

The Efficacy of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Promoting English Language Proficiency in Italian State Secondary Education: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has become a central pedagogical approach in European education, particularly in contexts where improving foreign language competence is a priority. In Italy, CLIL has been formally integrated into upper secondary education to strengthen students' English proficiency while simultaneously developing subject-specific knowledge. This article explores how CLIL could enhance English language learning in Italian high schools by examining its theoretical foundations, implementation within the Italian educational system, and its linguistic and motivational benefits for learners. This study was conducted in Italy and employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data in order to investigate CLIL's impact. The data gathering processes consist of CEFR-aligned English proficiency tests at B1/B2 levels, structured for 12 students and semi-structured interviews with 4 teachers. Drawing on existing research and educational theory, the paper discusses the impact of CLIL on vocabulary acquisition, communicative competence, and academic language development, as well as the challenges faced by Italian teachers and state institutions. The analysis suggests that, when effectively implemented, CLIL has the potential to represent a robust pedagogical approach, fostering language acquisition and promoting learner autonomy, though its success depends on adequate teacher training and institutional support.

Keywords: CLIL implementation; EFL; language proficiency; pedagogical approach; SLA



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1. Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, proficiency in English has become a key educational objective across Europe. Educational systems are therefore required to adopt innovative teaching approaches capable of enhancing language competence while maintaining high standards of subject learning. One such approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which involves teaching non-language subjects through a foreign language, most commonly English (Marsh, 2002). CLIL has been strongly promoted by European institutions as a means of fostering multilingualism, intercultural competence, and lifelong learning skills (European Commission, 2014). In Italy, CLIL was officially introduced into upper secondary education as part of a national reform aimed at modernizing foreign language education and aligning it with European recommendations (MIUR, 2010).

This article explores how CLIL can enhance English language learning in Italian high schools. It examines the theoretical principles underlying CLIL, the specific characteristics of its implementation in Italy, and the linguistic benefits associated with this approach. Additionally, it addresses the challenges encountered in practice and considers the conditions necessary for CLIL to be effective.

2. Materials and Methods

This study was conducted in Italy and employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data in order to analyze CLIL's impact. The data gathering processes consist of CEFR-aligned English proficiency tests (reading, listening, writing and speaking at B1/B2 levels structured for 12 students and semi-structured interviews with 4 teachers (2 English language and literature specialists and 2 teachers of non-language content subjects who had an advanced level of English (C1) certified by Cambridge Assessment. As far as the four tests are concerned, firstly, the reading comprehension section consisted of 30 multiple-choice questions and had a duration of 30 minutes. Secondly, the listening test comprised 25 questions on conversations and monologues with a time allowance of 30 minutes. Thirdly, the writing task required the participants to produce a 150-word essay on a general topic with a 40-minute time frame. Lastly, the speaking task involved a 5-minute role-play followed by a discussion with the examiner lasting 15 minutes in total. Regarding the interviews with the teachers, I deliberately opted for semi-structured interviews as I wished to have a closer interaction with the participants and set in advance the questions that I could ask them. Moreover, this approach has the advantage of allowing the researcher to supply all the information to the interviewees, with regard to the type of investigation being done. Conversely, a potential limitation of this research method lies in the researcher's skill and the interaction duration, which can impact the quality of data gathered (Kumar, 2005).

The option of employing focus groups and questionnaires was discarded, as focus groups entail a semi-structured interview format requiring a minimum of five participants (Kumar, 2014). Given the small participant pool characteristic of the teaching context under investigation, I determined that this approach would be unsuitable for the present study. Similarly, questionnaires were deemed unsuitable as the intention was to conduct in-person discussions, thereby enabling the provision of detailed explanations regarding the study's objectives and the participants' roles.

The questions asked in the first part of the interviews ranged over the effectiveness of combining language and content as to promote foreign language development; what is the efficacy of CLIL program in boosting FL proficiency; how teachers manage to adapt their teaching strategies in a CLIL classroom; what are the challenges that they tend to face when implementing CLIL, and in what way they manage to overcome them; which are their perceptions regarding how CLIL enhances students' motivation to learn English. The second and concluding part of the interviews explored how they assess language learning outcomes in a CLIL context, and it is also required to describe a successful CLIL lesson or activity along with the support or training that would help them improve CLIL implementations.

3. Results

CLIL is grounded in several influential theories of second language acquisition (SLA) and educational psychology. A central assumption of CLIL is that language learning is more effective when language is used as a means to learn meaningful content rather than as an isolated object of study (Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

One of the most influential frameworks in CLIL pedagogy is Coyle's 4Cs Framework, which identifies four interrelated components: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (Coyle et al., 2010). According to this model, effective CLIL instruction must simultaneously address language development, subject learning, intercultural awareness and cognitive engagement.

From a linguistic standpoint, CLIL is closely linked to theories of input and interaction. Krashen's Input Hypothesis highlights the importance of comprehensible input for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985), while interactionist theories emphasize the role of meaningful communication and negotiation of meaning. CLIL classrooms typically offer abundant linguistic input and opportunities for engagement, enabling students to develop their English skills through comprehension and expression of concepts. CLIL also draws on Cummins' distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). By engaging learners in cognitively demanding tasks through English, CLIL facilitates the acquisition of academic language skills that are often underdeveloped in conventional language teaching approaches (Cummins, 2008).

Regarding the Italian education system, the introduction of CLIL in high schools represents a major shift in teaching practice. CLIL became compulsory in the final year of *Licei* and technical institutes, where one non-linguistic subject has to be taught in a foreign language, typically English (MIUR, 2010). To further elucidate, the Italian government's legislative reform (L.107/2015) introduced explicit provisions into the Italian education system, which have been strongly advocated for secondary schools, particularly in the realms of foreign languages and technical institutes (Civinini, 2016). This legislative reform underscores the efficacy of CLIL methodology in educational settings, explicitly encouraging institutions to develop initiatives that augment English language acquisition. In Italy, CLIL projects were initially proposed by the former Minister of Education, Gelmini, with a particular focus on integration within *Licei linguistici* specialist high schools devoted to the study of foreign languages (MIUR, 2010). As previously mentioned, this methodology presents a potential enhancement to conventional EFL instructional approaches utilized in formal educational contexts, offering a more efficacious alternative to other strategies designed to address prevailing deficiencies in English language proficiency development (Hughes & Madrid, 2019). However, the recent integration of CLIL into formal school curricula poses a significant challenge for both foreign language and subject teachers. The adoption of CLIL in Italian schools remains limited as this approach is still in an experimental phase. This can be primarily attributed to a shortage of suitably skilled teachers and a scarcity of resources within institutions (Cinganotto, 2016). Nevertheless, despite its formal introduction, CLIL implementation in Italy varies considerably across schools and regions. Research suggests that differences in language proficiency, teacher training and institutional support have a significant impact on the quality of CLIL provision (Di Martino & Di Sabato, 2012). In many cases, CLIL teachers are subject specialists who might have received limited methodological training in language teaching, and this can affect classroom practices. Yet, studies conducted in Italian

high schools indicate that CLIL increases students' exposure to English and contributes positively to their attitudes toward L2 learning (Coonan, 2007). It appears that even partial or flexible use of English in subject teaching has been shown to offer valuable opportunities for authentic language use. A widely acknowledged advantage of this methodology is the significant increase in exposure to the target language. Compared to traditional English lessons, CLIL provides extended contact with English in academic contexts, which is crucial for language development (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). In particular, results indicate that vocabulary acquisition is notably facilitated through CLIL. Students are exposed to academic discourse and subject-specific terminology, thereby expanding their lexical repertoire and fostering linguistic sophistication (Nation, 2001). Because vocabulary is learnt in contexts and linked to conceptual understanding, retention is often stronger than in decontextualized language learning activities. Besides, this technique also promotes the enhancement of communicative competence. Learners are required to use English to present information, discuss concepts and ask questions, which fosters pragmatic competence and fluency. Hence, research suggests that CLIL learners seem to demonstrate increased confidence in using English for purposeful interaction (Lasagabaster, 2008).

Moreover, this method promotes the advancement of academic skills such as reading complex texts, listening to extended explanations, and producing structured written and oral output. These abilities are closely related to CALP and are essential for success in higher education and international contexts (Cummins, 2008). In addition to linguistic gains, CLIL has been associated with significant cognitive benefits. To further explain, learning subject content through a foreign language encourages deeper processing and the use of higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis and evaluation (Coyle et al., 2010).

Furthermore, motivation plays a crucial role in FL learning, and this approach seems to have a positive impact on learner motivation. Students often perceive CLIL lessons as relevant and more engaging since English serves as a means to attain specific learning objectives, rather than being treated as a subject of abstract study (Dörnyei, 2001). The outcome is that this increased motivation can lead to greater effort and persistence in language learning. Additionally, in the Italian context, CLIL has also been found to improve learners' self-confidence and attitudes toward English, especially when lessons are interactive and well-scaffolded (Coonan, 2007).

In light of the above, Genesee and Hamayan (2016) maintain that the integration of content into additional language teaching enhances its productivity.

This concept pertains to the enhanced value attributed to meaning construction in L2 instruction when not only do the learning objectives encompass the target language, but also the subject-specific content conveyed through the medium of the FL.

In other words, a notable advantage of certain content-based (immersion) initiatives, particularly CLIL, is that learners are afforded dual benefits in a single instructional context (Bruton, 2013). Then, CLIL methodology seems to provide both students and teachers with enhanced opportunities to engage with novel subject matter innovatively, fostering an appreciation for knowledge sharing, skill development and collaborative activities, whilst cultivating a supportive learning environment that optimizes student motivation in SLA (Villabona & Cenoz, 2021). Hence, contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies, specifically those targeting spoken English, necessitate revision within the Italian educational context. A revised syllabus, prioritizing learner-centered activities and diminishing the prevalence of traditional

teacher-led instruction, could effectively address the current deficiencies and cater to the distinct needs of Italian learners. In this regard, CLIL may catalyze positive change, enabling educators to adopt innovative practices, enhance their English proficiency and refine classroom management strategies, ultimately yielding improved instructional outcomes.

4. Discussion

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to investigate CLIL's impact

This mixed-method approach combined pre-/post-test data from 12 students (CLIL *vs* non-CLIL) with thematic analysis of teacher interviews.

On the one hand, the results of quantitative research indicate that CLIL students outperformed non-CLIL peers; in particular, CLIL students scored higher in reading and listening. To further explain, the mean scores were the following: CLIL (reading: 22/30, listening: 18/25) *vs* non-CLIL (reading: 18/30, listening: 14/25). There were no significant differences in writing and speaking scores. On the other hand, the results of the qualitative approach show that teachers reported increased engagement and collaboration in CLIL classes, citing benefits like authentic language use and interdisciplinary connections.

CLIL's positive impact aligns with previous studies indicating that it is a versatile methodological approach, characterized by a dual potential for beneficial and detrimental consequences. It seems to be marked by considerable intricacy and stringent requirements, rendering it vulnerable to potential malfunction. First and foremost, one of the main issues that emerged from the interviews is that the nature of the learning material employed can exert a profound influence on EFL learners' attitudes, thereby underscoring their crucial role. Secondly, two teachers claimed that an initial strategy for catering to the needs of Italian FL learners would entail identifying school subjects amenable to CLIL adaptation and integration, thereby fostering the development of EFL speaking skills. Studies on CLIL pedagogy suggest that scientific and technical subjects may offer greater potential for developing EFL learners' speaking skills through CLIL projects than humanities-based subjects (Valdés-Sánchez & Espinet, 2020). Costa (2013) argues that humanities subjects, notwithstanding their seemingly greater suitability for this approach owing to the more pronounced language engagement in class, are typically not recommended for CLIL methodology owing to the inherent intricacy and specialized nature of their lexicon. Conversely, Smith (Dalton-Puffer, 2011) contests this hypothesis, asserting that technical and scientific topics tend to constrain opportunities and genuine interaction, largely due to the teacher's predominant role as subject matter expert. These findings underscore the need for more detailed examination. Consequently, further empirical research and pedagogical experimentations are necessary to identify the most efficacious subject types for this approach, to enhance learners' ability to communicate effectively in the TL. Nevertheless, according to the 4 interviewees, the primary challenges associated with CLIL programs may be influenced by a range of variables, including the teachers' preparatory training, the complexity of identifying and selecting relevant material, the learners' proficiency level in the L2 and the assessment strategies utilized for evaluating student progress.

Research indicates that the efficacy of CLIL and students' positive responses are contingent upon the type of materials employed, which need to be simple and ap-

proachable. In contrast, the utilization of unsuitable material risks exacerbating learner indecision and anxiety, then leading to complete disengagement and rejection of this methodology (Coyle et al., 2010). Some educators assert that suitably selected materials in the FL can foster the TL learning by motivating students, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that certain students may perceive this as an additional and superfluous burden (Bruton, 2013). As mentioned above, CLIL is a noteworthy innovation, however, its implementation in Italy has been suboptimal, with the government introducing it in high schools without adequately addressing crucial factors, notably teacher training and preparation, as well as the essential resources required for effective CLIL implementation (Costa, 2013).

An effective CLIL project straightforward application necessitates, primarily, the presence of well-trained and skilled teaching staff at both the institutional and individual student levels (Banegas, 2018). The success of CLIL programs hinges on teachers' proficiency in the subject content and their mastery of the FL involved. Presently, Italian schools seem to face a shortage of teachers with the necessary competencies. Di Martino and Di Sabato (2012) indicate that Italian teachers encounter challenges in implementing this methodology, highlighting a need for targeted professional development programs in CLIL. During the interviews, further considerations have arisen regarding the feasibility of retraining veteran teachers along with the most effective training modalities to support CLIL introduction, and, crucially, the specific resources required by Italian state school students to achieve proficient English language skills through this approach. The data examined in this study imply that further research is necessary. Supposedly, joint teaching initiatives involving EFL educators and teachers of other subjects can contribute to improved communicative competence among FL learners with varying levels of proficiency, whilst cultivating effective speaking strategies through CLIL-oriented activities. As maintained by Cingarotto (2016), Italian subject-area teachers, similar to EFL specialists, ought to possess a minimum of C1-level English proficiency (CEFR) to undergo training in CLIL methodology. Unfortunately, it appears that, in Italy, only a limited number of teachers meet this linguistic threshold. Another key finding that arose during the interviews was that since CLIL is an innovative pedagogical approach centred on cooperative learning, essential resources required for its effective experimentation may include multimedia tools, such as ICT laboratories with open internet connectivity. This result highlights the intrinsic link between CLIL and technology. The emerging field of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL), which emphasizes the interrelationship between CLIL, SLA and technological integration, strongly advocates the utilization of technology in educational settings to support diverse stages of the learning and teaching process (Walker & White, 2014).

Hence, the integration of digital materials, online tools, open educational resources and multimedia platforms is likely to enhance the efficacy of a CLIL learning environment. As a result, the potential of learning technologies may add value to CLIL programs, promoting learner motivation, teacher innovation and improved learning outcomes.

Accordingly, the resulting outcome is that CLIL can facilitate context-based EFL through interactive and practical means. Moreover, this approach can have the potential to enhance speaking skills, as students are likely to feel more at ease when communicating in English, with reduced anxiety regarding error-making of assessment, since CLIL instructors are typically subject specialists rather than foreign lan-

guage teachers. Consequently, the study of a CLIL subject requires that EFL be regarded not as a standalone subject, but as a means of conveying subject-specific content (Coyle et al., 2010). Thus, CLIL can be seen as a key contributor to more effective EFL speaking instruction, as it aims to arouse learners' interest, augment enthusiasm and stimulate curiosity. Achieving this goal necessitates students' profound engagement in classroom activities, positioning them as central actors in their own learning trajectories. This is facilitated by CLIL's pioneering approach, which prioritizes interactive, experimental learning and teaching practices (Mehisto et al., 2008). Furthermore, CLIL tasks frequently incorporate teamwork, necessitating the active participation of all students in project-based learning exercises, the outcomes of which may include posters, digital products and interactive displays. Studies suggest that many L2 learners exhibit increased confidence when speaking in pairs, as opposed to whole-class settings. CLIL is well-suited to address this need, as its emphasis is on cooperative learning, peer collaboration, promoting active participation and the development of communicative abilities in a supportive, low-pressure environment (Hedge, 2000).

In view of the preceding discussion, to ensure that CLIL effectively enhances EFL, several pedagogical strategies should be adopted. Teacher training programs should integrate language awareness and CLIL methodology, and collaboration between subject and language teachers should be encouraged (Coyle et al., 2010). Scaffolding strategies, such as pre-teaching of key vocabulary, visual support and guided tasks, are essential to make content accessible while promoting language development. These strategies are particularly important in heterogeneous classrooms.

Finally, notwithstanding its potential, research in this area indicates that CLIL methodology presents several challenges, as acknowledged by the participants in this study. Firstly, one major issue concerns learners with lower levels of English proficiency, who may struggle to cope with cognitively demanding content in a foreign language (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Then, without adequate scaffolding, CLIL may increase cognitive overload. Secondly, teacher preparation remains a critical concern in Italy. Many CLIL teachers report difficulties concerning material development, language proficiency and assessment practices (Di Martino & Di Sabato, 2012).

Assessment seems to be particularly complex, as teachers must balance the evaluation of language competence and content knowledge.

5. Conclusions

All things considered, the obvious conclusion that could be drawn is that CLIL represents a significant innovation in Italian high school education and offers substantial potential for enhancing English language learning. By integrating content and language, CLIL increases meaningful exposure to English, supports academic language development, and fosters learner motivation. Although challenges related to teacher training, assessment, and learner diversity remain, research suggests that these issues can be addressed through targeted professional development and institutional support. Overall, CLIL can be considered an effective approach for preparing Italian students to use English confidently in academic and professional contexts.

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