. Language teachers are not. It's time to change.

The key for the fledgling world of soft CLIL is to embrace real content objectives (conceptual and procedural), to use language as a vehicle to support these other two dimensions, and to change assessment procedures radically. Soft CLIL needs to get much harder. When it does, and when the objective for that Global Warming unit is no longer the 2nd Conditional but to formulate scientifically sound proposals to 'save the world' (proposals that we can assess), then language and content will no longer need to be limited by the straitjacket of an acronym. CLIL will disappear, and so will language teaching, as we know it.

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