

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL): Characteristics, Connections, and Pedagogies

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in relation to content-based instruction (CBI) and English medium instruction (EMI) with the aim of offering a concise summary of what this educational/language teaching approach entails and offers in terms of situated practices and research. While we draw on scholarship published in articles and edited volumes, special attention is paid to articles recently published with *TESOL Quarterly* as a way to recognize the contribution that the journal has made to broadening our understanding of CLIL.

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BACKGROUND

Different educational policies and forms have been developed over time with the aim of enhancing learners' experience by integrating language learning and curricular content and fostering disciplinary literacies within formal education. Within the umbrella created by

such forms, specific approaches have been designed and implemented to ensure the sustainability and success of the integration of content and language: (1) content-based instruction (CBI) (e.g., Snow & Brinton, 2019), (2) content-based language teaching (CBLT) (e.g., Lyster, 2018), (3) content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010), (4) English medium instruction (EMI) (e.g., Macaro, 2018), and (5) pluriliteracies teaching for deeper learning (PTDL) (e.g., Coyle & Meyer, 2021). Journals such as the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, the *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, the *Journal of Immersion and Content-based Language Education*, or special issues (e.g., Llinares & Cross, 2022; Morton, 2024b; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018) in more general journals in the field of language education not only attest to the traction that these approaches continue to gain in educational systems but also how they have found fertile ground in TESOL.

In this article, we draw our attention to CLIL, and its relation to CBI and EMI, since the literature seems to suggest that this approach has become popular across the globe, particularly in primary and secondary education. We acknowledge that this is the approach in which our research and teaching expertise lies. With reference to the relationship between EMI and CLIL, our point of departure is that while the former may be understood as a policy or overall curricular principle (Macaro, 2018), the latter may be conceived as a research-informed pedagogical approach that can actualize EMI as policy. We must also recognize that the interconnections between CLIL and EMI are rooted in the global spread of English (see Sah, 2025). In other words, the language element in CLIL is predominantly the English language.

Against this background, we first offer a brief conceptualization of CBI, CLIL, and EMI. The order in which these are presented is based on historical developments in the field of (language) education, policy, and practice. We then offer a succinct summary of methodological approaches in CLIL. Last, we discuss pedagogical applications and offer some avenues for further exploration.

CONCEPTUAL APPROACHES

CBI

As summarized in Banegas (2012), CBI began to gain prominence in the 1980s in Canada and the USA as an approach to bilingual education seeking to integrate language learning with subject matter content. This approach emerged from the recognition that language may

be best learned when used as a tool to construct knowledge, rather than being the sole focus of instruction. Early implementations of CBI were influenced by immersion programs in Canada, where English-speaking students were taught in French to enhance their language proficiency while learning academic content (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989).

CBI involves the teaching of language/linguistic elements and skills (e.g., lexis, pronunciation, writing) through topics and materials that are discipline-specific to a school subject (e.g., science) (Waller, 2018) so that students build knowledge and language proficiency simultaneously. In a systemic functional linguistics-informed empirical study published more than 20 years in this journal, Schleppegrell, Achugar, and Oteiza (2004), had already demonstrated that “language and content are never separate, that content in school contexts is always presented and assessed through language, and that as the difficulty of the concepts we want students to learn increases the language that construes those concepts also becomes more complex and distanced from ordinary uses of language” (p. 67).

CBI is primarily implemented in contexts where English is the language of instruction and the dominant language used in the wider context (e.g., a primary school in Toronto, Canada) with students whose dominant language is not English, also known as English as second language (ESL) learners. Over time, CBI has evolved and been adapted in various educational contexts, becoming a popular approach in bilingual and second/foreign language education not only with English (e.g., Lee & Abbott, 2025; Suzuki, 2022) but also, to a lesser extent, with other languages such as Russian (e.g., Abramova & Aoki, 2025).

CLIL

In response to the European Union’s agenda to foster socio-economic growth and population mobility across the bloc, CLIL emerged in the 1990s in formal education. CLIL is often regarded as an educational or a language teaching approach with a dual purpose: to provide learners with opportunities to construct subject matter knowledge while developing proficiency in an additional language. CLIL is primarily based on sociocultural theory, cognitivism, systemic functional linguistics (SFL), intercultural awareness, and theories of disruptive practice (Coyle & Meyer, 2021). CLIL research and theoretical underpinnings have advanced concepts and pedagogical tools such as cognitive discourse functions (CDFs) (Dalton-Puffer, 2007), the 4Cs

(content, communication, culture, and cognition) (Coyle et al., 2010), or the language quadriptych (Banegas & Mearns, 2023).

As an educational approach, CLIL underscores the position of learning content through an additional language, such as learning social science through English in the Basque Country (e.g., Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2024). Hence, it is often referred to as content-driven CLIL and is in the hands of content teachers. However, Morton and Llinares (2017) acknowledge that “little integration of content and language actually happens” (p. 2), which may be due to structural reasons such as teacher’s lack of proficiency in (disciplinary) English or limited pedagogical guidance (Lazarević, 2022). Such a criticism may indicate that while at the level of the intended curriculum, integration is the cornerstone of CLIL, the enacted curriculum may show that in some cases, CLIL is practiced as the teaching of content through another language with little support to enhance learners’ disciplinary literacy in the additional language (but see Coyle & Roca de Larios, 2024).

As a language teaching approach, CLIL emphasizes the language element of the integration and it is usually practiced by language teachers. From this perspective, CLIL has been defined as “instruction that integrates the development of proficiency in an additional language in school contexts where authentic non-language content (such as Science and Mathematics) serves as a vehicle for language teaching and learning” (Genesee & Hamayan, 2016, p. 27). Thus language-driven CLIL may be closer to TESOL since both share the focus on language learning, in most cases English. Both seem to respond to contemporary notions of language education that stress the importance of selecting topics which foster situated meaning making. In the case of CLIL, such topics will come from learners’ school curriculum. The centrality of meaning making is testimony of the role that SFL has in the CLIL conceptual base.

In a reflective piece on CBI and CLIL, Cenoz (2015) concludes that, despite their differences in contextual origins, both approaches share the same theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings as they are both aligned with sociocultural, cognitive, intercultural, translanguaging, and SFL perspectives (see also Banegas, 2012). Notwithstanding, in terms of implementation, the language in CBI is used as the primary language in that society (e.g., CBI with French in French-speaking Canada for students whose dominant language is Arabic), whereas in CLIL, the language in focus may not have such a status (e.g., CLIL with German in Argentina, a country in which Spanish is the dominant language).

EMI

Contemporary research has frequently conceptualized EMI as “the use of English language to teach academic subjects (other than English itself) in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (Macaro, 2018, p. 19). However, relevant literature contains substantive debates regarding EMI’s scope and parameters.

One conceptual tension is centred on EMI’s geographical and institutional demarcation. Macaro’s (2018) conceptualization has restricted EMI to non-Anglophone contexts, emphasizing the distinctiveness of EMI as a designated educational approach. Some scholars (e.g., Akıncioğlu, 2024; Baker & Hüttner, 2017; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018) have challenged this geographical restriction, advocating for greater acknowledgement of similarities between contemporary English medium environments from both Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts and have called for conceptual frameworks that recognize their increasingly similar multilingual and multicultural nature. However, Rose et al. (2023) contend that broadening EMI to encompass Anglophone contexts risks “conflating EMI-issues with wider internationalization issues and general educational issues” (p. 539) and ignoring influential historical dimensions of EMI and the significance of policy decisions in EMI provision.

Rather than taking a definitive stance on geographical restrictions, Smit’s (2023) EMI theoretical framework presents location as one of six “flexible criteria” within a broader conceptual architecture anchored by three essential elements: English medium education delivery, non-language academic subject instruction, and L2 English users. This approach bypasses the binary opposition between geographically-restricted and inclusive definitions by positioning geographical context as a descriptive rather than definitional criterion. Smit’s (2023) framework accommodates both Rose et al.’s (2023) concerns about preserving EMI’s distinctive policy dimensions and Pecorari and Malmström’s (2018) emphasis on institutional similarities. This conceptual approach suggests that geographical demarcation and institutional characteristics need not be mutually exclusive considerations in EMI conceptualization, but rather can be understood as interrelated dimensions within a more comprehensive analytical framework.

Another critical distinction in conceptualizing EMI lies in its relationship to similar educational approaches that integrate content and language instruction. While EMI shares certain pedagogical characteristics with CLIL or English for Academic/Specific Purposes (EAP/ESP), its theoretical distinctiveness emerges through its primary

orientation toward content delivery rather than explicit language development (Curle, Şahan, Jablonkai, Mittelmeier, & Veitch, 2020; Macaro, 2018; Smit, 2023) particularly in the context of higher education (Dafouz & Smit, 2023). Hence, EMI maintains a more neutral stance on this relationship, which lends support to the view of EMI being understood as policy rather than as a pedagogical approach. In this regard, CLIL could be then implemented as a pedagogical approach which will actualize EMI as policy. However, this conceptual distinction should be seen as existing along a theoretical continuum of approaches (Macaro, 2018) rather than an attempt to isolate EMI. Recognition of EMI and TESOL existing in “natural symbiosis” (Pecorari & Malmström, 2018, p. 497) acknowledges the inevitability of language learning, albeit limited sometimes (Hornberger & Chick, 2001), within EMI contexts, even when not explicitly targeted.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

While in the section above, we have offered a minimal conceptualization of CBI, CLIL, and EMI highlighting their similarities and interests, in this section we concentrate on CLIL, with some attention to EMI research.

In a review of methodological trends in CLIL research between 2002 and 2022 oriented toward examining and improving CLIL practice, Goris (2024) has identified the use of certain research designs to investigate language gains, subject matter development, discourse and cognitive development, stakeholders’ perspectives, and teaching practices (for specific studies on such areas please see Goris, 2024). Such areas are not exclusive to CLIL since they have also been examined in CBI (Domke & Cerrato, 2026) and EMI (Liu, Fang, & Zhang, 2025).

One trend in CLIL research is the use of comparative designs and correlations in cross-sectional studies (e.g., Gong, Liu, & Wu, 2025; Lasgabaster, 2011) to measure the extent to which there exist language and/or content gains, or differences in learner motivation and engagement between TESOL classrooms and CLIL mainstream classes. These studies continue to be conducted with large student populations and are primarily quantitative in nature. Bruton (2013) criticized such studies since he identified a potential bias as students in CLIL mainstreams classes had been included in such classes because their English language proficiency was higher, which may have skewed the results. Goris (2024) concludes that while comparative studies have demonstrated the benefits of CLIL for additional language development, these vary according to participants’ age or contextual differences.

A second trend used to identify the effects of CLIL is that of longitudinal studies in primary and secondary education, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative instruments (e.g., San Isidro & Lasagabaster, 2019; Verspoor, De Bot, & Xu, 2015). A third trend is illustrated by research featuring case study design (Xia & Li, 2026) or action research (e.g., Banegas & Mearns, 2023), usually carried out by practitioners or through partnerships between schools, government, and university-based researchers. According to Goris (2024), studies in both trends not only highlight the benefits and challenges of CLIL implementation, but also underscore the different models implemented in response to contextual, curricular, and resource, and policy circumstances (see also Dobson, 2020).

While CLIL research initially started with large-scale studies before diversifying into the trends mentioned above, the methodological landscape of EMI research reflects a field in transition, moving from exploratory investigations toward more systematic and theoretically informed approaches to studying EMI as a complex educational phenomenon (Lasagabaster, Fernández-Costales, & González-Mujico, 2025; Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Dearden, 2018; Sah, 2022). Between 2005 and 2020, research predominantly focused on classroom dynamics and programmatic outcomes at primary and secondary levels, alongside faculty and student perspectives regarding EMI implementation and practice in tertiary education (Macaro et al., 2018; Pun & Curle, 2021). However, significant methodological challenges persist in EMI research. The predominance of single-institution case studies with restricted sample sizes has impeded robust longitudinal or even comparative analysis within specific contexts (Curle & Pun, 2024; Macaro et al., 2018). The resulting paucity of longitudinal intra-institutional studies has therefore limited the ability to generate comprehensive insights into the effectiveness of EMI provision (Macaro et al., 2018) within a program, institution, geographical region, or programmatic context.

PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

The methodological approaches succinctly mentioned above have dominated the CLIL research agenda, leading to a plethora of studies with direct pedagogical applications around learners' language skills (e.g., speaking) and language systems (e.g., lexis) development, cognitive discourse functions (CDFs), and pedagogical tools to enhance CLIL provision across educational levels, from kindergarten (e.g., Otto & Cortina-Pérez, 2023) to higher education (e.g., Tsuchiya, 2019). In terms of the expansion of CLIL, authors (e.g., Landau, Albuquerque

Paraná, & Siqueira, 2021; Sohn, 2024) have been critical of institutions that adopt CLIL as a brand or commodity, which may perpetuate the view of bilingual education as elitist (but see Bakken & Brevik, 2023).

The development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in CLIL can be facilitated with various pedagogical tools and interventions regularly employed in foreign language education settings. Hence, we acknowledge that the suggestions which follow are not CLIL-specific. Given the central role of aural input in CLIL education, teachers can promote the development of students' listening skills in class by aiming to provide input that constitutes a reasonable yet attainable challenge for students. This can be achieved by, for example, making adjustments to a teacher's prepared instructions and explanations in lesson planning, as well as by spontaneously amending teacher talk in response to cues from students during class (de Graaff, Jan Koopman, Anikina, & Westhoff, 2007). In the case of young learners specifically, focusing on listening via input-oriented approaches (e.g., exposure to and playing with sounds in different context) and integrated approaches (e.g., songs, rhymes and poems) can promote the development of both listening and speaking skills (Fleta Guillén, 2019). Classroom activities designed to target listening skills can also have a positive effect on students' cognitive capabilities. For instance, Uemura, Gilmour, and Costa (2019) employed tasks designed to allow students to demonstrate their understanding of input prior to proceeding to subsequent stages of a task, thereby facilitating progression from lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) to higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), while also promoting listening skills. Therefore, using approaches that focus on students' listening skills in class can help learners develop not only their listening but also their speaking and cognitive skills, thus highlighting the interdependence of skills development in CLIL classrooms.

Although there is overlap between the development of listening and speaking skills, teachers can also target students' oral skills specifically by eliciting reactions, designing tasks that allow pair- or group work, and actively encouraging target language use with, if needed, the help of compensation strategies (de Graaff et al., 2007). During lesson planning, decisions concerning the timing of activities also carry important pedagogical implications for the development of speaking skills. For example, integrating a meaningful communicative activity at the post-task stage of a CLIL class provides students with an opportunity to explore new content ideas with peers while experimenting with newly introduced language points (Ruiz Gómez, 2015). Where possible, teachers are also encouraged to employ dialogic rather than monologic teaching methods, with the aim of helping students develop their speaking skills to an operational level (Lo &

Macaro, 2015). Given that CLIL fosters students' development into bi- or multilinguals, translanguaging can be harnessed in class discussions and activities in order to allow learners greater freedom to use their full repertoire of language skills (Tsuchiya, 2019). Translanguaging can also be employed when providing definitions, explanations and clarification, thereby helping students develop conceptual knowledge as part of their content learning.

As with audio input, the language that students encounter in written form can also be carefully selected according to the learners' level and graded in order to promote students' comprehension and linguistic development (de Graaff et al., 2007). Reading comprehension can be promoted by spontaneous teacher-led actions, such as teaching reading strategies, asking students clarification questions, giving translations, making gestures, and using board drawings (de Graaff et al., 2007). Alternatively, the use of a systemic approach to incorporating reading and writing activities such as *Reading to Learn* (Rose, 2005) can be used to promote the development of these skills in CLIL (Ahern & Smith, 2022). Teachers can also help students develop their writing skills by allowing and even encouraging L1 use in the research and planning stages of an extensive writing task (Coulson & Adamson, 2015). In classrooms with young learners, games can be used to promote pre-reading strategies while also developing interaction skills generally (Fleta Guillén, 2019). Such games could focus on, for example, the alphabet or matching common words and pictures. The use of music integrated into class activities can also help to promote the development of writing skills in young learners (Fleta Guillén, 2019). Such integrated approaches may prove beneficial, as it is not clear to what extent different language skills should be developed in isolation from each other (Ruiz Gómez, 2015).

Although focusing on developing students' receptive and productive language skills is a key priority in CLIL education, planning how to teach new language points is also an important consideration. Promoting students' natural use of the four skills in class invariably helps to consolidate existing vocabulary and provides opportunities for incidental learning of lexis, whereas introducing new concepts and terms as part of content learning may require specific interventions from the teacher. For example, Sato (2024) highlighted the role that visual aids and matching activities can play in scaffolding vocabulary development in CLIL classrooms. Fazzi and Menegale (2024) suggest the use of storytelling, as well as music, rhyme and other kinesthetic approaches, to promote the ability of young learners to use appropriate lexical choices when communicating about content. While learning vocabulary through input is likely to occur in CLIL, teachers can also promote the development of students' lexical knowledge via the provision

of sufficient and timely scaffolding, such as glossaries, summaries and explanations (van Kampen, Admiraal, & Berry, 2018). As discussed by Lo, Lin, and Liu (2023), such techniques can also be used as part of *semantic waves* in which abstract concepts are made accessible (i.e., unpacked) before returning to language that is dense and academic (i.e., repacking).

While learning new vocabulary in CLIL classes may occur relatively seamlessly with the introduction of new conceptual terms related to content, the acquisition of grammatical structures is not guaranteed to occur via input processing alone, particularly with adult learners (Van Patten, 2015). Therefore, ensuring the development of students' grammatical knowledge may require teachers to consider alternative approaches. For instance, Walenta (2018) found that using content-based structured input (i.e., input that has been modified so that form and meaning are interdependent) promoted the development of students' grammatical accuracy more effectively than the use of comprehension-based instruction. Additionally, bilingual pedagogical approaches (e.g., translanguaging) can be used not only to help students learn new lexis, but also to render explanations and examples of grammatical structures more accessible to students, thereby promoting learning (Kim, Li, & Lee, 2024). In terms of the structure of activities, Ruiz Gómez (2015) proposed following a sequential approach whereby grammatical (and lexical) points would be chosen in terms of their relationship to students' immediate communicative (and content) needs. In addition, de Graaff et al. (2007) identified teachers' effective use of, for example, corrected forms, recasts and feedback to facilitate students' form-focused processing. On the other hand, board games have also been found to work as an effective method for improving students' grammatical knowledge of, for example, tenses (Mattheoudakis & Panteliou, 2024). To sum up, the development of students' grammatical knowledge can be supported via various teacher-led actions that are integrated into different stages of CLIL lessons.

CLIL teachers can also adopt approaches that reflect CDFs in order to facilitate knowledge creation related to both language and content. Notwithstanding, they require teachers to have high proficiency in the target language and possibly in the mainstream language of instruction. For instance, a teacher might elicit discussion, pose questions, draw comparisons, provide etymologies and use multimodality (Evnitskaya, 2019) to promote students' lexical and content knowledge. Teachers can also create learning materials, such as a graphic organizer containing prompts and blanks, that promote students' knowledge creation via CDFs (Roca de Larios, Coyle, & García, 2022). Moreover, integrating various techniques such as the use of body

language and graphs into the explanations and descriptions led by the teacher can help students develop effective concept definitions in CLIL (Kääntä, Sert, Kunitz, & Markee, 2021). Conversely, learning via CDFs can also be achieved via interactions and activities not involving the teacher. For example, Pastrana's (2019) study illustrated that students engaging in group work can enhance learning with the use of CDFs relating to three layers: discourse, knowledge and interaction. Similarly, problem-based tasks that students complete in groups in CLIL classes can be designed in such a way that the completion of different elements of the project requires students to engage in various CDFs for learning (del Pozo, 2019). It is also possible, and perhaps even advisable in some circumstances (e.g., if a content teacher does not have training in language pedagogy), to use an integrated approach to teaching new concepts, whereby teachers start by creating thematic patterns which can then be mapped to content in the curriculum (Wu & Lin, 2022). In addition, teachers can use the Language Quadriptych (Banegas & Mearns, 2023) as a teaching planning tool. The quadriptych consists of four types of language used by students to construct knowledge: the language *of* learning (e.g., subject-specific terms), the language *for* learning (e.g., academic/transactional language needed to complete tasks), the language *through* learning (e.g., spontaneous language needs resulting from learning), and the language *about* learning (e.g., language needed to explain metacognitive strategies, learning skills). The Language Quadriptych can support learners' development of subject matter terminology, disciplinary literacies, general academic language, and metacognitive language.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

CLIL is an approach which continues to be on an expansive trajectory either on its own or in relation to TESOL and EMI. While CLIL research and practice are in good health, as we look forward, certain aspects of its ecology may deserve further attention.

While translanguaging is a core element of CLIL, Sohn (2024) advocates for recognizing, promoting, and maximizing multilingualism in CLIL classrooms as a way to further imbue criticality and inclusion. This direction certainly aligns with ongoing developments in multilingual TESOL with the aim of mobilizing different forms of languaging among learners and educators. In so doing, CLIL practice could gain further traction in multilingual settings and schools which are not branded as bilingual education. Together with a focus on harnessing languages, Morton (2024a) stresses the necessity of improving practices and concomitant research on content in CLIL together with a

nuanced conceptualization of integration, learning, and learners. To this list, we should add teacher development. As the future of CLIL depends on a number of stakeholders, but primarily on teachers, it is also vital that further attention is paid to teachers' knowledge base in teacher education (e.g., Zhu, Peng, Shu, & Newton, 2024), their proficiency in disciplinary language (e.g., discipline-specific English), and their continuing professionalization through, perhaps, initiatives that place them at the very center of the research agenda by, for example, enabling them to carry out participatory action research studies or become co-researchers in interdisciplinary projects.

As this brief article has suggested, CLIL pedagogy, when critically implemented, has the potential to create meaningful and multilingual educational spaces through which learners can display and develop their linguistic repertoire and disciplinary literacies in formal settings from pre-primary to higher education.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

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