

# CLIL: the nature of the beast

**Mary Spratt** sets CLIL and ELT side by side for a close comparison.

**CLIL** is being put forward more and more as an alternative to ELT, and many teachers are asking themselves: *What exactly is CLIL? Should I be using it with my classes?* This article aims to provide readers with some pointers for answering these questions.

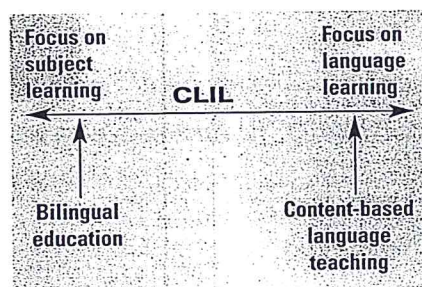
We will start by defining CLIL and ELT.

## Definitions

CLIL (content and language integrated learning) is an approach to teaching and learning in which school subjects are taught and studied in a second (third/fourth) language. So it is different from foreign language teaching, as in CLIL a foreign language is the vehicle for a form of subject-based teaching. In other words, while language and subject learning are both the aims of CLIL, the main focus of the lesson is the subject, not the language.

This is a 'hard' form of CLIL, but not the only form. In practice, CLIL exists in different guises on a continuum with content-based ELT at the softer end and bilingual education focusing exclusively on learning subject matter through the medium of a foreign

language at the harder end. We could show this continuum, as follows:



This article will refer to CLIL as taught at the mid point on this diagram, ie with the dual aim of subject and foreign language learning. I will use the term ELT (English Language Teaching) to refer to learning or teaching the English language as a tool for communicating in daily situations or about daily, social or professional needs, and in ways which may follow a variety of methodologies, eg task-based learning, PPP, the lexical approach, the communicative approach.

## Aims

Broadly speaking, the aims of CLIL are to improve both the learners' knowledge and skills in a subject and their

language skills in the language the subject is taught through. Language is used as the medium for learning subject content, and subject content is used as a resource for learning the language. The aims of CLIL are often specified in terms of Do Coyle's 'four Cs':

- **Communication:** improving overall target language competence;
- **Content:** learning the knowledge and skills of the subject;
- **Culture:** building intercultural knowledge and understanding;
- **Cognition:** developing thinking skills.

The aims of ELT, as often stated in course descriptions and syllabuses, are to enable learners to learn the structures, vocabulary and skills needed for a particular purpose. This purpose will sometimes be related to some form of English for Special Purposes, but is more often related to daily or survival needs and topics of general interest.

The different aims of CLIL and ELT lead to different classroom experiences in terms of teaching methodologies, content for learning and language use. They also involve different contexts for learning. Let's look at these.



## Classroom experiences

### Methodology

The methodology employed for CLIL generally focuses on developing in an interactive way the knowledge, skills and cognitive abilities involved in subject learning. Language is taught mainly through acquisition, though with some overt support through the use of scaffolding devices such as speaking and writing frames and word glossaries. Methodologies in ELT vary along the cline of more to less communicative, with language taught either by acquisition or focus on form, depending on their point on the cline. Many ELT classrooms combine the two.

### Content

The content of CLIL lessons varies according to the subject being taught through CLIL, eg geography, physics, music. However, it will centre on the facts, information and skills of the subject, subject-related concepts and the cognitive skills required to learn about the subject's concepts. In ELT, content is generally related to the learners' daily and survival needs and general interests, particularly at lower levels, with

sometimes a more ESP focus, such as English for academic purposes or English for business, taking over at more advanced levels, and a more content- or topic-based focus at primary level.

### Language

The different content of CLIL and ELT results in different types of target language and language use in the classroom. In CLIL we see:

- a predominance of subject-related vocabulary;
- language for exploring, discussing and writing about the subject matter;
- language for employing cognitive skills (eg defining, giving reasons for opinions, evaluating, hypothesising, drawing conclusions, exemplifying);
- language for carrying out learning skills (eg locating information, interpreting information, classifying).

Much of the language taught in CLIL is related to the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP).

Language is not graded across a CLIL syllabus and, if they are focused on, grammatical or structural patterns occur in the context of achieving particular academic functions, eg the

use of the passive voice to report on the procedure in an experiment, or the use of the past tense to relate a past event in history or geography. These patterns do not form the building blocks of a syllabus and are not usually subject to 'controlled' or 'freer' practice, but may be introduced through scaffolding.

In ELT, the language focused on may be the grammar, functions, skills or vocabulary relevant to dealing with tasks, daily situations or an ESP focus. Language itself or language skills are often the starting point for lesson planning, and daily contexts, tasks or topics are provided to give the language meaning and relevance. The language is likely to be graded to a greater or lesser extent, and is likely to form the basis for the syllabus and its progression.

*The language taught in CLIL is primarily related to the subject being taught and to the learning of academic learning and thinking skills*

We can see from the above that there are significant differences between CLIL and ELT. To recap, CLIL focuses on teaching a *subject*. It uses language as a vehicle for doing this and the method of learning language is predominantly acquisition. The language taught in CLIL is primarily related to the subject being taught and to the learning of academic learning and thinking skills. It tends not to be graded and does not determine the content or progression of the syllabus.

ELT, on the other hand, generally focuses much more on linguistic forms and meanings than CLIL and on practising them in the classroom. It does not generally concern itself with teaching cognitive or learning skills or the facts and figures of a subject (with exceptions, mainly at primary level). The main focus of ELT lessons generally remains what it always has been, ie language itself and/or using it. The language it teaches is usually related to daily survival language and interests, is likely to be subject to some form of grading and forms the building blocks of the syllabus.

### Contexts

Let's look at these factors in the contexts of teaching CLIL and ELT: where, how often, by whom and materials.

#### Where?

CLIL operates primarily in compulsory learning settings. ELT is taught in compulsory learning settings, too, but it is also widely taught in language school settings, spanning a greater age range than CLIL and learners with a wider range of immediate and/or identifiable needs for the language.

#### How often?

The time allocations given over to the study of CLIL differ widely, from immersion contexts, in which students learn all or most of their school subjects in a second language, to drip-feed contexts, in which learners learn perhaps just one school subject in a second language for a few hours a week and possibly for a limited period. In compulsory schooling, ELT tends to be taught for approximately three hours a week, while at tertiary level or in language schools this can vary considerably.

#### By whom?

In terms of teachers, CLIL can be taught by either a subject teacher or a language teacher. Sometimes in certain school settings, language and subject teachers cooperate through team teaching to teach a particular subject. Keith Kelly has suggested that ideally a teacher teaching CLIL would have this profile:

- has subject specialism;
- is proficient in the L2;
- uses CLIL methodology;
- uses language-appropriate materials;
- integrates content and language learning during lessons;
- has the skills needed to plan CLIL lessons;
- is able to identify the language demands of subject materials;
- is familiar with aspects of CLIL task design;
- participates in professional development.

ELT teachers, on the other hand, are generally required to have proficiency in English, knowledge about the English language and a grounding in ELT pedagogy and methodologies. We can see that the abilities suggested for a CLIL teacher, even if ideal, go well beyond those required of an ELT teacher.



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## Materials

Finally, in terms of materials, there is a wealth of ELT materials available commercially, catering for different ages, contexts of learning and learning purposes. CLIL, which is younger than ELT, is yet to be supported by a similar range of materials. The large differences currently existing in teaching contexts, eg age of uptake, subject area and amount of time allocation, no doubt make commercial materials less easy to produce.

## Effectiveness

Besides knowing what makes CLIL and ELT intrinsically different, teachers thinking of adopting CLIL may also want to know more about its effectiveness as compared with ELT. While ELT is able to boast many success stories, it has also been criticised (for example by Pérez-Vidal) for not being able to provide in the classroom sufficient exposure to or interaction with the foreign language to allow sufficient language processing to take place, and for tending to be quite superficial in its topic content. These shortcomings are said to lead to demotivation of learners and insufficient cognitive engagement with the language.

Here are some of the claims that have been made for CLIL:

- CLIL does not negatively affect learning of a content subject; it can enhance it. (Zarobe)
- CLIL can enhance language proficiency. (Ackerl; Hutter and Rieder-Beinemann)
- CLIL can enhance students' motivation, language retention, involvement and risk taking. (Coyle)
- CLIL may help those boys who see language learning as 'something that girls do'. (Baetens Beardmore)

These claims have been made not just by the above researchers but also by many others, and they are based on studies of CLIL in action. For reasons of space, we can't go into them any further here.

Other researchers, though, have expressed concern about CLIL, suggesting, for example, that learning subjects in L1 rather than L2 produces better exam results, greater progress in subject learning, better learner self-perception and self-esteem and greater classroom participation. There are also concerns that CLIL takes time from L1 learning at primary level, leaving children unsure in their mother tongue; that weaker learners are disadvantaged; and that teachers may sometimes have insufficient L2 proficiency to teach CLIL effectively.

These findings on the effectiveness of CLIL seem contradictory, but when you look at what experts suggest leads to a successful CLIL experience, it is clear that much hangs on how it is implemented. John Clegg has put together a list of 12 factors needed for successful implementation of CLIL. Among them are the need for language

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upgrading of teachers, training teachers in specialist pedagogy for working with low-L2 learners, ensuring quality of literacy and cognitive development in L1 in the early years, partly re-orienting training of language teachers towards teaching of language for subject learning, starting CLIL only after some years of good initial L1-medium education, writing textbooks with L2-medium learners in mind, spending a lot of money on implementing CLIL and giving yourself ten years for it to succeed.

David Graddol, the author of *English Next*, has said of CLIL: 'there is a potentially large downside to it. In many countries they just don't seem to be equipped to implement CLIL. When it works, it works extraordinarily well, but it is actually quite difficult to do well. My feeling is that it may actually take 30 or 40 years for a country to really to pull this one off.'



To my mind, ELT teachers thinking of adopting CLIL need to know the nature of the beast, evaluate their own skills carefully and look hard at whether the learning environment they and their learners work in can support a CLIL programme. **577**

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Mary Spratt is an ELT consultant, trainer and writer. She works in teaching, teacher development, assessment, materials writing and ELT research. She is the author or co-author of ELT coursebooks and supplementary materials, works on the Cambridge TKT tests for teachers, and is a member of Sue Leather Associates.

[mary.spratt@ntlworld.com](mailto:mary.spratt@ntlworld.com)

