Reviewing the puzzle of CLIL

Sophie Ioannou Georgiou

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) has become a well-known term for foreign language teachers and language researchers. A little more than a decade ago, it was a term unheard of in most staff rooms or professional conferences. This paper seeks to define CLIL and to look into the reasons that have propelled it to widespread adoption. Important success factors of CLIL programmes will be presented, as well as research results relating to its impact. Finally, concerns about CLIL will be addressed and a way forward for the approach will be roughly sketched.

Introduction

One of the most important developments in language teaching and learning of recent years must be the significant rise and widespread adoption of content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Although CLIL was around before 1995, it has generated much interest and has spread very rapidly in the time since then.

CLIL is a term that is extensively used in Europe, although it is often adopted far beyond Europe, too (for example Asia and South America) and has also been translated into other languages.[1] It refers to a dual-focused, learning and teaching approach in which a non-language subject is taught through a foreign language, with the dual focus being on acquiring subject knowledge and competences as well as skills and competences in the foreign language. This dual focus is what mainly distinguishes CLIL from other approaches, which may either use content but only aim towards a language learning syllabus or may use a foreign language but only with reference to a subject curriculum.

CLIL is based on a sound theoretical framework that validates it as a potentially effective learning approach. It can be argued to be the most recent developmental stage of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach. It has been described as the 'ultimate communicative methodology' (Graddol 2006 as quoted in Coyle, Hood, and Marsh 2010) and claims to implement the basic characteristics of CLT by providing a context for authentic, meaningful communication as well as offering opportunities for learners to gain exposure to more foreign language (FL) input and become engaged in more active learning. CLIL also incorporates characteristics of task-based learning as students focus on real content-learning tasks such as creating a map of their school (geography) or carrying out an experiment (science) and use language

with a focus on the task rather than the language itself thus promoting incidental learning. CLIL brings together the main principles of task-based learning and CLT by creating an authentic setting of meaningful learning where the students can engage in exploring and finding out about the world while using a foreign language to do so. Moreover, CLIL creates a situation where the students use the language as they learn it rather than spending years 'rehearsing' in a language class for a possible opportunity to use the language some time in the future. CLIL also transcends the isolation that sometimes characterizes the language learning field by strengthening its connection with general education theories, such as sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning, through a focus on the learners' development and construction of knowledge by means of a dialogic relationship with their peers, their teacher, and the materials.

Reasons behind CLIL's widespread adoption

CLIL is not argued to be something completely new (Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols 2008, *inter alia*), but it is claimed to be a fusion of a number of theories and approaches. In essence, it is a fusion where the best of language education joins together with the best of general education. Its appeal is therefore understandable and, as a result, there has been a rapid increase in CLIL programmes, from pre-primary to tertiary education, all over the world. As well as its theoretical appeal, there are other reasons that could perhaps explain CLIL's widespread adoption.

Strong support from the European Union

European Union (EU) policymakers have been some of the most important supporters of CLIL. Since 1995, the EU has officially recognized the value of CLIL and has consistently promoted it in a range of important policy documents (for example European Commission 1995, 2003, 2005, 2008).[2] It has also offered generous funding support to programmes that promote and develop CLIL through teacher training, materials development, or research.

> This method [CLIL] can contribute to individual and collective prosperity and can strengthen social cohesion. The method thus presents a practical tool for promoting European citizenship while increasing student and worker mobility. (Council of the European Union, press release, May 2005)[3]

As can be inferred from the quote above, this support for CLIL is due to the EU's search for effective language learning approaches that can help achieve important EU goals such as 'Mother Tongue +2' for all its citizens, social cohesion, increased mobility within the EU, and improved economic strength and competitiveness.

Parents' understanding of the need for foreign languages

CLIL can be attractive to parents who agree with the thinking behind it and who can see it as a practical way to increase their children's exposure to one or more foreign languages. Their support in the introduction, the establishment, and the implementation stages of CLIL programmes is crucial.

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Parental support for CLIL programmes can also be linked to the fact that parents have become aware of the value of foreign languages for their children's future and have become proactive in providing their children with the best possible opportunities to access and acquire foreign languages (Pavlou and Ioannou Georgiou 2008). Furthermore, the EU has specifically targeted parents in the past (Piccolingo campaign)[4] in order to encourage them to promote language learning for their children.

Disillusioned/ dissatisfied teachers

Many teachers have become disillusioned or dissatisfied with the current state of language teaching. Although nearly all language programmes pay lip service to CLT, the classroom reality is usually different (for example Gupta 2004). Language classes are too often oriented towards exam preparation or follow a structural syllabus. CLIL as an approach resonates with grassroots teachers and teacher initiatives have often led the way to CLIL programmes in a number of countries. Studies that have investigated teachers' attitudes towards CLIL show that teachers venture into CLIL in search of something new and professionally fulfilling and appreciate the professional development they acquire through their involvement (Pavlou and Ioannou Georgiou op.cit.).

A practical solution

Schools and education systems often view CLIL as a practical solution that can help them respond to the growing need to include more languages in their programmes. The fact that languages can be supported within the existing school day without dramatically affecting the school timetable and/or the school finances can be a decisive factor for CLIL implementation.

CLIL: the bare essentials

The rapid, widespread adoption of CLIL in diverse settings and educational contexts has resulted in a range of models being developed to fit specific contexts. As a result, and in an effort to include all the varieties generated, CLIL has been defined as an 'umbrella' term (Mehisto *et al.* op.cit.); this can, however, lead to a number of complications relating to how large or how small the 'CLIL umbrella' is.

Unfortunately, it seems that the CLIL umbrella might be stretching too much and that CLIL might be on the verge of becoming a victim of its own success. CLIL has become the new 'fashionable' approach and nearly everyone either wants to do it or wants to be seen to be doing it. Although Coyle *et al.* (op.cit.) include the 'transferability' of CLIL across contexts as one of the reasons for its success, there are numerous dangers involved, such as the approach either being watered down and losing the characteristics that have made it popular in the first place, or being misapplied, thus generating bad press and disappointment. Ting (2010), for example, argues it is time to distinguish between content-based language learning and CLIL and to accept each for what it is. Ting (ibid.) also reports Coyle (2009) arguing that published materials targeted for CLIL teachers sometimes water down the content subject and treat it in an FL-oriented manner. She (op.cit.: 13) goes on to quote Coyle as saying that CLIL is at a 'dangerous moment' and arguing that if specific guidelines are not given, it risks becoming a

time-consuming, ineffective, and frustrating experience. Finally, the frustration of Costa and D'Angelo (2011) is evident when they report 'bad CLIL' practice they witnessed. Although the authors appreciate the efforts of well-meaning practitioners, they suggest that teachers have not been guided or supported adequately and seem to be obviously confused by the 'flexibility' suggested by a number of CLIL proponents. Costa and D'Angelo (ibid.) strongly argue that it is high time for the basic characteristics that make up CLIL to be clearly defined so that those who are involved in or intending to venture into CLIL are better supported by a clear image of what CLIL is, ensuring that they can deliver an effective CLIL programme.

The extensive variety of CLIL models has also created a problem, which may lead to communication between researchers, teachers, and policymakers being obstructed. As one CLIL programme can vary greatly from another, each CLIL programme needs to be carefully defined so as to allow communication and sharing of practice. The large disparity obstructs the replication of studies, the compilation of a substantial body of research, or opportunities for meta-analyses of research results, all of which could enhance our understanding of CLIL.

It is, therefore, important to clarify what the main principles of CLIL are as well as the basic requirements for its success. The approach may be able to be adapted to suit various contexts, but what are the main principles that it should always retain? As Coyle *et al.* (op.cit.: 1) also suggest:

> While CLIL is flexible and can be adapted to different contexts, none the less for the approach to be justifiable and sustainable, its theoretical basis must be rigorous and transparent in practice.

Defining these key principles is a difficult task, given how large the CLIL umbrella is at present. A recent effort to trim it down and distinguish CLIL from immersion (Lasagabaster and Sierra 2010) has been criticized for making this distinction based mainly on characteristics of one particular context (Somers and Surmont 2012). The present article, therefore, aims to distil CLIL to its bare and most essential characteristics, which are argued to transcend local contexts and which might function as basic universal principles.

Content-driven approach

One of the main principles found in the literature is that CLIL is content driven (Coyle *et al.* op.cit.; Ting op.cit.). A content-driven approach distinguishes CLIL from other language-driven approaches that may use content in language teaching but aim solely towards language gains and do not necessarily cater to a content subject curriculum.

A content-driven approach is in line with CLIL's definition as an approach in which other, non-language subjects are taught through a foreign language. Although the balance at any one time may vary, the assumption is that overall, a CLIL programme will equally focus on content and language and will be referenced both to a foreign

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language and a content subject curriculum (Kiely 2011). It is reasonable, therefore, to accept that the language aspect of a CLIL programme will also be content driven, in that it will be generated from the specific needs of the particular subject taught and will assist students in better dealing with the requirements of the subject.

A unique educational methodology

Another principle is that the implementation of CLIL requires a particular educational methodology, which is derived from a fusion of the methodology used for language learning and the specific methodology used for the teaching of the particular subject that is taught through CLIL (for example simulations and role plays for life skills; hypothesis formation, experiment implementation, and report writing for science; or field trips for geography).

A quality learning experience

This third principle is related to the second one and focuses on general educational goals that should not be compromised. Specifically, what has become known as the '4Cs framework' (Coyle 1999) assists in visualizing the main elements that should be involved in CLIL learning. These go beyond Language (Communication) and Content and also involve Cognition and Culture. All four areas should be promoted through CLIL so that a quality learning experience may be achieved. It is important that CLIL learners are not offered an inferior educational experience, especially in the area of content. Concerns about inferior quality of engagement with content or an oversimplification of content are frequently voiced (Costa and D'Angelo op.cit., *inter alia*). It is, therefore, imperative that the goals of the content curriculum are fully achieved through cognitively stimulating and appropriately challenging student engagement with the subject content. Since CLIL is implemented in particular subjects, during the time allocated by educational institutions to these subjects, the subject curriculum should be covered adequately and not be compromised because instruction takes place through a foreign language.

An insight into CLIL success factors

Once the above principles are agreed on, it becomes clear that it is not an easy task to achieve them in practice. Indeed, reports from successful programmes wishing to share their success factors have long lists of points meticulously thought out by the researchers involved. Some of the most important success factors discussed in the literature are presented below.

Including the learners' L1 in the learning process

CLIL promotes additive bilingualism and respects the role that the L1 can play both in promoting and supporting L2 learning but also in creating and establishing a supportive and safe atmosphere for learners who are beginning CLIL (Naves 2009). Translanguaging is a phenomenon found in many monolingual CLIL classes, where learners may respond to a teacher's L1 question in the L2, use the L1 during group work in an otherwise L2 lesson, or use L1 reading materials to support instruction in the L2. Nevertheless, it is important that the L2 is increased with time and that a CLIL lesson should at least have 50 per cent of lesson time in the L2, if not more, soon after the initial stages of its implementation.

Teachers who are bilingual in the CLIL language and the school language	Such teachers of monolingual classes will be better able to deal with the issue of the learners' mother tongue as presented above (Naves ibid.). Even in multilingual classes, bilingual teachers are better able to support and empathize with the learners.
Teacher training is essential	CLIL teachers need to have adequate competence in the CLIL language, training in foreign language teaching as well as in teaching their particular content subject, and an understanding of the CLIL approach and relevant methodology. Lack of training as well as inadequate competence in the CLIL language have been identified as factors that have led to the failure of CLIL programmes (Marsh, Hau, and Kong 2000; Hoare and Kong 2008, as reported in Mehisto 2008). Cummins (1994) argues that all teachers need to be teachers of language and content, something that has proved difficult at this transitional stage where schools are eager to implement CLIL but do not have appropriately trained staff.
A joint effort	Involving all the stakeholders in a CLIL programme is very important (Mehisto op.cit.; Naves op.cit.). A CLIL programme is an innovation and, as such, it requires everyone's support in order to succeed. For instance, children who may be entering a CLIL programme in late primary or early secondary already have a specific mindset as to how school works and they might initially be resistant to CLIL (Hood 2006 reported in Coyle *et al.* op.cit.). Parental support can help alleviate some of the initial resistance and any difficulties that the children might face. CLIL teachers, on the other hand, are also being challenged by a new way of thinking and doing things. Support from parents, colleagues, and the school administration can help teachers manage this innovation.
Tools for the task	Teacher and student materials are an important tool in the learning process. Unfortunately, the majority of CLIL teachers around the world are still working without the support of suitable published materials or materials banks. Due to the variety of CLIL programmes, CLIL subjects, and the different subject curricula, it has been difficult for commercially published materials to cater to the growing needs of the field. It is, however, an important success factor and CLIL initiatives can benefit by creating in-house materials that can cater to the needs of their specific students and particular programme.
Continuity	If the learning objectives of a CLIL programme include FL improvement, then there should be a programme with some continuity and it should involve a minimum specified exposure to the FL. Some Italian programmes mentioned in Costa and D'Angelo (op.cit.), as well as Costa and D'Angelo themselves, argue for a minimum of 20–25 periods a year for a CLIL programme to show any linguistic benefits.

This is, of course, an absolute minimum and it does not take account of the fact that school CLIL programmes usually have separate language classes running parallel to CLIL classes. A CLIL programme needs to have continuity and adequate time over an academic year so as to allow time for the students to familiarize themselves with the academic |

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language required by the subject and be able to function adequately in the CLIL classroom.

A coordinating centre When it comes to large-scale CLIL programmes, Mehisto (op.cit., *inter alia*) asserts the need for a coordinating centre that can provide support and monitoring. The coordinating centre in Estonia was ranked as one the most important factors of success by the Estonian CLIL schools. On the other hand, in countries where there is no systematic monitoring of CLIL schools, it is also more difficult to provide necessary support, training, and materials for the teachers.

To sum up, establishing a successful CLIL programme is not an easy task and it will take all the above-mentioned factors and more to ensure that it is effective and sustainable. Perhaps understanding the complexity of the task and realizing that it is not a quick-fix solution may also be an important prerequisite for success.

Does CLIL work? The question whether CLIL is worth the investment of time, effort, and resources may naturally arise in the reader's mind. Until fairly recently, the answer to this question would be based on mostly anecdotal, enthusiastic reports, but there is now a growing body of research that examines the learning outcomes brought about by CLIL.

As regards language learning, there is increasing evidence that CLIL programmes are more successful in developing foreign language competence than traditional language classes. Dalton-Puffer (2011) presents a range of research studies that confirm this. More specifically, research shows that learners in CLIL programmes have an improved lexicon and higher writing and oral competence levels than their counterparts in traditional language classes.

Nevertheless, Dalton-Puffer (ibid.) rightly points out that the CLIL programmes examined offer CLIL classes in addition to FL classes. This means that, in effect, comparisons are made between two programmes that provide different exposures to the FL. Increased FL benefits would, therefore, be naturally expected to come with increased FL exposure.

As regards the effects on content learning, the research available is not extensive enough to allow for definite conclusions. The compilation and meta-analysis of a substantial body of research in the area of content subject finds obstacles in that, in addition to the different CLIL models available, there are a number of different subjects being taught through CLIL and different local curricula and syllabi that define the content's learning outcomes. Dalton-Puffer (op.cit.) in her report of CLIL research, mentions only one study of content outcomes, which showed higher learning outcomes in CLIL learners in comparison to non-CLIL learners, whereas most studies reported show no difference between content-learning outcomes reached by CLIL and non-CLIL learners. The results of the latter are none the less of the utmost importance because a CLIL programme needs to provide the same level of education and achievement in content as would L1 instruction.

Concerns about and critique of CLIL

The most common or vocal criticisms of CLIL refer to whether it is effective in the areas of both language *and* content, and especially whether it can deliver content outcomes in the same way as would L1 instruction. Other critiques claim CLIL is an elitist approach that uses unprofessional research in order to promote its positive image. Finally, others question whether the reality of CLIL classrooms matches the picture that CLIL proponents put forward.

The issues of effectiveness have already been discussed with the help of research results in the previous section. Although the results are supportive of CLIL, there still needs to be more research, sometimes better designed and implemented (see Bruton 2011). Research is particularly lacking in the area of content for the reasons that were presented earlier. This is, however, a major concern that needs to be addressed so as to ensure the future of CLIL. CLIL should not be seen as a mere enhancement of language learning programmes. It is an approach that focuses on both language and content and it should be dealt with as such. Unfortunately, the picture that seems to prevail at the moment, in the areas of both research and practice, is one where the content specialists are mainly absent. It is important to remember that CLIL is a joint venture and it involves two partners. If CLIL is to be successful in the long run, it has to be based on a fair partnership that must take full account of the needs and learning outcomes of the content area. CLIL uses time allocated by educational institutions to subject learning and the issues of content are, therefore, of vital importance. The ongoing research and debate need to open up and involve more content specialists.

Involving content specialists can potentially have a positive effect on classroom interaction in CLIL classes, which have been criticized for not promoting the dialogic, knowledge-constructing interactions expected of CLIL but instead creating classes with limited interaction and passive students (for example Dalton-Puffer 2007 referenced in Dalton-Puffer op.cit.). Sadly, this is usually not an effect of CLIL alone, but often it is merely the transfer of bad teaching to a new context. More active involvement of content specialists can assist in addressing such problems.

Criticism, not of CLIL but of the way it has been developing, has been voiced by CLIL supporters. These concerns have been discussed earlier and have to do with the way the term 'CLIL' is overstretched and the way it is sometimes misapplied or misinterpreted. These could possibly be growing pains similar to those created by the rapid spread of CLT which had also led to numerous misinterpretations of the approach as teachers, administrators, and policymakers tried to make it fit their own contexts, tried to understand and interpret the approach based on their own educational backgrounds, or tried to implement it without training or adequate resources (Gupta op.cit.). This is perhaps the time for a clear, simple definition of CLIL to be developed and for guidelines for implementation to be offered.

Conclusions

It is a sign of maturity that there is a fair amount of debate around CLIL and indeed such debate can benefit the approach by helping to refine and improve it.

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It is clear that CLIL, as an innovation, was difficult to implement perfectly at the beginning, but that should not deter us from striving towards improving an approach that has an important potential for language learning and education in general. CLIL has been developed on a solid theoretical background and as a response to the challenges of modern times. It requires major changes in educational systems, in individual mindsets, in university training programmes, and more. It will take a long time for all these changes to come about.

It is not an approach that suits all contexts and it is not necessary for it to be so. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it is crucial that CLIL is carefully defined so as not to exceed its scope. It is important for it to remain content driven and clearly distinguish itself from other content-based or topic-based language-learning approaches. CLIL can support language learning by creating opportunities for authentic, meaningful learning in a different context than that of a language classroom. In this way, there will be opportunities for more varied interactions, an increased exposure to FL input, and more time to engage with the FL: all important factors for effective language learning.

Notes

1 EMILE (Enseignement d'une Matière par l'Intégration d'une Langue Etrangère), AICLE (Adquisición Integrada de Contenidos y Lengua Extranjera).
2 The EU policy documents below can be accessed online at http://ec.europa.eu/ languages/eu-language-policy/ policy-documents_en.htm
   ▪ White paper on education and training: 'Teaching and learning: towards the learning society' (1995)
   ▪ 'Promoting language learning and linguistic diversity: an action plan 2004–2006' (2003)
   ▪ 'A new framework strategy for multilingualism' (2005)
   ▪ 'Council conclusions on multilingualism' (2008).
3 See http://www.eu2005.lu/en/actualites/ communiques/2005/05/24ejceducation/ index.html
4 See http://piccolingo.pauservers.com/en

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The author

Sophie Ioannou Georgiou holds a PhD from the University of Nottingham and an MA from the University of Reading. She has extensive experience in EFL teaching and teacher training and has been coordinating CLIL implementation in Cyprus for the past five years. She is currently Inspector for English in Primary Education at the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture while also continuing to train teachers through the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute (in-service training) and the European University Cyprus (initial training). Her most recent CLIL-related publication is *Guidelines for CLIL Implementation in Primary and Pre-primary Education* (co-edited with Pavlos Pavlou).
Email: sophiecy@yahoo.com