

# The relevance and potential of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) for achieving MT+2 in Europe

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The consultancy report Content and Language Integrated Learning: The European Dimension - Actions, Trends and Foresight Potential was submitted to the European Commission DG EAC in September 2002 (Public Services Contract 2001 – 3406/001 – 001. See Marsh 2002).

Drawing on the contents of the above report, the following has been compiled specifically for language policy representatives in order to invite further discussion on the relevance and potential of teaching non-language subject matter through a foreign language in Europe.

## Introduction

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) refers to any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content. It is dual-focused because whereas attention may be predominantly on either subject-specific content or language, both are always accommodated.

This approach is currently implemented in differing ways depending on the age-range and location of learners. It is most commonly realised by teachers of foreign languages and those of other subjects, who may, for example, provide "language showers" for 6-10 year olds (involving 30 minutes to one hour exposure per day); "language encounters" for 10-14 year olds (involving experiential blocks of some 40 hours before or parallel to formal language instruction; "dual-focused learning" for 14-19 year olds in academic streams (involving some 5-10 hours per week); or "competence building" for 16-19 year olds in vocational education and training.

There are many variants now active in European mainstream education differing not only in terms of implementation but also goals. These range from preparing children at pre-school or primary school for language learning through language awareness activities, to building self-confidence through skills development for certain vocational sector students who may not have responded favourably to earlier language instruction.

## Present situation

There is a broad consensus that a delivery gap often exists between what is provided as foreign language education, in terms of curricular investment and optimum goals, and outcomes in terms of learner attainment. The importance of having a broad range of young people leaving school with the ability to use languages other than the mother tongue is frequently stressed by member states. However, although some educational systems reportedly outperform those of others, targets for requisite competence in additional languages are not yet being sufficiently reached across the EU.

This provides an opportunity to examine how current approaches to foreign language education, as found in different systems, can be utilised, adapted or enhanced. In so doing it might be useful to view what is frequently considered as a language problem, in terms of language potential, by looking at options available. This document is about one such option that is currently attracting considerable interest across Europe. It introduces an approach for developing additional language competence that is termed content and language integrated learning.

## **Development, change and good practice**

Over the last five decades best practice in teaching and learning foreign languages has evolved from emphasis on grammar and translation in the 1950s, behaviourist forms of rote learning in the 1960s and the communicative approach of the 1970s, to those which emphasise form and function in the present day. Put simply, knowledge of a language has given way to pragmatic competence whereby a person has both knowledge and skills for actively using the given language.

Whereas in the 1950s it was often only selected students who undertook additional language learning, by the end of the century such provision was extended to broad school populations. Thus more students were seen to need more language competence, and to achieve this fresh impetus was given by various educational specialists in a range of countries as to how and when languages are best taught and learned. In the 1990s the European Commission made a recommendation that all school leavers should have some competence in both the mother tongue and two community languages (MT+2). This helped crystallise optimal educational goals, but the question of identifying an appropriate "platform for delivery" has remained largely unsolved. The reason for this has generally not been due to lack of knowledge of *what* could be done, but rather the inability to visualise *how* it could be achieved.

In the last twenty years increasing attention has been given to early foreign language learning in some states. When teaching children of 5-10 years, the methods used generally reflect those typical of primary education. Thus they usually combine form with function whereby children *learn by doing*. The same type of methodology is equally appropriate for older age groups. Some learners clearly respond well to formal language instruction where, often because of time constraints, the focus is generally on form. But there are others in the broader school population who can benefit from the same type of approach as used in primary level, where form and function are integrated and learners *use language to learn and learn to use language*. The language teaching professions have generally understood this, particularly since the 1960s when foreign language education was extended to include a greater range of young people.

## **Providing solutions**

The question of how to achieve higher levels of language learning has often been answered in terms of improving the quality of language teaching and increasing the time devoted to languages in curricula. In terms of the former, as with any profession, development has to be continuous. As regards the latter, securing extra time within curricula has often been "non-negotiable" for obvious reasons. Whereas the hallmark of this methodology is an integrated, process-oriented approach to language teaching, the requisites for success require exposure. Improving the quality of language teaching would not, itself, provide opportunities for greater exposure.

Integrating language with non-language content, in a dual-focused environment, has emerged as a solution. Success with this approach in, for example, private education and border schools, alongside implementation in other continents, has been frequently cited in support of its introduction into European mainstream education.

The most obvious reason for this is that exposure to the language can be provided without allocation of extra time within the curriculum. Theoretical justification stems from understanding of *which* type of exposure yields *what* results. For instance, low exposure, using appropriate methods, can lead to better outcomes than greater exposure that is methodologically insensitive.

If you exclude primary schools that have introduced early foreign language learning into the curriculum, some 3% of all mainstream schools in Europe are estimated to be using content and language integrated learning methodologies. The proportion of private schools is considered much higher. Although initial implementation has often been in the secondary sectors there are indicators that it is now increasingly entering primary and vocational education.

It is not only the desire of parents, and young people, to have greater competence in languages that appears to be an essential driving force for introduction of this approach. The impact of national and European initiatives, alongside professional developments within language teaching, and, in particular, grassroots demands, have resulted in its emergence as an educational innovation which suits the times, needs and aspirations of learners. In terms of foreign language learning there are signs that older learners are increasingly unwilling to *learn now for use later*, but prefer to *learn as you use and use as you learn*, which suits the immediacy of purpose common to the times. Mobility and the imminent broadband roll out are also considered likely to further impact on learner attitudes towards how they learn, particularly with regard to foreign language teaching.

## **Justification**

CLIL is seen as providing a framework for achieving best practice without imposing undue strain on either curricular time or resources. By nurturing self-confidence with both young learners and those who have not responded well to formal language instruction in general education, converting knowledge into skill with more academic learners, and responding to the domain-specific and immediacy needs of older learners, it is seen to support the creative spirit which lies at the heart of all real and genuine individual language use.

The recent experience of CLIL is clearly multi-faceted. This is not viewed as a weakness. On the contrary, it shows the extent to which the approach is used for achieving differing tangible outcomes. These may concern language learning; development of intercultural knowledge, understanding and skills; preparation for internationalisation, and improvement of some aspects of non-language education.

Theoretical justification remains tentative because European pioneering initiatives are relatively recent. However, empirical and anecdotal evidence is favourable, particularly with regard to achieving results with broad school populations. Egalitarianism has been one success factor because the approach is seen to *open doors on languages for a broader range of learners*. It has particular significance in terms of early language learning and vocational education. Both of these complement its use with the often more academically-oriented secondary school populations which tend to comprise higher academic ability learners who are likely to enter higher education. It is viewed as *inclusive* because both below average and above average ability learners have been seen to benefit from exposure.

Research suggests that the intensity and timing of exposure may be more important than high exposure, particularly with certain types of learners. Small-scale long-term exposure is therefore being viewed positively. Early introduction (4-12 years) is now increasingly under discussion as advantageous. There is no available evidence which would support the view that low (5-15% of teaching time) to medium exposure (15-50% of teaching time) would threaten the first language. English language does not have a monopoly position as a target language. In addition, teachers do not need to have native or near-native competence in the target language for all forms of delivery, although naturally they need a high level of fluency.

## **Added value**

The added value of the approach is viewed according to different sectors and types. First and foremost, this is in terms of providing greater individual economic opportunities and benefits, which, in turn, provides greater overall economic return on investment in language education. In addition, there is potential to enhance:

- social inclusion and egalitarianism through providing a greater range of young people with alternative platforms for learning languages which suit specific styles, particularly with regard to learning strategies;
- gender mainstreaming in terms of male and female performance in language learning;
- reaping the benefits of naturalistic early language learning;
- the relevance and value of limited and domain-specific competencies in languages;

- opportunities for learners to be linguistically prepared to take up their rights to study in other countries;
- school development which may lead to improvement of educational environments.

## **Conclusion**

Language teaching and learning, as delivered through the widely differing educational systems of the European Union member states, clearly needs review and development in one form or another. Some would argue that contemporary languages education has often failed to provide platforms for learning which suit a broad range of people, young and older. CLIL has emerged as a pragmatic European solution to a European need. The MT+2 formula has been recommended alongside claims that foreign languages are not sufficiently taught or learned in schools and that a considerable investment in this field is called for. A cost-effective, practical and sustainable solution may be found in this approach.

To learn a language and subject simultaneously provides an extra means of educational delivery which offers a range of benefits relating to both learning of the language, and also learning of the non-language subject matter. In addition there are social, psychological and economic benefits that suit political policies and goals. Thus there is a need to consider CLIL in terms of language policy, planning, and politics.

## **References**

Marsh, D. 2002. Content and Language Integrated Learning: The European Dimension - Actions, Trends and Foresight Potential.  
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/languages/index.html>