

## **The contribution of CLIL to learners' international orientation and EFL confidence**

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### **Abstract**

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become increasingly popular all over Europe. As the target language is invariably English, many people see CLIL as a way of helping learners develop an optimal command of English as a foreign language (EFL). The focus of many research studies has been on gains in language proficiency but the aims of CLIL reach well beyond this. The present study concentrates on whether CLIL also contributes to building pupils' confidence as EFL users, well-prepared for life in an internationalized world. Specifically, it looks at the impact on two constructs: 'EFL confidence' and 'international orientation'. The results indicate that all pupils, both CLIL and mainstream, showed a positive development on our two variables during their first two years at grammar school. The CLIL intervention seemed to produce only a small added value. This was only a small-scale study but it highlights the need for further investigation of the impact of CLIL with a wider range of learners.

**Keywords:** CLIL practice in the Netherlands; Germany and Italy; EFL learner confidence; international orientation; English-medium CLIL

**Introduction.** Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been introduced in many European countries since the 1990s onwards. This innovative approach aims to improve language learning opportunities through the use of a target second language in the teaching of a range of subjects in the school curriculum. It has been strongly promoted in Europe where considerable value has been placed on knowledge of foreign languages but conventional teaching methods have been considered inadequate for meeting learners' future communicative needs in a changing, globalized society where English has in effect become the lingua franca (Eurydice Report 2006). Even though in principle any foreign language may be used as a medium of

instruction in CLIL programs, English is the most widely implemented target language for CLIL in Europe (Dalton-Puffer 2011).

Warschauer (2000), among others, has described how the industrial societies of the past are giving way to a new economic order based on global manufacturing, and the use of new technologies. These developments have brought about extensive international trade negotiations and cooperation, and have led the European Union to promote education for multilingual and multicultural citizens in a globalized context, where travelling, studying at a foreign university or building a career in a foreign country are within reach of all. Thus, attention to foreign language education has been promoted in European school curricula. Furthermore, globalization may also be contributing to an awareness among young people that language skills are valuable in an increasingly internationalized marketplace and integrated Europe and the rest of the world. The extensive language input in CLIL classes provides additional opportunities for learners to process and use a foreign language. CLIL pupils are expected to not only learn more language for the purposes of social communication but also to develop a broader range of academic language proficiency that could potentially lay a foundation for TL use in further study or employment (Graz Group et al. 2013).

The implementation of CLIL has been the focus of research ever since it was first introduced and results suggest broadly positive outcomes. Many studies have found higher EFL proficiency levels for pupils enrolled in CLIL classes in addition to mainstream language classes (e.g. Huibregtse 2001). This was the case even when pupils were at the very early stages of CLIL. Admiraal, Westhoff and de Bot (2006) found significantly higher scores for EFL reading comprehension, general oral proficiency and pronunciation after two years of CLIL. Goris, Denessen and Verhoeven (2013) found similarly positive results for vocabulary, grammar, idioms and text comprehension in three European countries: the Netherlands, Germany and Italy, each of which have rather different CLIL approaches. Dalton-Puffer (2008) also compared research findings from CLIL in different European countries: she found positive effects for receptive language skills, vocabulary and morphology as

well as creativity, risk-taking, fluency and speaking confidence. In particular, spontaneous oral production was the area where the difference between CLIL and mainstream learners is most noticeable (Dalton-Puffer 2011).

Studies focusing on affective outcomes such as motivation, positive attitudes towards language learning, satisfaction and increased confidence have also showed positive results in favor of CLIL learners. CLIL learners tend to be more motivated to learn the foreign language than their non- CLIL counterparts and have more positive attitudes towards language learning (Doiz, Lasagabaster and Sierra 2014; Perez-Canado 2012). They also develop better communication skills and experience satisfaction when they succeed in mastering the content subjects in the foreign language, a feeling that enhances their motivation and linguistic confidence (Dale and Tanner 2012).

Research has also found that pupils following CLIL programs had higher EFL proficiency scores before starting CLIL (Rumlich 2013). Verspoor, de Bot and Xu (2015) found initial proficiency to be a strong predictor for later EFL proficiency results, an effect still present after three years of study in a CLIL class, interacting with motivation and attitudes. Otwinowska and Forys (2015) see the initial presence of favorable attitudes towards CLIL learning as a prerequisite to positive outcomes. There are questions therefore as to whether CLIL 'works' because CLIL classes tend to be 'selective', and thus the pupils following them tend to be more motivated and more proficient in the first place, or whether the CLIL approach itself can be considered the key factor in bringing about the positive outcomes highlighted by research.

The aim of the present study is to investigate how pupils in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy starting CLIL in 'grammar' schools - i.e. secondary schools preparing learners for university - differ from their peers in mainstream classes in these schools in terms of their international orientation and their perceived confidence for using their EFL skills, and how these variables develop in the two groups of pupils after two years.

### **The aims of CLIL**

CLIL is considered by some to be based on egalitarian principles and appropriate for a broad range of learners (Marsh 2002; Wolff 2002). In several European countries (e.g. Spain, Latvia and Estonia and lately in Italy), CLIL programs have been implemented with a wide range of pupils. However, in practice, CLIL still is predominantly a selective program, for which schools tend to apply strict admittance criteria: pupil selection typically depends on above-average academic performance, an adequate level of EFL and motivation to persevere (Bruton 2011). These criteria were applied by the schools participating in the present study. Several studies point out that CLIL pupils are often from internationally orientated homes (Mehisto 2007; Weenink 2005) and have a strong desire to learn English, seeing the CLIL program as a positive challenge. This suggests that they have what Gardner (1985) describes as integrative motivation, implying that they take pleasure in language learning, and have favorable attitudes towards language learning, L2 native speakers and international cultures. Integrative motivation has repeatedly been found to be conducive to successful second language learning (e.g. Dornyei, Csizer and Nemeth 2013; Dornyei and Skehan 2003; Dornyei, Csizer and Nemeth 2006).

CLIL schools have typically also fulfilled a pioneering role in internationalization in secondary education from several social perspectives. The Eurydice Report (2006) noted 'preparing pupils for life in a more internationalized society and offering them better job prospects on the labor market' among the aims of CLIL, as well as the socio-cultural aim of 'conveying to pupils values of tolerance and respect vis-a-vis other cultures'.

### **CLIL practices in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy**

In the Netherlands, of 642 secondary schools, there are at present 130 schools with English-medium CLIL programs, most of them 'grammar schools' for academically gifted pupils. Similar figures were not available for Italy or Germany. In terms of the subjects taught through CLIL in these three countries, these are determined by national or regional guidelines. There is also considerable variation in the proportion of lessons taught using CLIL in different countries: Goris, Denessen and Verhoeven (2013) found that in the Netherlands, CLIL can comprise up to 50-60% of the

curriculum, while in Germany, the percentage is about 20%. Italy has a modular approach, which means that CLIL subjects are not offered throughout the school year but in a set number of modules, increasing in number per year.

In addition to curricular subjects, CLIL often covers out-of-school activities such as English-oriented language excursions and theatre visits, international pupil exchanges and ICT projects. In this respect, schools in the three participating countries decide their own policy. CLIL school coordinators from the Netherlands and Germany taking part in this study mentioned pupils participating in public speaking contests or the European Youth Parliament as extra opportunities for EFL practice. This was not mentioned by the Italian schools.

Recent developments in CLIL practice relate to the introduction of English-taught programs into a broader range of school types. A development we wish to mention here is the project launched by the Italian Ministry of Education to make CLIL mandatory in some form in the last year of secondary high schools in order to provide not only the selected CLIL groups but all pupils with extra EFL practice in preparation for life in the twenty-first century (Lange 2014). This development took place after the data for the present study were collected and does not affect our research findings.

### **Motivation in L2 learning**

Considerable research on motivation for second language learning has been conducted by Robert Gardner and associates (Gardner 1985; Gardner and Lambert 1972). This research initially distinguished between two orientations: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation comprises the desire to belong to, and engage with, the target language culture as well as having favorable attitudes towards the learning situation, the teacher and the course. Instrumental orientation encompasses the wish to develop favorable career prospects, and is utilitarian in nature. Sociolinguistic research has confirmed that positive attitudes towards the target language community are linked to high levels of language confidence (Hummel 2013; Noels and Clement 1996). MacIntyre et al. (1998,2001) stress the fact that the major motivation to learn a foreign language is the development of communicative

relationships with target language speakers. MacIntyre et al. define the learner's 'willingness to communicate' as 'readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2' (1998:547). This is a non-cognitive variable, which was found to contribute to L2 achievement, along with linguistic confidence - the trust in one's own ability to use the foreign language adequately. This feeling of confidence and the absence of anxiety are mentioned as a positive influence on a person's willingness to use the foreign language (Dornyei and Skehan 2003).

In later versions of his work on L2 motivation, Gardner (2010) looked at motivation in classroom learning and noted that it was affected by 'the teacher, the class atmosphere, the course content, materials and facilities, as well as personal characteristics of the student' (2010: 3). This aspect was integrated in Dornyei and Hadfield's 'L2 Motivational Self' (2013) and relates to the impact of success in the language classroom on the development of confidence in one's L2 skills.

### **The present study**

As we have discussed, present-day educational policy in Europe, and CLIL in particular, typically aims to promote in young people a positive attitude towards other cultures and an interest in global affairs, together with confident advanced language skills which would enable them to take up studies at a foreign university if they so choose, or start a career abroad. To what extent CLIL adds value to the achievement of these aims is the key question motivating this study.

The specific research questions for the study are as follows:

- 1) Are pupils who have chosen to follow CLIL in grammar schools in the Netherlands, Germany and Italy more internationally orientated and more confident in their EFL skills than their mainstream peers at the outset of the CLIL program?
- 2) Does CLIL contribute more to pupils' international orientation and EFL confidence than mainstream education in the course of the first two years at grammar school in these three countries?

### **Discussion**

The aim of the present study was to explore whether the CLIL approach, as

compared to the mainstream curriculum, adds value in enabling young European learners to develop into confident EFL speakers, prepared for life in a global world. Our research found that the CLIL programs investigated in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy attracted pupils not only with higher initial EFL proficiency than mainstream learners, as shown by our previous research (Goris, Denessen and Verhoeven 2013) but also with an above-average linguistic confidence and interest in the international world. This was the case in all three countries, even though there was some variation between groups and countries in the detail of results. At the pre-test, the scores of Italian pupils on EFL confidence and international orientation lagged behind those of pupils in Germany and the Netherlands. This may be because their native language is of Roman, rather than Germanic, origins; but further, the introduction of EFL as a common curriculum subject in Italian primary education is of a relatively recent date as compared to the other two countries, where primary EFL lessons have been generally adopted over the past few decades. The Dutch CLIL pupils were the most confident EFL users, but the German CLIL classes also started with relatively high scores in EFL confidence and also had the highest initial scores on international orientations.

Our results suggest that the EFL CLIL approach in these three countries did not produce a significantly greater increase in learners' international orientation and language confidence than the mainstream approach: CLIL pupils developed positively, but so did mainstream pupils, and largely to the same degree. Assuming that there was a general inclusion of a global dimension in the curriculum (Mannion et al. 2011), CLIL learners did not develop any particular advantage over non-CLIL pupils as far as international orientation was concerned; rather, it appears that there was a positive development across the grammar schools on this construct.

In this respect, only a few differences between groups (CLIL vs. mainstream) and between countries could be discerned. In the Netherlands and Italy, all groups - both CLIL and control - developed along the same lines: they all became significantly more positively orientated towards international culture, foreign languages and the role of the English language. In Germany, however, the control group increased in

international orientation while the CLIL group decreased. One explanation may be found in the fact that one of the two participant schools was located in Berlin, where CLIL primary schools with a variety of target languages are common practice in order to accommodate the multicultural population. Primary CLIL learners are immersed in international thinking from a very early age, which may well account for German pupils' high initial scores on international orientation. It may be that this, then, did not leave much room for growth. The mainstream pupils, on the other hand, started with lower scores, and it seems likely that they benefitted more from the general international orientation of their surroundings and contacts with CLIL schoolmates. As to EFL confidence, the variation in development between groups and countries was even smaller: no significant interaction effects were found.

In interpreting our results, several limitations should be borne in mind. In the first place, the number of participants was small and moreover, they were spread across several nations, resulting in limited numbers of participants per group. The comparison of countries has led to interesting results, yet it is very hard to generalize them to a larger population. More comprehensive studies are necessary to come to a robust value of CLIL. A further limitation lies in the fact that the CLIL groups started with higher initial scores than the control groups. It would have been useful to compare CLIL groups with control groups of mainstream learners having the same pre-test scores but who were studying in similar, but non-CLIL, schools. Even non-CLIL learners sometimes prefer schools offering a CLIL stream because of the international orientation this reflects; it is conceivable that the learning experience of these pupils in such schools is in fact influenced by the 'side-effects' of CLIL on the general school climate. Thus, the differences between the CLIL and mainstream results in the present study must be interpreted with caution.

Despite the fact that the results of the present study do not suggest conclusively that CLIL adds value in terms of promoting international orientation and EFL confidence, it should be noted that the CLIL programs studied did generally provide an inspiring learning environment for the select group of the most motivated and confident EFL learners. The CLIL approach was generally successful in pushing high initial scores

on international orientation and EFL confidence even higher.

Our research findings give rise to suggestions for future research. It would be helpful to investigate further the development of the non-cognitive variables discussed in the present study over a greater length of time. As the age of learners increases, their educational focus may shift. Their international orientation may be affected by what goes on in the world; their cultural interests may develop in a different direction, and likewise their confidence as an EFL user.

A notable outcome of the present study is that, while mainstream learners have far less contact with target language speakers than CLIL learners, this apparently does not mean that their EFL confidence develops very differently. This raises the question of how the wider range of mainstream learners would perform in a non-selective CLIL context. Marsh (2013) sees CLIL as a particularly appropriate educational approach for today's young language learners, and likely to benefit a broad range of learners, not just a privileged group. As mentioned earlier, this has been a recent initiative in Italy where EFL through CLIL has now been made mandatory in the last year of secondary school. Such initiatives call for further studies to investigate the extent to which the positive outcomes for CLIL, both in language proficiency and in international outlook, are maintained with non-selective implementation. A further issue would be to identify the strategies CLIL content teachers use to implement CLIL effectively with more diverse learner groups, and what attitudes and beliefs support them.

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