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R E V I S T A

The Impact of Content Learning Integrated Language (CLIL) on the Speaking Skill in the EFL Classroom at the Secondary Level

El impacto del Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos Lingüísticos (AICLE) en la capacidad de expresión oral en el aula de EFL de secundaria

Lucía Tapia, Melita Vega

ABSTRACT

Many authors assert that the dual focus on CLIL on language and content develops higher-order critical thinking, cognitive engagement and fosters motivation. Originally emerging in Europe, the versatility and adaptability of this approach led to wider adoption in other parts of the world leading to multiple empirical and contextual articles. The purpose of this study was to identify the impact of CLIL on developing English language skills at the secondary level in Latin America to allow students to learn a second language in a meaningful context. Thus, this study uses a descriptive qualitative method to analyze studies that focus on the main challenges in applying CLIL at the secondary level, as well as how it has been implemented in Latin America over the last decade through different and interactive strategies that allow the students to increase oral communication in context.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrate Learning; Speaking skills; Strategies; Challenges; and Cognitive Abilities.

Lucía Tapia
Universidad Católica de Cuenca | Cuenca | Ecuador. gltapia@amv.edu.ec
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5794-601X
Melita Vega
Universidad Católica de Cuenca | Cuenca | Ecuador. melita.vega@ucacue.edu.ec
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6501-4011

RESUMEN

Muchos autores afirman que el doble enfoque de AICLE en la lengua y el contenido desarrolla el pensamiento crítico de orden superior, el compromiso cognitivo y fomenta la motivación. Surgido originalmente en Europa, la versatilidad y adaptabilidad de este enfoque condujo a una adopción más amplia en otras partes del mundo, lo que dio lugar a múltiples artículos empíricos y contextuales. El propósito de este estudio fue identificar el impacto de AICLE en el desarrollo de las habilidades del idioma inglés en el nivel secundario en América Latina para permitir a los estudiantes aprender un segundo idioma en un contexto significativo. Así, este estudio utiliza un método cualitativo descriptivo para analizar los estudios que se centran en los principales desafíos en la aplicación de AICLE en el nivel secundario, así como la forma en que se ha implementado en América Latina en la última década a través de diferentes e interactivas estrategias que permiten a los estudiantes aumentar la comunicación oral en contexto.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas; Habilidades de expresión oral; Estrategias; Desafíos; y Habilidades cognitivas.

Introduction

Nowadays learning English is one of the main challenges in the education system. Obtaining a high English level requires developing the skills of the language and the importance of speaking skills is enormous since a strong command of it opens opportunities for fields around the world. Statistics show that the learners at the secondary level after completing international exams have demonstrated low levels in mastering the English language. Researchers David Marsh and Anne Maljers were instrumental in popularizing and promoting CLIL in Europe in the 1990s, which emphasizes the integration of language learning with subject content, development, and refinement of the skills of the language in context. CLIL is any dual-focused educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first language of the learners involved, is used as a part of the teaching, and learning of language content (Cenoz, 2021).

Duyen (2023), states that oral communication analyzes context in real situations. Learners need to be especially and successfully trained in speaking skills to become well-rounded communicators. Challenges in developing speaking skills through classroom interaction between EFL learners can be seen in nervous behaviors and inappropriate use of grammar (Alam, 2018).

This literature review examines the impact of CLIL on speaking skills at the secondary level, as well as the main challenges with implementing CLIL in the educational system in Latin America.

Research questions

1. What are the challenges of implementing CLIL at the secondary level in Latin America?

2. How has the CLIL approach been applied to foster speaking skills in the EFL classroom at the secondary school level in Latin America?

Background on CLIL

According to Marsh (2020), CLIL emerged during the 1990s in higher education institutions in European countries, including Germany, the Netherlands, and France as a means of uniting the learning of the contents of a non-linguistic area with linguistic learning. This means content and language learning are equally necessary and important to develop speaking skills (Collado, 2017).

Banegas (2021), suggests that the CLIL community in Latin America has developed CLIL models and conceptual frameworks that address the necessities of learners to make CLIL context-responsive and suitable for a better learning process. Moreover, McDougald, J. (2016) suggests CLIL increases motivation in students due to the language being used to fulfill real purposes, its real-life use and effectiveness and meaningul learning for students. This argument has been adopted by many institutions with a viable option to look for something different in the classroom.

According to Velásquez (2019), CLIL is considered an '"umbrella" term with many variants and a wide range of different approaches. Social, cultural, and educational factors can influence CLIL programs, which means they vary from country to country, and even from classroom to classroom depending on content and language aims or the context.

Implementation of CLIL to foster speaking skills

The development of speaking skills is of vital importance in English language teaching, both in an educational system and in the design of an exam to earn a certificate. A high level of language learning is measured by skills and the final process of carrying out a conversation in the target language (Lasagabaster, 2016).

Delliou et al. (2016), state that CLIL can help students develop their speaking skills in a more effective manner than the traditional educational methodology. The authors conducted an experiment using the observation of CLIL lessons, and a questionnaire investigating the students' attitude to the approach. The findings showed the effectiveness of CLIL in fostering the speaking skills of students, as well as favorable attitudes to the new teaching approach.

In addition, Pérez (2018), claims that CLIL is efficient at increasing the speaking levels of students at the secondary level. In a study that applied a pre-test and after intervention, data observed in the post-test phase revealed encouraging results in favour of the CLIL group in both oral comprehension and oral production.

Content vs. language teachers in CLIL

The fusion of content and language is one of the main features of the CLIL approach, as the relationship between these two elements is at the core of any implementation in this system (Cenoz, 2021). According to McDougald (2016), it is necessary to train both content and language teachers to collaborate in developing and implementing the most appropriate kinds of tasks for their learners to generate more successful CLIL outcomes.

In a study by Villabona and Cenoz (2021), that explored how teachers conceptualize the integration of content and language in CLIL, the results showed that it was difficult to achieve a balance of content and language in CLIL classrooms because some classes tend to be language-oriented or content-oriented. Koopman et al. (2014), considers that teachers in CLIL and immersion contexts seem to struggle to focus on language and content at the same time and find it challenging to learn how to focus on language. This is likely because most CLIL teachers do not have a professional background in language pedagogy and therefore tend to focus on content only.

Methods

The present research analyzes data from several sources using a qualitative method. Snyder (2019), suggests that when the scientific production is not very structured, the synthetic method can be used without necessarily being methodical as it can resort to various sources and search engines to provide an approximate classification of scientific production.

The present study examines the impact of CLIL on the speaking skills of students at the secondary level in Latin America, as well as the main challenges with implementing CLIL in the education system and how the approach has been applied.

The sources for the review included academic journals in Spanish or English, as well as databases including ERIC, and Google Scholar from 2016 to 2023. Table 1 shows the exclusion and inclusion criteria applied in the selection of articles for the review.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for data sources.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Focus of the journal articles	Impact of CLIL on the learning process in Latin America. Improving speaking skills using CLIL. Challenges to apply CLIL at the Secondary level Implement the CLIL method at the secondary level.	Articles that correspond to other kinds of information. Books and articles from North and European countries
Publication date	2016–2023	Articles published prior to 2016 or after 2023
Publication Type	Scholarly, peer-reviewed articles, journal articles, magazines, few chapter books	Book chapters, thesis, technical reports, or discussion papers
Language	English and Spanish	Other languages will not be included.

Source: Own.

Since communication apprehension has attracted international interest, Google was selected as the primary search engine because of its universal familiarity. Searches were conducted using the following keywords: "CLIL Method," "Speaking Skills," "Challenges to apply CLIL approach," "Teacher training in CLIL method," and "How to implement CLIL at the secondary level."

Additional search engines, including the Latin American Journal of Content & Language Integrated Learning and Elsevier, were checked using the keywords listed previously as a final step. The search yielded more than 50 sources, 90% of which provided relevant information about the impact of CLIL on speaking skills at the secondary level in Latin America and the challenges in its implementation.

Results

Challenges of CLIL

Pérez et al. (2018), analyzed how CLIL is introduced in a context where long-standing constraints are deeply incorporated in an educational system, but the confidence to change the status quo and introduce innovative practices was strong. It describes the development of CLIL practice in a situation where indicators would suggest that the limitations exceed the opportunities for success. Furthermore, the author considers that the implementation of CLIL was a real challenge due to its launch, and early forecasting was carried out on how its precepts might develop in the medium to long term. At first, there was an initial negative backlash from certain entities, organizations, and educational sectors that perceived CLIL as a threat to the established order.

Over time, it was increasingly recognized that CLIL would continue to emerge and that "success is likely to depend on the context in which CLIL programs are implemented and the amount of support the programs receive" (Herzog et al., 2017). McDougald (2016), claims the implementation of CLIL in the context, does not come easy, and aside from the obvious factors such as timetables, qualified teachers, budget, resources, and others.

In the present research, a total of 30 papers directly addressed the challenges in implementing CLIL at the secondary level in Latin America, particularly in the areas of training, knowledge among school authorities, and resources.

Table 2. The main challenges in implementing CLIL at the secondary level in Latin America.

Challenges	Levels	Number of Papers
Lack of teacher training	Secondary	15
Lack of material resources	Secondary	8
Unknowledge importance of the CLIL method Authorities and Administrators	Secondary	3
Elitist learners	Secondary	2
CLIL is conducted by language educators rather than subject specialists	Secondary	2
Total		30

Source: Own.

Lack of Teacher Training in CLIL

Coyle (2018), advocates for continuous professional development opportunities that focus on language teaching methodologies, curriculum design, assessment practices, and techniques for supporting diverse learners in CLIL classrooms. This implies that teacher training must cover the different disciplines.

The data showed a recognition of the importance of providing teachers with opportunities for experiential learning, peer collaboration, and reflective practice to enhance their confidence and competence in implementing. Alam (2018), suggests that teachers should focus on raising awareness of language as a tool for learning and meaning-making across different subjects.

Azparren (2023), points out that CLIL teacher training might help teachers improve their ability to deal with content in context to improve their development of teaching strategies. A study by Azparren (2023), not only analyses the impact that CLIL has in the learning process but also how teachers' beliefs are transformed after a specific CLIL training program.

Pérez (2016), has suggested carrying out a diagnosis of teacher training needs across Europe from the answers compiled through a questionnaire conducted among practitioners. The author concluded that European instructors are confident in their language and intercultural competencies. However, teachers require additional ongoing professional development to guarantee successful CLIL teaching. Aspects such as the theoretical basis of the CLIL approach, the methodologies to be developed in class and the appropriate materials and resources for CLIL lessons are among the main demands teachers must contend with.

CLIL Materials

CLIL tends to be more effective with specific resources and teaching materials available to provide rich, meaningful, and comprehensible content for effective input (Paran, 2013). Banegas (2016) analyzed the results of a workshop with secondary school English language teachers in Argentina in which the focus was on teacher-made CLIL materials. The teachers created the materials to develop language skills and capture the attention of learners. The workshops also focused on multimodal sources, text simplification, text enhancement through visual support, knowledge structuring through graphic organizers, and designing tasks that increase the learner's critical thinking. The author concluded that teacher courses allocate more learning opportunities for material development following a framework that establishes a powerful link between theory and practice in CLIL. A positive point was the advantage of producing the materials based on a collaborative experience of teacher-developed CLIL to adapt contents according to the academic environment, and level of student condition to easily achieve results in the future (Banegas, 2016).

Lack of knowledge among school authorities and administrators

One of the issues to address in the implementation of CLIL is the lack of knowledge stakeholders have regarding its aims. The possibility of adopting a CLIL approach from an inductive model in institutions has been described as the best option for the education system since CLIL may be a more viable method to improve language skills in a contextual condition that vary by region, the academic environment, or teachers (Banegas, 2012).

Barrios & Acosta (2022), conducted a study of elementary and secondary level students´ perceptions of CLIL and found that socioeconomic status factors were considered a weakness. The authors concluded that the authorities should invest more in supporting CLIL education for the most disadvantaged to foster a truly egalitarian bilingual education.

On the other hand, in Europe, a study by Legarre (2022), investigated the impact of a CLIL teacher education program where teachers gave voice to their beliefs and reflected on their own previous CLIL teaching practices. It was found that thanks to the support of European authorities, the participants were made aware of the importance CLIL represents in bilingual education and soon began to encourage CLIL teacher education provision to content teachers with pedagogic knowledge about the approach.

Impact of CLIL in Latin America

Over the past decade, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been increasingly adopted in South American countries, where it has been implemented efficiently and received enthusiastically by stakeholders (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016). After seeing positive results of CLIL application in Europe, many educators and experts in Latin America have proposed applying it to develop language skills in content and in an appropriate context.

While it is not possible to pinpoint when interest in CLIL started to develop in South America, an increasing number of publications on CLIL experiences, especially in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia began to emerge as of 2008 (Domingos et al., 2018). According to the English Proficient Index (2017), South America is one of the continents with the lowest English level. However, Argentina has the best command of the English language and tops the ranking of the list of the most proficient Latin American countries. Table 3 shows a list of countries in Latin America that have published research on the implementation of CLIL in different educational environments.

According to Hammi (2021), CLIL has also facilitated the inclusion of interculturality and citizenship in the L2 classroom based on topics that are often ignored in general English coursebooks. The author also conducted an action research project in Argentina through which an expert developed a series of language-driven CLIL lessons to revitalize aboriginal languages in Argentinian territory. It has allowed the teacher and the students to explore local cultures.

Table 3. Implementation of CLIL in Latin America.

Countries	Levels	Number of Papers
Argentina	Secondary, University	6
Brazil	Secondary, University	5
Colombia	Primary, Secondary	4
Ecuador	Primary, Secondary	3
Total		18

Source: Own.

The first bilingual programs in Argentina were implemented in the 19th century (Banfi & Day, 2004). A considerable amount of pedagogical and psycholinguistic research reports significant benefits from the implementation of CLIL in which language and communication skills are given primary importance (Pistorio, 2009). The support that stakeholders have given to adopt this new method has been useful in the school system.

Rodríguez (2011), mentions that in Colombia, CLIL has gained popularity due to educators not talking about teaching in English but teaching through English. Colombian schools have used this approach to promote project-based learning. Mejía (2004) also claims that Educational Institutions appear to be more aware of the overall language teaching and learning process implemented by CLIL methodology allowed to increase language skills. On the other hand, other studies on Colombian teachers have found degrees of unawareness of CLIL work being carried out in their environment (Curtis, 2012), which implies teachers do not have a complete command of the language and the method. Pérez (2022), points out the implementation of a methodology similar to CLIL in Colombia (including urban and rural zones), as a means of moving away from decontextualized language policies.

In Brazil, several articles have been published on the role of CLIL in fostering English language skills in a plurilingual society. Giménez (2018), claims that the teaching of foreign languages in Brazil was sometimes treated as an extracurricular using private language institutions, thus reinforcing the belief that foreign languages could not be learned fluently in schools and high schools. On the other hand, Finardi (2016), suggests the teaching of English as an international language to create space in the curriculum for the inclusion of other foreign languages. The internationalization programs and the methodologies used in English Language Teaching together with this reflection allow Brazilian pre-service English to successfully implement CLIL.

Regarding the role of English in internationalization and English language teaching (ELT) methodologies, CLIL has become very popular in Europe and Canada to promote multilingualism in elementary education and internationalization in higher education (Alencar, 2016). In Europe, CLIL has achieved significant advancements and results at elementary and secondary levels.

Impact of CLIL on speaking skills

The development of speaking skills is of vital importance in English language teaching, both in an educational program and in the design of an exam to obtain a certificate. Success in language learning is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the target language (Delliou & Zafiri, 2016). One of the advantages of CLIL learning contexts that can enhance speaking skills and hence oral fluency is that they often succeed.

Table 4. CLIL advantages in speaking skills.

Advantages	Levels	Number of Papers
Practice conversation fluency and accuracy in the English language.	Secondary	3
Develop vocabulary, expressions, and grammar in a contextualized form.	Secondary	3
Improve learners' communication performance in both curricular subjects and the target language.	Secondary	3
Increase communication skills efficiently in different disciplines.	Secondary	2
Total		11

Source: Own.

In English lessons, the aim of speaking activities derives from the fluency or accuracy approach. Fluency in communication without paying attention to grammar or correct pronunciation does not always imply an issue because the main goal is to convey meaning. However, achievement in learning a foreign language pronunciation is correlated with motivation since reaching people with a message is paramount (Kovacikova, 2016). Ball (2016), states that CLIL represents a very important aspect of learning vocabulary and developing speaking. CLIL is not language teaching without pronunciation and grammar; they are present and contextualized, as well. Moreover, the author mentions that CLIL has a natural tendency to encourage a more learner-centered methodology. The basic difference in preparation for CLIL vs. non-CLIL lessons is conceptual sequencing in subject lessons without CLIL will not have a total connection between contents and language.

Several studies on CLIL in Latin America have analyzed its impact on speaking skills in learners of different ages and education levels. In 2018, the CLIL program of English as a Foreign Language Teaching for preservice teachers at the University of Cuenca Ecuador was analyzed and found to have had a real impact on students' skills, such as their ability to develop Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) as well as their proficiency in the foreign language (Argudo et al., 2018). However, the findings also revealed that 52% of the students were between A1 and A2 levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; this meant that they did not have the necessary linguistic conditions to take content subjects.

Argudo (2018), notes that the Ministry of Education of Ecuador in the presentation of the EFL program (2015), proposed that 7th-grade students who have an A2 level of English will study the same content again but in a different context and combined with a new language according to cultural aspects and age of the students. This allows the learners the opportunity to increase their level and thus benefit from CLIL in a systematic form. The Ministry has also implemented CLIL as a measure for improving the English teaching-learning process as it is seen as a "flexible system that responds to contextual demands" that facilitates communication in any context and develops language skills (Coyle, 2020 p. 2). However, in practice, there is a lack of strategic application and poor improvement of communication skills.

Benalcázar (2019), investigated the effect of CLIL in second language oral production at the Ecuadorian secondary level and found CLIL to be an effective means of developing students' oral production compared with traditional language learning instruction. At the same time, the learners expressed positive opinions towards the new approach.

A study by Reinoso (2023), noted that CLIL has proved to be an opportunity for the development of communicative skills for learners, as well as to achieve a better linking of knowledge with different subjects. Nevertheless, despite some attempts, the implementation of the CLIL is still very low in the Ecuadorian education system. The author concludes that the lack of experience in applying the CLIL approach among teachers and students' low level of proficiency in the foreign language are some drawbacks that need to be considered both in public and private schools.

The success of CLIL and bilingual education in general seems to depend on learners' preexisting English language proficiency as this avoids oversimplification of content, and positive results can be achieved with elitist learners (Banegas, 2020). Mehisto (2007), has suggested that CLIL tends to attract a larger group of bright students who are motivated to succeed academically, be it in a foreign language or not.

CLIL teacher training programs

Considering that CLIL is not easy to put into practice, these types of classes can be most effective when there is a large range of activities and strategies. McDougald (2016), claims it is necessary to work in combination, training both content and language teachers to collaborate in developing and implementing the most appropriate kinds of tasks for their learners, CLIL outcomes could be much more successful.

Hillyard (2011), mentions that Education ministries insist on CLIL implementation, but do not oversee a workforce sufficiently competent in all three necessary areas: target language ability, subject knowledge, and CLIL methodology. Mehisto et al. (2008), state that language teachers in CLIL programs have a very important and difficult task because they must know the language as well as the content of the subject at a sufficient level.

On the other hand, regarding the effect of CLIL on content learning, mixed opinions were found. Some authors have found CLIL generates interest, motivation, and participation among students (Pérez, 2018), while others have found that CLIL has neither a positive nor a negative on content learning (Lasabagaster, 2018).

Conclusion

As an approach, CLIL has been used to teach students about a new subject in a language foreign to them. Therefore, the success of this approach relies on the integration of the new language and the new learning content.

In South America, where bilingualism or multilingualism is often encouraged, CLIL can play a crucial role in improving language skills, particularly in English, which is widely used in academia and business. After researching the impact that CLIC has at the secondary level in Latin America, it is possible to gain an understanding and appreciation of other cultures, contributions to global citizenship, intercultural competence, and the potential CLIL must develop English language skills together with the contents according to each context.

In Latin America, the main challenges that CLIL has had to face in the education system include lack of teacher training, lack of knowledge among authorities about the importance of CLIL, and the need for materials and language levels of learners. Countries including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador have faced challenges in implementing CLIL in their education systems; however, it was found that some countries demonstrate a greater advancement in the development of CLIL than others. Banegas (2022), who is among the top contributors to this field of research in Latin America, claims that over time, the implementation of this method has also facilitated the inclusion of interculturality pedagogically and has allowed teachers to explore local cultures.

Other authors collectively consider the need to invest in teacher training programs that equip educators with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to implement CLIL successfully in secondary school settings. Such training should address not only language and content integration but also pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, and strategies for supporting diverse learners. With proper institutional support for teacher training programs and the development of appropriate resources, CLIL programs have a high potential to develop critical thinking and effective communication skills among learners of different ages. In addition, the development of speaking skills using the CLIL method at the secondary level is integral to students' academic, social, and personal growth. It equips them with essential communication and critical thinking skills that are vital for success in both academic and real-life contexts.

On the other hand, Ecuador is one of the countries where there is a lesser application of CLIL strategies, communication skills are not being improved, and there is poor performance to communicate fluently. In addition, the limited financial support and the knowledge among authorities does not allow students to receive a quality education. There is also a lack of teacher training programs to develop CLIL in the class and the lack of resources that prevent successful learning.

CLIL has the potential to enrich educational experiences and prepare students for success in an increasingly interconnected world. South American countries continue to face challenges in providing sufficient training and resources for teachers to effectively implement CLIL, so it is recommended that authorities invest more resources in educational projects on the development of English language skills as well as conduct research to understand how CLIL can be developed in several Ecuadorian contexts, whether they be urban, rural, private, or public.

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Authors

Lucía Tapia. Mg. en Educación Mención en Gestión y Liderazgo. Lcda. En Idiomas Mención Plurilingue Inglés, Francés y Español para Extranjeros. Teacher in the Secondary level at the Academia Militar del Valle.

Melita Vega. Master's degree in applied Linguistics from the University of Cuenca (Ecuador), a bachelor degree in Computer Science from the University of Azuay (Ecuador) and a postgraduate certificate in Public Relations from Toronto Metropolitan University (Canada), Her research interests and publications focus on social responsibility and sustainability, crisis communications, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). She is currently a professor, researcher and tutor in the School of International Studies and the Language Unit at the University of Azuay (Ecuador), and the postgraduate program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at Universidad de Cuenca. She is a doctoral candidate in Education at Universidad Nacional de Rosario (UNR). Prior to her work in academia, Melita held positions in marketing and corporate communications in Canada.

Statement