

## “Challenging, but not impossible”: Student-teachers’ views of CLIL

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### Abstract

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) is a learning and teaching approach with the dual purpose of enabling learners to acquire content such as geography together with an additional language (English). Since little is known about how ELT student-teachers understand CLIL and its implementation potential, the purpose of this exploratory preliminary small-scale study was to explore student-teachers’ insights on CLIL at a four-year initial English language teacher education programme in Argentina. Data were collected by means of a survey with open- and closed-ended items and an interview to randomly selected participants. Findings show that CLIL is viewed as challenging -given its dual purpose-, which has a direct impact on teacher preparation and workload. However, it is seen as an approach that not only favours the contextualization of language learning but also promotes learner and teacher motivation.

*Keywords:* CLIL, student-teachers, ELT

### Resumen

El Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras (CLIL) es un enfoque de aprendizaje y enseñanza que persigue el doble propósito de permitir que los alumnos adquieran contenidos disciplinares junto con un idioma adicional (inglés). Dado que se sabe poco acerca de cómo los profesores de ELT en formación entienden el CLIL y su potencial de implementación, el propósito de este estudio exploratorio preliminar a pequeña escala fue explorar los puntos de vista sobre CLIL de los docentes en formación en un programa inicial de formación de profesores de inglés de cuatro años en Argentina. Los datos fueron recolectados por medio de una encuesta con ítems abiertos y cerrados y de una entrevista a participantes seleccionados al azar. Los hallazgos muestran que el CLIL se considera un desafío dado su doble propósito, y que esto tiene un impacto directo en la preparación y la carga de trabajo de los docentes. Sin embargo, se ve como un enfoque que no solo favorece la contextualización del aprendizaje de idiomas, sino que también promueve la motivación del alumno y del profesor.

*Palabras claves:* CLIL, profesores en formación, enseñanza de inglés lengua extranjera.

## Introduction

With the steady growth of English language teacher education (IELTE), educational systems around the world are under constant pressure to prepare future teachers who can offer context-responsive and informed pedagogies, and have knowledge about current (language) teaching approaches such as content and language integrated learning (CLIL). In this exploratory preliminary small-scale study, we examine the views of a group of IELTE student-teachers on CLIL, informed by their formal preparation for this approach.

## Literature review

CLIL is an approach which ‘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). This definition recognises two broad models within CLIL, which are present in practice across settings: (1) content-driven CLIL (i.e. the teaching of a school subject through the medium of an additional language), and (2) language-driven CLIL (i.e. the teaching of an additional language contextualized in curriculum content) (Banegas & Hemmi, 2021).

The literature offers evidence of linguistic, cognitive, and affective benefits with young learners (e.g., Mahan & Norheim, 2021) and higher education students (e.g. Fajardo Dack, Argudo & Abad, 2020) as well as insights into teachers’ professional development and perceptions (e.g., Lo, 2020). Nevertheless, little is known about how student-teachers in IELTE programmes understand CLIL and its implementation potential. There is a compelling need to understand how student-teachers view language-driven CLIL since this is an approach they may find pertinent to implement in their future practice.

In a recent review of CLIL teacher education, Pérez Cañado (2018) lists a set of competences for successful CLIL implementation: linguistic competence, pedagogical competence, scientific knowledge, organizational competences, collaborative competences, and reflective and developmental competences. While these have been explored with teachers to satisfy the demands for preparation in terms of lesson planning, delivery, and CLIL materials, the author points out that novice and experienced teachers still struggle with CLIL. Thus, she urges institutions to guarantee that pre-service teacher education programmes include sufficient grounding on CLIL.

Recent studies have examined teachers’ as well as student-teachers’ views on CLIL; however, these studies are often framed in content-driven CLIL. For example, subject and English language teachers may view CLIL as challenging since their own English language proficiency level, lack of teaching materials, lack of knowledge on CLIL lesson planning and delivery, and subject-matter knowledge act as major obstacles in quality and sustainable CLIL implementation (Pladevall-Ballester, 2015; Torres-Rincón & Cuesta Medina, 2019). In a similar vein, McDougald and Pisarello (2020) found that Colombian in-service teachers’ confusion and concerns with CLIL were reverted into positive attitudes after completing specialized training on CLIL materials, lesson development, and assessment. These studies stress the necessity of providing teachers with bespoke courses on CLIL before they engage in CLIL practice.

In CLIL teacher preparation, student-teachers’ views of CLIL also reveal concerns. Through a survey-based study, Gutiérrez Gamboa and Custodio Pinar (2021) examined the perceptions of a group of 56 undergraduate and post-graduate student-teachers in Spain. Findings revealed that after completing CLIL-oriented modules, only 66% percent of the participants expressed an interest in working as CLIL teachers. Student-teachers’ self-perception of professional competences and training level for CLIL led the authors to

conclude that more robust work should be done to support future CLIL teachers, particularly as they enrol on initial teacher education programmes. Similarly, in a case study carried out with 105 Spanish preschool pre-service teachers who received training on CLIL, Cortina-Pérez and Pino Rodríguez (2021) found that the participants' self-assessment of CLIL knowledge depended on their English language proficiency. While the participants showed moderate degrees of confidence with the development of their CLIL pedagogical competence, they expressed that self-reported low levels of linguistic competence and scientific knowledge had a negative influence on their interest and self-efficacy in CLIL practice. The authors conclude that teacher education should symbiotically address CLIL pedagogic competence and, what they term, CLIL communicative skills (i.e. linguistic competence) critically so that future teachers are cognizant of CLIL benefits and challenges and, above all, enhance their informed CLIL practice.

The literature, thus, indicates that both pre-service as well as in-service teachers share concerns around CLIL teacher competences, particularly in relation to L2 proficiency and scientific knowledge within content-driven CLIL. In this study, we seek to investigate whether student-teachers trained for language-driven CLIL share similar views.

### **The study**

As part of a larger project on CLIL in IELTE, this study adopted a teacher research perspective to examine the views of a group of IELTE student-teachers on CLIL. Teacher research is practitioner research – usually, classroom-based research – which is initiated and carried out by and for teachers, for their own benefit and that of their students (Smith 2020). In the context of our study, teacher research involved a collaborative dimension since Gimena Cerrato agreed to work with Darío Banegas to explore Cerrato's student-teachers' views of CLIL in a module she led.

As stated above, this report is a brief preliminary approximation and, therefore, it does not seek to engage with CLIL practice. This small-scale study took place between April and June 2021. The context was a four-year IELTE programme at a university in Argentina. We specifically concentrated on a Year 3 mandatory module called “Didactics of English Language Teaching” since this module introduced student-teachers to the notion of CLIL. The module runs from March to November and CLIL is part of Unit 1, which includes learning theories and language teaching approaches and methods. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic imposed restrictions, the module was delivered online. There were three two-hour sessions on CLIL (Table 1).

The participants were a group of seven Argentinian student-teachers attending the aforementioned module. There were five females and two males and the average age was 26.5. They provided written consent to participate in this study. They were granted confidentiality and anonymity, hence, the use of pseudonyms in the sections below.

Data were collected in two stages. At the beginning of Session 2, after the students read two articles on CLIL and worked in groups to analyse a lesson plan, they completed a survey (available at <https://bit.ly/3wdSO7t>) with open- and closed-ended items (Likert scale) on background information, learning experiences, and views on CLIL. Prior to its implementation, the survey was piloted with a similar group of participants to ensure that the items were clear. The survey had a twofold purpose: (1) to collect data, and (2) to encourage reflection, as a post-reading activity. In this sense, the survey was a pedagogical task and a research instrument. Between May and June 2021, three randomly selected student-teachers accepted to be interviewed. Carried out in Spanish, each individual interview was led by Banegas through Zoom and lasted approximately 40 minutes. The interviews were orthographically transcribed for data analysis purposes.

Table 1. CLIL sessions' aims and activities.

Session	Aims	Activities
1	Become acquainted with CLIL by reading and discussing material on the topic.	Prior to the session, the students were assigned articles on CLIL definitions, characteristics, CLIL lesson frameworks, how CLIL is put into practice in South America, and how teachers develop materials in Argentina. In class, the students had to contribute to a Padlet with different questions (e.g. 'There are two CLIL models: content-driven CLIL and language-driven CLIL. What is the difference?')
2	Compare content-driven CLIL and language-driven CLIL.	Students analysed two lesson plans to identify the main differences between content- and language-driven CLIL. They were guided by a set of questions that helped them focus on: activation of previous knowledge, presence of opportunities to promote lower-order and higher-order thinking skills, and activities to support language use.
3	Synthesize main CLIL concepts.	Tutor rounded off the main concepts addressed in the previous sessions by means of a presentation and invited students to share questions, doubts and final thoughts.

The survey results were nominally treated given the low number of participants involved. The interview data were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which entailed an iterative process of coding, thematization, revision and discussion of themes between both authors.

## Findings and discussion

### *Previous and current experiences*

In the survey, the student-teachers were asked to remember their language learning experiences prior to joining their IELTE programme (Table 2, n=7).

Table 2. Participants' prior experiences.

Item	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
My subject teachers would teach their content in English.	0	2	1	4
My subject teachers would teach in Spanish but include bibliography in English.	1	1	2	3
My English teacher would teach grammar through topics linked to the school curriculum.	2	1	4	0
My English teacher would help us develop our written skills (reading & writing) through topics linked to the school curriculum.	2	0	2	3
My English teacher would teach vocabulary through topics linked to the school curriculum	3	0	4	0
My English teacher would help us develop our oral skills (speaking & listening) through topics linked to the school curriculum.	1	2	2	2

According to the survey results, the student-teachers had not been systematically exposed to CLIL in their trajectory as secondary school students. As they later explained, they attended state schools where English learning followed a grammar-oriented approach. However, it should be noted that there were some isolated attempts by both subject and English teachers to establish connections between the school curriculum and English language learning. On such experiences, Aurelia explained in her interview:

My Biology teacher would explain everything in Spanish. But sometimes, she would include illustrations she had taken from sources written in English. Some other times, she would give us a short text in English with a few comprehension questions in Spanish. The focus was on the content of those texts. (Aurelia, Excerpt 1)

In the interviews, the student-teachers also referred to their learning experience in the IELTE programme emphasizing that CLIL was present as an approach in some of the modules they had taken. This exhibits their critical and reflective ability to identify CLIL practices in their own immediate learning context. For example, Betina reflected on her experience with another module in the IELTE programme:

In the module called English Language II we learnt about culture. I found that extremely relevant because we learnt the content and the language while using the language to learn the content. It's like you maximize time because you can learn many things and you can talk about the content in another language. I think it's more natural because when we use the language, we use it to communicate something, and the learning experience is more meaningful and lasting because you learn something through and with English. (Betina, Excerpt 2)

Despite the inevitably small-scale nature of our study, Excerpt 2 reveals that when IELTE teacher educators' practices are congruent with the language teaching approaches and methods student-teachers are encouraged to display in their own future practices, such practices become exemplary and relevant. Student-teachers can connect theory and practice and understand the benefits of some approaches, in this case CLIL, through their first-hand experience. This connection between CLIL and language teacher education (LTE) pedagogy not only helps student-teachers harness their pedagogical and reflective competences (Pérez Cañado 2018), and self-perception of CLIL training (Gutiérrez Gamboa & Custodio Espinar, 2021), it also illustrates Johnson and Golombek's (2020) call for LTE pedagogies that are theoretically-informed, locally situated, and anchored in student-teachers' trajectories and cognitions.

### **Views**

In the survey (Table 3), the student-teachers were asked about their views of CLIL, clustered around these interlaced areas: challenges (Items 1, 3, and 6), materials (Items 4 and 5), benefits (Items 7-10), assessment (Items 12-14), and overall conditions for CLIL success (Items 2, 11, 15, and 16). They were also asked whether they believed that CLIL would be a conducive language teaching approach in their own geographical context.

Table 3 shows that the student-teachers had a relatively positive attitude towards CLIL despite some reservations. For example, Item 3 shows student-teachers' caveat with prioritizing content at the expense of language accuracy (Item 3). This tension may be connected with the student-teachers' interest in supporting learners' language proficiency and ensuring that both meaning and form receive careful attention. A second point of mixed opinions was related to teachers' ability to develop their own CLIL materials (Item 5). We believe that the heterogeneous responses may reflect the participants' understanding that teacher-made materials can be an extremely time-consuming activity. Last, utilizing curricular content to contextualize language teaching (Item 11) also received mixed reactions. The different attitudes may respond to the participants' awareness of other

approaches that also use content or topics as a core element such as project-based learning, task-based language teaching, or inquiry-based learning. We reason that their concerns may explain their need for teacher preparation (Item 2) and appropriate teaching resources (Item 4).

Table 3. Participants' views.

Item	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
1. Teachers of English cannot be expected to teach curricular content in English.	1	0	4	2
2. For CLIL to be successful, teacher preparation is vital.	7	0	0	0
3. If we focus on the content side, language accuracy may be relegated.	0	3	4	0
4. For CLIL to be successful, we need quality materials that support both content and language learning.	7	0	0	0
5. Teachers can develop their own materials to respond to the learners' curriculum.	0	3	4	0
6. Integrating content and language may be too challenging for teachers.	1	6	0	0
7. Integrating content and language can increase learners' motivation.	5	2	0	0
8. Teaching content through English can increase teacher motivation.	6	1	0	0
9. Integrating content and language helps develop higher order thinking skills.	7	0	0	0
10. Integrating content and language gives students the chance to increase their academic vocabulary.	5	2	0	0
11. Curricular content is not necessary to contextualise language learning. It's better to include any topic instead.	0	3	3	1
12. Assessing students' performance may be problematic in CLIL.	1	4	2	0
13. As a teacher of English, I wouldn't fail a student if the content is not accurate.	0	4	2	1
14. As a subject teacher, I would be less strict on student's use of English.	0	2	3	2
15. CLIL can only be used with students who already have advanced competence in English.	1	2	2	2
16. CLIL can be used with any type of student.	3	1	2	1

In relation to the effects of CLIL, student-teachers also coincided in viewing CLIL as an approach to enhance learner and teacher motivation (Items 7 and 8) and academic vocabulary learning (Item 10), views which confirm benefits reported in the literature (e.g., Banegas & Hemmi, 2021). On the issue of assessment, the participants had divided opinions. Unfortunately, during the interviews, the participants could not articulate clear reasons to support their views on assessment, possibly due to their lack of experience with CLIL practice in their practicum.

During the interviews, the student-teachers had the opportunity to articulate their views in detail. Thematic analysis yielded the following key themes: (1) teacher preparation, (2) CLIL benefits, (3) curriculum, and (4) target learners. These themes are aligned with the survey items on benefits and essential conditions that need to be guaranteed for CLIL effectiveness.

In alignment with the survey, the three interviewees agreed that teacher preparation was vital for CLIL success as demonstrated in the following excerpts:

CLIL is challenging, but not impossible. It means that teachers find material, adapt activities and study about the topic. (Betina, Excerpt 3)

Teacher preparation is fundamental because it takes time and effort to learn how to teach a language and how to teach a subject. I'm not sure how good it would be that a teacher of English completes a short course on a subject, or that a subject teacher completes a short course on teaching English. Subject teachers may have practical knowledge of English, but that doesn't mean that they know how to guide their learners in developing their English. (Camilo, Excerpt 4)

Excerpts 3 and 4 highlight that CLIL is seen as challenging -given its dual purpose-, which has a direct impact on teacher preparation and workload. In Excerpt 4, Camilo recognizes that both language and subject teachers can be supported for a CLIL approach, but he is sceptical about the outcomes as he believes that teachers need to have solid knowledge and expertise in both language and content. These views echo those expressed by in-service and pre-service teachers when they express the need to develop both pedagogical and subject-matter knowledge (Cortina-Pérez & Pino Rodríguez, 2021; Pladevall-Ballester, 2015; Torres-Rincón & Cuesta Medina, 2019). In the student-teachers' case, they extend these views by assigning special attention to both knowledge of and about English, which can be understood as linguistic competence (Pérez Cañado, 2018). On the issue of L2 proficiency, it seems that whether in-/pre-service teachers are prepared for content- or language-driven CLIL, English language proficiency plays a crucial role.

The student-teachers had positive views of CLIL as they identified a number of benefits on their professional autobiographies as well as teaching and learning. For example, one student underscored the impact that CLIL could have on her motivation as a teacher:

I'd like to implement CLIL because I would be able to combine content with English language teaching. I know it'll take a lot of time and effort, but I like the challenge because I can have two aims in my practice, and that would help me teach something through English. (Aurelia, Excerpt 5)

Another student welcomed CLIL as an approach that promotes contextualized language learning:

Adopting CLIL would solve the problem of lack of context in teaching. In my experience and when I observed teachers as part of my placement, grammar is taught without context. There are no tasks with meaningful goals. And the four skills [listening, reading, speaking, and writing] are also taught in isolation, everything is like atomised. (Camilo, Excerpt 6)

Camilo added that CLIL can be an opportunity for raising learners' language awareness and promoting implicit language development because the focus is on using the language to learn something else, in this case, curricular content. Such views show that the sessions on CLIL contributed to the student-teachers' pedagogical knowledge and reflective competence (Pérez Cañado, 2018) since they associated CLIL's dual aim with inductive teaching and metalinguistic reflection.

The student-teachers envisaged CLIL as an approach that needed clear curriculum guidelines for sustainable implementation. They also noted that CLIL could be progressively implemented in different ways:

CLIL can be implemented in bilingual schools because the learners have more exposure to the L2 and the school aim is to have learners who can manipulate the school curriculum in more than one language. (Aurelia, Excerpt 7)

CLIL can be first implemented in secondary education because learners have more knowledge of both content and English. At the beginning, it could be implemented with concrete subjects such as science, and then more abstract subjects can be added, such as History. Or also, Art could be included at the beginning, and then there would be both cognitive as well as linguistic progression. (Camilo, Excerpt 8)

The student-teachers' anticipated need of curriculum guidelines may be associated to organizational competences (Pérez Cañado, 2018) and lack of confidence with CLIL lesson planning as found among in-service teachers (Bärnthaler & Kelly, 2021; McDougald & Pissarello, 2020). We believe it is understandable they viewed this level of support as essential since they were undergraduate students with no teaching experience, and therefore they had not developed high levels of agency or autonomy to create their own curriculum.

In terms of CLIL curriculum development, the student-teachers assessed CLIL as an approach that necessitates learners' academic foundations. They felt that CLIL should be principled on progressive complexity and move from the construction of concrete to abstract notions (Meyer, 2013). They also recognized the affinity between CLIL and bilingual education, given that learners have greater exposure to English. Unlike previous studies (e.g., Pladevall-Ballester, 2015), they did not see their own English language proficiency as an impediment for CLIL practice. However, they established connections between learners' language proficiency and CLIL success.

The issue of English language proficiency became a central factor in the interviews and demonstrated that although CLIL was understood to be inclusive of all learners, the student-teachers had divergent opinions as the survey (Item 16) and the following extracts show:

CLIL depends on the learners' level of English and knowledge. School knowledge is a key factor to understand the content in another language. And their knowledge of English is just as important to be able to access the new knowledge. If learners only know very basic English, like A1 [CEFR] I think it's going to be complicated. (Aurelia, Excerpt 9)

Once the learners have some idea of English, then CLIL can be used to leverage their development. For example, I think that once learners reach an A2 level [CEFR], then CLIL can be beneficial to take them from A2 to B1 and beyond. (Camilo, Excerpt 10)

Hence, the students equated CLIL success to learners' knowledge of English, and to a lesser extent, subject-matter knowledge. It is worth highlighting that they did not expect learners to have high levels of English proficiency; they felt that A1-2 (CEFR) would be a sufficient condition for the teaching of content and language to be meaningful and sustainable.

The findings show that while the student-teachers exhibited a positive view towards CLIL, at least in relation to its potential, they also demonstrated a critical understanding of it, unlike studies with preschool student-teachers (Cortina-Pérez & Pino Rodríguez, 2021). The findings also confirm that when compared to in- and pre-service teachers in other contexts, concerns around CLIL teacher competences, particularly around pedagogy and subject matter confidence, are shared across the spectrum. What is different in this study is the participants' views on L2 competence. While participants within content-driven CLIL



settings exhibited concerns with their own preparation in terms of pedagogy, subject-matter knowledge, and L2 proficiency (Pladevall-Ballester, 2015; Torres-Rincón & Cuesta Medina, 2019), our participants only showed concerns about the first two, and attributed L2 proficiency a central role in learners' success rather than their own as teachers. This, quite expectedly, is connected to the fact that our participants were ELT student-teachers and, therefore, they had more confidence in their linguistic competence. However, with content student-teachers, lack of L2 proficiency seems to be detrimental to their self-perceived efficacy in scientific knowledge competence, which, when compared, should not be problematic.

### Conclusion

This small-scale study reveals that IELTE student-teachers may welcome being introduced to CLIL, particularly as a language teaching approach. While IELTE student-teachers may feel confident about their level of English language proficiency, they recognize that teacher preparation on subject knowledge is paramount together with further curriculum guidance. As this study also shows, CLIL is viewed as a conducive approach to contextualize language learning even if it places harder demands on teachers in terms of lesson preparation and materials development. Nevertheless, these concluding results should be taken with caution given (1) the limited number of participants involved, and (2) programme circumstances that did not allow the student-teachers to carry out CLIL teaching in their practicum.

In terms of pedagogical implications, IELTE programmes may wish to incorporate CLIL in their curriculum, whether as a session or series of sessions within a module or as a module on its own right. It is important to engage in CLIL teacher education by drawing on student-teachers' experiences and views as well as local cases of good practice to critically calibrate provision to contextual circumstances. Our study, then, may encourage educators in IELTE programmes to prepare future teachers for successful and sustainable CLIL provision by offering student-teachers opportunities to profit from input and activities that help them develop an understanding of context-appropriate CLIL pedagogies.

Concerning research implications, more research is needed to understand how to equip student-teachers with course design for CLIL, lesson planning and materials development, given the time constraints in certain institutions and programmes since there seems to be a demand to work beyond the level of recognition and analysis. CLIL in IELTE can be further investigated through teacher-research since teacher educators may be in a better position to understand and address teaching challenges, and student-teachers may feel trusted as partners in research and thus more engaged in learning. In addition, future studies can examine student-teachers' perceptions before and after practising CLIL as part of their practicum/placement experience.

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