Essay

Emerging From Content and Language Integrated Learning and English-Medium Instruction, is CLIL-ised EMI the Next Trend of Education?

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Abstract

Objectives: The text aims to present a comparison of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and English-Medium Instruction (EMI), followed by a discussion of CLIL-ised EMI, a new educational phenomenon, regarding its feasibility in content-based bilingual programmes.

Method: The ideas presented in this paper are principally drawn from previous research and literature about CLIL and EMI, as well as from my personal experience with content-based bilingual education programmes.

Results: Although CLIL and EMI differ in nature, CLIL-ised EMI supplements traditional EMI, which has a single objective of content learning, with special attention to students' needs, particularly their linguistic needs. It may pose challenges to teachers, especially in relation to their language-teaching activities.

Conclusions: CLIL-ised EMI shows considerable feasibility in bilingual education and can overcome the linguistic challenges faced by students in content-based programmes.

Implication for Practice: CLIL-ised EMI teachers are advised to be attentive to students' linguistic demands and engage in professional collaboration with language specialists to design and provide well-planned language learning activities. Standardisation and quality control of bilingual programmes are also necessary at an institutional level.

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Introduction

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) refers to "a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language" (Coyle et al., 2010, p.

1). With the popularisation of multilingualism, CLIL has gained significant recognition in both educational practice and research. Another important form of bilingual education is English-medium instruction (EMI), where English is used as the language of instruction in subjects other than English, and it has also experienced global growth across all educational stages (Macaro, 2018). While the terms CLIL and EMI are sometimes used interchangeably at the layperson's level (Abdujabborova & Sadirova, 2020), they differ in nature (Bellés-Fortuño, 2021; Carrió-Pastor, 2021). Consequently, some European countries and regions have begun implementing CLIL in secondary schools and adopting EMI in higher education (Macaro et al., 2019). This practice is justified by the fact that CLIL can address both the content and language knowledge gaps in school learners, while EMI better caters to university students, who possess English proficiency but lack knowledge in specific disciplines (Macaro, 2018). In recent years, however, the concept of CLIL-ised EMI has emerged in higher education, in which EMI is used not only for content delivery but also as a means for students to improve their English skills (Aguilar-Pérez, 2022; Moncada-Comas & Block, 202). This blurs the distinctions between CLIL and EMI, prompting contemplation on whether CLIL-ised EMI should become an educational trend or is merely a fallacy to be dispelled. As a novice researcher in content-based bilingual education, I aim here to briefly address this issue and present a preliminary understanding for further discussion.

Comparisons of CLIL and EMI

To assess the feasibility of CLIL-ised EMI, a critical comparison of CLIL and EMI can provide a fundamental understanding. To reiterate, CLIL is an approach that integrates the teaching of a second or foreign language (L2) with content instruction. Its aim is to provide students with an authentic language learning experience, develop their language skills through the use of the target language in content-based activities, and help them acquire proficiency in subject matters (Coyle et al., 2020). What makes CLIL particularly attractive is its 4Cs Framework, which integrates "content (subject matter), communication (language learning and use), cognition (learning and thinking processes), and culture (developing intercultural understanding and global citizenship)" in authentic contexts (Coyle et al., 2010, p. 41). CLIL allows teachers considerable flexibility in determining the balance between language learning and content learning. For instance, language-driven CLIL primarily emphasises language learning and is typically implemented by native or non-native language teachers. In contrast, content-driven CLIL occurs when teaching and learning focus primarily on the subject content (Rojas, 2021). Both language-driven CLIL and content-driven CLIL have dual learning objectives, which distinguishes them from other pedagogical approaches to L2 learning. On the other hand, EMI is an approach that utilises English as the primary medium of instruction in academic subjects. It is often employed in educational contexts where English is not the native language, with the goal of providing students with an immersive language-learning experience and preparing them for further education or employment in an English-speaking environment (Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021). The dual objectives of content and language learning in CLIL differ from the sole objective of content learning in EMI.

This principal difference first highlights that CLIL and EMI students are expected to have different levels of language proficiency before enrolling in a content-based programme. In CLIL, students may have varying language proficiency levels, necessitating the provision of language support to help them develop language skills (Hermawati, 2022). On the other hand, with EMI, the expectation is that students have a high level of language proficiency before entering the programme, as they need to understand subject matters and to communicate effectively in English in an academic setting (Bakkar, 2021). This distinction explains why CLIL has been mostly implemented in secondary schools and sometimes in primary schools, as well, by both language and content teachers, while EMI is usually adopted at the tertiary level by subject specialists proficient in English (Macaro et al., 2019). Furthermore, this difference shapes the role of teachers. An EMI instructor should focus on content learning during lesson planning, teaching, and assessment, while a CLIL teacher must balance content and language instruction and ensure that they provide adequate language support, without compromising the quality of content instruction.

It is important to note, however, that CLIL and EMI share a content-based and communicative approach to bilingual education (Carrió-Pastor, 2021). That is, both approaches emphasise authentic language communication through the medium of content instruction in a given discipline. Perhaps because of this overlap—likely the only overlap—CLIL is often incorrectly equated with EMI. L2 researchers and scholars suggest that CLIL and EMI are "two of a kind" organised across different educational levels and that CLIL can be an umbrella term referring to "any teaching of a non-language subject," including EMI, "through the medium of a second or foreign language" (Abdujabborova & Sadirova, 2020, p. 32; see also, for example, Colibaba et al., 2015). I believe this idea is largely conjectural and worthy of deliberation.

As explained above, some researchers may distinguish CLIL from EMI based on educational levels. However, in accordance with Hu et al. (2023), I believe that the different educational levels at which CLIL and EMI programmes have been implemented should be viewed as a context-specific phenomenon, rather than the crucial factor in differentiating between CLIL and EMI, in both theory and practice. Instead, the needs of the students, particularly their linguistic needs, play a vital role in determining whether a content-based programme should be organised under CLIL or EMI. In other words, CLIL is more suitable for learners who are not proficient enough in an L2 and require systematic instruction in the classroom to develop their language proficiency, whereas EMI is more effective for learners who are capable users of the L2 and can actively engage in an immersive environment. This is why we have seen many successful CLIL programmes organised in colleges and universities to help learners develop proficiency in both a discipline and an L2 (Coyle et al., 2020) and also EMI classes delivered effectively to young learners in, for example, international schools, where English immersion is the norm (Sahiruddin & Manipuspika, 2021), contradicting the typical progression from CLIL in schools to EMI in higher education.

The Feasibility of CLIL-ised EMI

Against the binary view of CLIL and EMI, however, it is argued that CLIL-ised EMI occupies a middle ground. To clarify, CLIL-ised EMI is an approach where a content-based course is taught in English. While its primary aim is to facilitate content learning, it also emphasises the development of English proficiency. This characteristic sets CLIL-ised EMI apart from traditional EMI. In other words, CLIL-ised EMI complements EMI by prioritising language development alongside content learning. As a language teacher, I would like to spotlight CLIL-ised EMI, because it embodies a humanistic approach to education that takes into account student needs, particularly their linguistic ones. Previous research, conducted in different socio-educational contexts, has revealed that EMI students often lack proficiency in English, which hinders their effective learning (Christian & Bailey, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022; Truong et al., 2020). Therefore, I believe CLIL-ised EMI surpasses traditional EMI by providing greater linguistic support for students in a language immersion programme.

CLIL-ised EMI, an intriguing educational phenomenon examined in the research conducted by Moncada-Comas and Block (2021), should be considered as a practical approach that instructors responsible for content-based programmes should adopt. These programmes have a twofold purpose: not only to disseminate knowledge in the discipline but also to facilitate content learning by providing appropriate language scaffolding. Considering the linguistic challenges faced by EMI students, such as a lack of discipline-specific vocabulary and difficulties with the rules and patterns of English, it has been suggested that additional support in English for academic purposes (EAP) or specific purposes (ESP) should be offered concurrently with EMI classes (Sahan & Şahan, 2022). This additional support would provide learners with the necessary linguistic assistance to engage in more profound content learning. Kling and Del Corona (2020) similarly recommended that instructors, recognising the multilingual backgrounds of EMI learners, should be sensitive to their language needs, and "juggle and diversify the language input when they teach and consider sources and methods to support students in a new learning context" (p. 4). These proposals underscore the viability of

CLIL-ised EMI, which complements traditional EMI by giving special attention to language learning and aligns with an inclusive philosophy that accommodates student diversity (Kamis et al., 2021). Consequently, it enables learners with varying levels of language proficiency to succeed in content learning.

While the essence of CLIL-ised EMI lies in supplementing traditional EMI with additional language support, one may wonder about the differences between CLIL-ised EMI and EMI supported by ESP (i.e. teaching and learning English as an L2 with the goal of using it in a particular domain) or EAP (i.e. teaching and studying English courses that have a specific focus on areas of the language related to academic study), as suggested by Sahan and Şahan (2022). Admittedly, language teachers may find it difficult to differentiate these concepts in terms of language learning specifics (Hermawati, 2022). However, I would like to spotlight CLIL-ised EMI and regard language learning within it, if ideal, as an umbrella that covers different types of languages essential to effective functioning in content-based programmes. This means, for example, EMI teachers can consult The Language Triptych when planning and organising language learning activities, which is a useful framework that specifies three types of language essential to content-based programmes: language of learning (i.e. language related to understanding the subject), language for learning (i.e. functional language for carrying out learning activities), and language through learning (i.e. new language that may arise during learning) (Coyle et al., 2010). Additionally, the CLIL Matrix provides practical implications for EMI instructors, who can plan and sequence learning activities according to learners' cognitive and linguistic demands, considering both basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency (Coyle et al., 2010). In these ways, I propose ESP and EAP can both be included in content-based programmes. The key point, from my perspective, is not to draw a clear boundary between language learning in CLIL with ESP or EAP, but rather to facilitate language learning in a way that best meets the needs of EMI students.

However, I believe that regardless of how systematically language learning is addressed in CLIL-ised EMI, it should always prioritise being content-driven. This characteristic of CLIL-ised EMI is similar to the aforementioned content-driven CLIL, wherein subjects from the standard curriculum are taught in an L2, with content objectives taking precedence over language objectives (Rojas, 2021). From this perspective, it is assumed that both CLIL-ised EMI and content-driven CLIL are likely to yield the same outcomes in terms of language and content development. One could argue that CLIL-ised EMI, as a variation of EMI, distinguishes itself from CLIL due to its universal applicability in higher education. If we consider the transition from CLIL in schools to EMI in higher education, this distinction does hold merit. However, as mentioned earlier, the criterion for determining whether a content-based programme should be classified as CLIL or EMI does not depend on educational levels but rather on contextual needs (Hu et al., 2023). In this sense, my point is that CLIL-ised EMI can be implemented at various educational levels, ranging from schools to universities, as long as it is deemed appropriate for learner development by the stakeholders involved.

From a different perspective, I aim to distinguish between content-driven CLIL and CLIL-ised EMI by highlighting, as suggested by Hu (2022), that these pedagogical approaches tend to shape distinct teacher identities and mindsets. In other words, teachers involved in content-driven CLIL or CLIL-ised EMI programmes may perceive and fulfil their roles as language and/or content teachers in different ways. In CLIL, teachers typically see themselves as responsible for both content and language learning (Coyle et al., 2010). However, CLIL-ised EMI places more emphasis on content, with language learning occurring as a secondary outcome. Consequently, those who adopt a CLIL-ised EMI approach may consider themselves primarily as content teachers who happen to be teaching in an L2. This difference aligns with Moncada-Comas and Block's (2021) argument that the nature of CLIL-ised EMI will be questioned if instructors do not perceive EMI as an opportunity to develop students' proficiency in content-specific language and communication.

This challenge is intertwined with the need for balancing language and content learning in CLIL-ised EMI.

According to Moncada-Comas and Block (2021), CLIL-ised EMI has the potential to enhance language learning, but there is a risk that the emphasis on content may overshadow language development, leading to a lack of progress in language skills. CLIL itself inherently integrates language learning as a crucial element, expecting students to participate in various language-related activities (e.g. language production tasks) to enhance their language abilities (Coyle et al., 2010). However, in CLIL-ised EMI settings, language learning activities may not be adequately tailored to address individual student needs and can be as basic as "vocabulary learning through the provision of glossaries and translation," a case reported by Moncada-Comas and Block (2021, p. 686).

Undoubtedly, this practice effectively ensures that EMI students acquire a fundamental understanding of disciplinary knowledge while addressing their language needs, as confirmed by previous research (Romli et al., 2021; Sulaiman & Salehuddin, 2022). However, I suggest that teachers must carefully consider student needs, maintain a balance between language and content learning, and plan lessons accordingly for the successful implementation of CLIL-ised EMI. In particular, it is crucial to analyse and understand students' linguistic needs, which will inform the organisation of well-designed language learning activities guided by theories such as The Language Triptych and The CLIL Matrix. Based on my personal experience, it is evident that students in content-based programmes may possess different levels of language proficiency, and some may struggle to keep up with the content if language learning activities are not adequately integrated. Therefore, teachers should assess their students' language abilities and customise language learning activities to ensure they are suitable for all students. Considering that many EMI instructors are content specialists with a limited understanding of L2 education (Mastellotto & Zanin, 2021), continuous collaboration with L2 specialists is indispensable. Their involvement in the course design and sometimes even delivery can breathe new life into EMI courses. Additionally, professional training is essential. Such training equips teachers with the necessary pedagogical foundations to effectively integrate language learning into content instruction, making it more attainable.

To achieve the goals of CLIL-ised EMI at an institutional level, explicit clarification of administrative guidelines, teaching activities, learning outcome development, assignments, and assessments should be outlined to standardise lesson planning and delivery and to truly accommodate L2 instruction in EMI. I assume this standardisation and quality control are missing from many education providers, as they are from mine. My professional experience has shown me that many classroom teachers have been or are being pretty much burdened down with the responsibility of implementing successful content-based bilingual programmes all on their lonesome, without adequate support and resources. As a teacher who has been involved in implementing content-based programmes and navigating the complexities of bilingual education, I can personally attest to the overwhelming nature of this responsibility, which feels like being thrown into the deep end without a life jacket. Having experienced the challenges first hand, I firmly believe that the success of initiatives in bilingual education relies heavily on the collaboration and cooperation of researchers, educators, administrators, and policymakers.

Conclusion

In the early part of the millennium, the organisation of CLIL and EMI courses was mostly characterised by a grassroots endeavour (Kling & Del Corona 2020). However, almost twenty years on, there is extensive knowledge of structured and systematic implementation of these pedagogical approaches around the globe (Coyle et al., 2020). As a result of research and practice, CLIL-ised EMI has emerged. It is a variation of EMI, and its distinctiveness from CLIL, especially content-driven CLIL, may seem subtle. Nevertheless, the introduction of CLIL-ised EMI highlights the importance of embracing student needs when integrating language and content in education, whereby educators can make informed decisions about which approach best suits their teaching context and goals.

Researchers should continue to gather more robust empirical evidence to support the development of bilingual education that enhances language competence development through content-based approaches. The introduction of content-based programmes, without ensuring adequate language proficiency, which is de facto the case in many educational contexts, can have negative consequences, such as higher dropout rates, frustration, and lower academic achievement. This is the hard lesson that I have learnt from my own teaching experience. Therefore, it is imperative to clearly identify the specific needs of both students and instructors to recognise and distinguish between content-learning needs and language-learning demands. To ensure success, students must receive targeted language support and constructive feedback. In cases where content instructors lack the necessary pedagogical knowledge for effective language instruction, collaborative teaching involving both content instructors and language specialists should be considered. In addition to instructional quality, teacher training, ongoing evaluation, and continuous improvement are crucial for the success of content-based programmes.

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