

Is CLIL the approach for the future?

Autor: Catalán Alcocer, Cristina (Licenciada en Economía, Técnica Superior de Idiomas del Gobierno de Navarra).

Público: Profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera y de otras asignaturas en inglés. ESO. **Materia:** Inglés. **Idioma:** Inglés.

Title: Is CLIL the approach for the future?.

Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning CLIL facilitates the learning of English not just as a general subject but as a way of learning any content through English, learning at the same time English and the mentioned content. The article tries to examine this new approach specifically related to the context of Navarre, and the positive and negative aspects that we may find when trying to implement CLIL in a new context.

Keywords: CLIL, English, Content, Language

Título: Es AICLE el método del futuro?.

Resumen

El Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas (AICLE) facilita el aprendizaje de inglés, no sólo como una asignatura, sino como una forma de aprender cualquier contenido a través del idioma, aprendiendo al mismo tiempo inglés y el contenido mencionado. Este artículo intenta realizar una aproximación a este nuevo enfoque en un contexto determinado, el de la comunidad de Navarra, considerando los aspectos positivos y negativos que se encuentran al intentar implementar AICLE en un nuevo contexto.

Palabras clave: AICLE, inglés, contenido e idioma.

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Content and Language Integrated Learning (from now on we will refer to that concept as CLIL in this article) is a system that facilitates the learning of English not just as a general subject but as a way of learning any content through English, learning at the same time English and the mentioned content.

This system has been highly widespread in all the communities of Spain, and it is intended to be generalized to the entire learning population that attempts to learn a second language at schools.

To clearly understand the previous concept, we find necessary to clarify and explain certain aspects.

1.- GREAT IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT.

First, we would like to point out that CLIL has been applied in many countries and for many years. Although the name is new, the concept is not and we should recognize that it already existed before.

Thus, in some countries such as Belgium or Holland, it is not seen as a future but as a real present, even as a system that belongs to the past and is extended forward to be improved.

In Spain, Catalonia and the Basque Country are two great examples of places where CLIL has already been used. In these communities, several whole subjects are taught in the second language (L2), whether this is in Spanish, Catalan or Basque, depending on which the primary language (L1, the one used at home) is considered to be.

In Navarre, 53% of the community belongs to the mixed zone, in which there are two co-official languages, Spanish and Basque. In these zones there are schools (called ikastolas) where subjects are taught in Basque. What is taught at these ikastolas is already a variety of CLIL that was already established many years ago, though it was not called this way.

Concerning English teaching in Navarre, (as in nine other communities from Spain) there are certain agreements between the British Council and several High Schools, to promote bilingual education. Thanks to these agreements, in each course from 1st to 4th years of Secondary Education (ESO), two different subjects are taught in English, at the same time that the number of hours of teaching English as a subject has also increased.

Approximately 40 % of the time of study is done in the L2 language, and so exposure to the target language has undoubtedly increased.

In other communities of foreign countries with similar or close conditions to Navarra, the implementation of CLIL has been possible and positive. For instance, in the Flemish area in northern Belgium, there are also two co-official languages: Dutch and French. In this area for many years, students master these two languages and besides they are also proficient in English and learn another language at school, so when they get to the University, almost all of them are fluent in four languages.

One of the biggest differences between, the region of Limburg in Belgium and Navarre in Spain is that of the exposure to the language. Belgium is a small country located in the middle of Europe and they have been traditionally much more exposed to other languages than Spain or more specifically Navarre.

There are several factors that attempt to explain why English was not successful in Spain in the near past:

- Historically, our country has developed a strong protectionism towards the Spanish language, being sometimes fearful of other languages or influences.
- Our parents did not usually speak English, and so we do not inherit it as a second language.
- We are already speakers of an international language, Spanish, which is spoken by many people all around the world and so most of Spanish people have not found it interesting to learn a new language in the near past.
- The educational system gave little importance to English and to its teaching methodology.
- English seems to be more difficult to learn than French which has the same roots and origins than Spanish, and thus in the near past there was a preference for learning French.
- In Spain there is still a big industry for dubbing movies and TV series and it is difficult to see original versions of movies. Spaniards lose the possibility of more exposure to the English language.

But from some decades on, things have strongly changed bilingualism is a new target for the community: schools, politicians and families find interesting to implement bilingual programs in schools promoting its study.

The European Union also suggests the importance of CLIL benefits: "Content language integrated learning can contribute to individual and collective prosperity and can strengthen social cohesion....presents a practical tool for promoting European citizenship while increasing student and worker mobility" (Council of European Union).

2.- POSITIVE ASPECTS OF CLIL

Researchers and teachers in Navarre find that in schools where CLIL has been implemented the experience is being very positive, and no decrease in the level of content knowledge acquired has been observed. On the contrary, having studied Mathematics in English, for instance, has brought a great improvement in the English level of students. Both aspects have also been observed by external evaluators.

CLIL is positive for English education and it may refute the theory of the backsliding which states that learning a subject in L2 may lead to a retrograde performance in the L1. We do not agree with the fact that an increase in L2 learning involves a reduction of development in L1.

There is also another theory of the "untouchable subjects", which is against teaching subjects in another language different from Spanish. This theory argues that in Spain studying Spanish history should be done only in Spanish, or that to study Mathematics in English is not positive because this subject has not much linguistic range. We do not agree with it, since a fundamental part of Mathematics is based on the understanding of problems, where the level of exposure to the language is high and the possibilities of learning English are of great importance.

We do not fear that CLIL involves the death of English teachers as some people maintain, but we just assume that teachers would need to adapt to a new situation. Conversely, we consider that much additional work is required on the part of English teachers before a student is able to follow classes entirely in English, so it would probably be necessary to start from a very low level, increasing the amount of hours that a pupil is exposed to English from kindergarten.

Probably in a few years English teachers will be devoted to teach solely to the lower levels of the educational system. In this case, more teachers than those currently available would be needed.

Anyway it is quite likely that this system CLIL would not be fully incorporated in our society until many years, but in a changing world like ours, it is necessary to learn how to adapt to all circumstances as a way of survival.

3.- NEGATIVE ASPECTS TO BE SOLVED WHEN IMPLEMENTING CLIL

One of the current problems of CLIL in Navarre is to decide which subject are the most suitable to teach in English. The choice is not an objective conscious one, but it depends on the amount of teachers with the sufficient level of English that are available, and also on the subjects that these professionals are able to teach too.

Thus, even with the existence of agreements with the British Council, CLIL still depends on the willingness of teachers and his or her know-how, and especially the availability of teachers with the appropriate level of English that are able to give a course in English and are willing to make the effort.

The programs to train "subject teachers" that are taught by the British Council are extraordinarily good, as declared by most of the teachers who received this training. Thus, appropriate and accurate training programs are positively implemented. This is a very positive experience, but probably too expensive to generalize to all schools.

For several years there has been a kind of political battle between supporters and opponents of Basque language in this community. The introduction of English as a language to teach other content (biology, mathematics, physical education, philosophy and so on) is seen by some politicians as the solution to all our "learning English problems", facilitating the opening to Europe and improving students' curricula, and creating great opportunities for improvement.

Nevertheless, we must also admit that the introduction of English is not the unique possibility, that does not necessarily have to be the best option and, above all, that it should not displace other opportunities that might be as correct and desirable as this one.

It is important to point out that in the particular context of Navarre, it would be desirable to develop the possibility of learning subjects both in Basque and in English (as it already happens in the Public University of Navarre, UPNA, at the university education level) so that everyone would be able to choose the option that is most convincing or appropriate for each student.

Of course, it is hard because as it has already been mentioned, especially in the current economic situation, there is not enough budget to develop both (maybe not even one of the two possibilities) neither to train teachers as much as it would be necessary.

Another key point for the introduction of CLIL is teachers' motivation and confidence.

For this, it is absolutely necessary to have a good training plan and a great teachers' communication to be able to implement quality programs.

Compared to other countries there is a huge difference in how a teacher is considered by the rest of the society. In Norway, for instance, it is one of the most valued professions, while here in Spain it is not. In other countries external motivations are also much higher than in Spain.

In addition to that, and according to Hugh Baetens Beardsmore, CLIL is not exportable, so that the preparation of a schedule that is applicable to different countries is not possible. Maybe the same program could be used in different regions but some adjustments should have to be made in any case.

For this reason, companies that publish materials are reluctant to invest in the publication of any manual, and there is an evident lack of materials.

As a consequence, so much teachers' commitment and so many resources on the part of institutions are necessary that it seems difficult to see the implementation of CLIL in its strongest version soon.

Another fact to be considered is assessment.

It is very important to take into consideration the level of students at the beginning of the course in order to correctly estimate their progress throughout the school year. Evaluation should concentrate on the achievement of both language and content objectives and also in the attainment of basic skills.

One of the most widely used methods for the assessment is the observation of students in class.

Students can also participate in their evaluation process, assessing themselves and other peers at different times of the process and not just at the end.

For the promotion of students to the following level we must decide whether this is going to happen only if both parts (content and language) are passed or not. Clear guidelines are necessary to be applied to every student.

4.-CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, we can highlight that the main problem for CLIL implementation in Secondary Education is the lack of current financial resources to increase the number of teachers from kindergarten to high levels and to provide them more training hours in order to specialize them more, at the same time that publishing companies concentrate on preparing more accurate materials and programs to be used to avoid the evident lack of useful materials.

All this seems difficult in a context of general cutbacks in Education. It is clear that if many more economic resources were available to Education CLIL's implementation would be much easier and faster.

Nevertheless, we find that the work that some Spanish High Schools have been doing in collaboration with the British Council is very positive.

CLIL seems to be essential if Spain wants to remain an important country within the European Union. Spanish technicians and professionals will be bilingual or even multilingual by necessity in a few years.

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