

## BENEFITS OF APPLYING THE CLIL CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK IN BUSINESS ENGLISH CLASSES

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**Abstract:** *The present paper aims at providing an insight into the benefits that content and language integrated learning (CLIL) can bring to the teaching of business English in higher education, given the place of the English language in the European Union and the competitive advantages it offers on the international labour market. The first part of the paper puts emphasis on some historical facts related to CLIL, presents the EU position with respect to this teaching approach and introduces its characteristics. The second part shows how, in the absence of the dual-focus CLIL, this methodology can be adapted and successfully integrated in business English classes, by applying the four elements of the CLIL conceptual framework: content, communication, culture and cognition.*

**Key words:** *CLIL, business English, language competence, subject content, framework.*

### 1. Introduction

Foreign language learning has long represented a priority in Europe, but it has gained even more prominence with the enlargement of the EU, the increasing mobility of the labour force and the internationalisation of higher education. The position of the EU regarding the major issues connected to language learning is clearly stated in several documents published by the European Commission or by the Council of Europe: foreign language should be taught from as early an age as possible, and European citizens should be proficient in at least two more community languages apart from their mother tongue, in order to be able to meet the requirements of a competitive and fast-changing labour market (Commission of the European Communities, 1995; European Commission, 2002; Council of Europe, 2003; Commission of the European Communities, 2003; European Language Council, 2013; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017).

These recommendations have significantly impacted the school curricula at all education levels, as well as the perspective on foreign language teaching and learning. Thus, the expected level of attainment for languages has been made explicit for each education level, accuracy has lost ground in favour of fluency, the ability to communicate effectively has become paramount, and not the knowledge alone. All

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these changes have triggered the need to rethink foreign language teaching. In this context, one of the teaching methods considered particularly efficient for language learning and stimulating for students is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), highly recommended in the EU reports especially after the year 2000.

## **2. Content and Language Integrated Learning**

Content and language integrated learning is defined as that type of provision which “seeks to develop proficiency in both the non-language subject and the language in which this is taught, attaching the same importance to each” (European Commission. Eurydice European Unit, 2006, p. 7). The language of instruction is generally a foreign language, but it may also be a regional language or another state language, and it is used as a means to teach certain subjects in the curriculum except for languages. This approach to teaching and learning was only scarcely used before the 1970’s, but it started enjoying particular attention after the success of a Canadian project in Quebec, where children from English-speaking families were sent to study in schools having French as the tuition language, obviously with a view to turning them bilingual. The acronym CLIL was coined in 1994 by David Marsh, who was then part of a team working in the area of multilingualism and bilingual education at the Finnish University of Jyväskylä (Hanesová, 2015, p. 10), and it has received official support ever since.

In 1995, the “Resolution of the Council of Europe” encouraged “the teaching of classes in a foreign language for disciplines other than languages” and the provision of specific training for the teachers fond of adopting the new method. The ideas were reiterated the same year by the European Commission in the “White Paper on Education and Training”, where the recommendation for secondary school pupils to study certain subjects in their first foreign language was overt (Commission of the European Communities, 1995, p. 47). In the subsequent years, the benefits of applying the specific CLIL methodology during such classes was highlighted for different education levels in several documents and papers issued by the European Commission: language competences can be immediately applied, the exposure to the language is significant without dedicated extra time in the curriculum, language competences are improved and so are the gains in vocabulary, students’ self-confidence is boosted with reference to language learning, the foreign language is taught in an intensive way (Commission of the European Communities, 2003, pp. 19-20; European Commission, 2014, pp. 9-18; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, pp. 55-58).

The importance attached to the implementation of CLIL in primary, secondary and higher education institutions can be inferred from the significant financial support offered over the last 20 years by the European Commission for projects involving students, subject teachers, language teachers and curriculum developers from many European countries, including Romania (e.g. C4C –CLIL for Children and CLIL4YEC – CLIL for Young European Citizens, CLIL4S – CLIL for STEAM addressed to university students with low achievements in both English as L2 and STEM subjects, CLIL-HET, CO-CLIL, ECLIL, aimed at providing support for CLIL teachers).

As stated in the definition, the CLIL methodology has two equally important objectives: to develop students' proficiency in non-language subjects comprised in the curriculum and to develop specific competences for the language which serves as the medium of instruction (Greere and Bobăilă, 2011, p. 101). The combination of these characteristics is essential, as together they make the CLIL status clear. Thus, at higher education level, the CLIL approach is different from study programs which are taught in a foreign language, but which are not concerned with the students' language learning proper, do not dwell upon the language component and do not offer them any support from this perspective (European Language Council, 2013, p. 6). Secondly, CLIL should be differentiated from the languages for specific purposes courses (LSP), which are always taught by language specialists only and focus on the teaching of a foreign language, whether it is general language or specialized language for one particular field (e.g. Business English/ Medical English/ English for Science and Technology/ English for Social Studies).

Anne Räsänen (2011) highlights that the genuine CLIL approach supposes the full integration of language across subject teaching and is implemented by either subject specialists or by teams comprising a subject specialist and a language teacher. As regards the requirements connected to the use of the CLIL approach, important differences can be found from one country to another. In most European countries, there are official recommendations for the admission criteria for accessing CLIL provision at secondary and tertiary level, and they generally regard a minimum language level. As regards the eligibility criteria for teachers, teachers of content subjects are generally required to have a B2 or C1 level, but there are countries which require even a higher level of language proficiency (e.g. Italy) or special training courses on the CLIL methodology (e.g. Spain, Romania) (British Council, 2018, p. 44, 98). The latest European Commission report on teaching languages in Europe underlines the challenges connected to the formal requirements and to the methodology itself, concluding that its use in Europe is still limited (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2017, pp. 14, 55-58).

Apart from the dual-focus CLIL proper, reference is also made to three other approaches which only integrate CLIL elements, to a smaller or a greater extent (Räsänen, 2011):

1. Pre-CLIL LSP/ Discipline- Based Language Teaching: in a graphic representation, it would be placed immediately after Non-CLIL approaches (where content and language do not meet or only meet incidentally). It involves language teachers only, emphasis being put on the development of specialized vocabulary and of language competences for specific areas;
2. Partial CLIL, with two sub-sections: the language-oriented one is characterised by the pre-sessional teaching of language by language teachers, generally to international students, before they actually enrol in content courses, in order for them to be better prepared from the linguistic point of view; the content-oriented one is provided by subject specialists for multilingual and multicultural groups and supposes that students are offered more than 25% exposure to the target language, but without any explicitly set language outcomes.

Commenting on the latter type, Taillefer (2013) opines that this is possibly the most frequently encountered scenario and that it involves language learning "through

osmosis”, with no specification as to the language outcomes expected. The statistical data are a proof in this respect. Thus, in 2017, the number of the English-taught Bachelor’s degree programs in Europe was close to 3,000, having actually doubled since 2013 (British Council, 2018, p. 46).

3. Adjunct CLIL: it is presented as the closest to the genuine CLIL, as language support is included in subject teaching (but not fully integrated in it), with specific outcomes set for both language and content.

### **3. Content and Language Integrated Learning in Business English Classes**

The aforementioned classification clearly reveals that partial and adjunct CLIL prioritize content over language instruction and cannot be adopted by language specialists. Only fully dual CLIL equally emphasises content and language, with or without the contribution of language teachers. Starting from this evidence and from the fact that, in Romania, CLIL is still in a minority at Bachelor’s degree level in Business Studies and, consequently, language development at this level is still incumbent on language teachers, the CLIL methodology could widely and immediately benefit undergraduate business students only if implemented in an adapted form. From our perspective, the handiest method for this would be to apply the CLIL general framework to the business English classes.

This conceptual framework was devised by Coyle and comprises the following dimensions: Content, Cognition, Communication and Culture (Coyle, Holmes and King, 2009, p. 12). In what follows, we aim at presenting the way in which “the 4Cs” could be addressed in business English classes, so as to enhance students’ competences.

As the CLIL definition states, content lies at the very core of CLIL, but it is also indirectly related to ESP generally speaking, and consequently to business English, as Dudley-Evans and St. John showed (1998, pp. 4-5). They emphasized that the purpose of the ESP classes is to meet the specific needs of the learners and that they should focus on the language, skills, discourses, genres and activities specific to the discipline which they serve. According to the European Language Council, foreign language teaching and learning at higher education level should focus on languages for specific purposes (European Language Council, 2013, pp.7-8). An older study conducted in Europe with focus on ESP showed that, at that time, ESP courses at undergraduate level tended to have a more general character, only becoming more specialised at Master’s degree level (Fortanet-Gómez and Räisänen, 2008, pp. 44, 168), but recent research has noticed a changing trend, with courses becoming more subject-oriented and technical (Kazakova, 2015; Long, 2017).

With direct reference to business English classes, the CLIL content dimension touches characteristics which are already in place in business English classes to a certain extent, but its implementation in teaching would significantly foster specialized vocabulary items, the professional contexts used as a background for language provision, as well as the activities which students are likely to perform in their future professions. From the point of view of the lexis taught, this would not involve only attention given to isolated specialized words, but also to function words (articles, pronouns, conjunctions, modal

verbs etc.) and multi-word units or collocations and even colligations (Frendo, 2005, p. 6). E.g. *purchasing manager, incentive scheme, appraisal interview, executive burnout, leadership skills, minimum wages, fringe benefits, head hunter, to be in charge of, to achieve one's goals, to have a role to play* (Human Resources); *debenture, securities, equity, turnover, overheads, operating costs, capital expenses, current assets/ liabilities, management accounting, certified/ chartered accountant, to be payable within (one year), to default on ( a loan/ a credit)* (Accounting and Finance), *true and fair view, clean report/ qualified report, statutory audit, consultancy assignments, articles of association, memorandum of association, to depend on (the findings/ the results/ the deadline)* (Auditing). Following the CLIL framework, these lexical items should be presented in meaningful subject area content. Thus, they could be introduced as part of input texts that are ordinarily used by subject teachers: e.g. an organisation chart/ job interviews/ job descriptions/ case studies/ Eurostat reports (for the field of Human Resources), a balance sheet, profit and loss account or Chart of accounts (for Accounting), the presentation of the Big Four networks or in a newspaper article about famous financial scandals (for the auditing field).

Just like in the CLIL lesson stages proposed by Darn (Darn, 2006), the vocabulary is then practiced and consolidated by means of tasks set for students, first in guided exercises, next in more demanding activities, in contexts students are familiar with from specialized subjects in economics from the curriculum. With this background knowledge and the teacher's support in solving the tasks, students feel scaffolded, which means that, using this approach, another CLIL principle is complied with (Tzoannopoulou, 2015).

Communication is another important element in the CLIL conceptual framework. CLIL students are expected to establish maximum interaction in the target language in authentic settings, relevant either for their academic life or for their future professions (Coyle, Holmes, King, 2009, p. 15). In business English classes, this translates in the development of the discourse competence, which, relying on the linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar structures and vocabulary items), refers to the students' ability to effectively use the language to communicate in a variety of contexts (Frendo, 2005, p. 7). Such contexts could be: networking, video-conferencing, chairing meetings, delivering oral presentations, selling and buying, negotiating, explaining graphic representations, which involve especially the speaking skill (both as spoken production and as spoken interaction), but also taking notes, writing agendas, letters, reports, proposals, advertising materials, which involve another productive skill, writing. The discourse competence also supposes the development of receptive skills, given that production and reception are both present in real communication. Thus, students should be provided with meaningful contexts in which to develop and practise reading and listening, starting from real-life professional situations: reading newspaper articles, reports, documents, correspondence, selecting information from websites, watching TV programmes or listening to the radio, to peers/ employer/ business partners etc. But all these activities are truly in line with the CLIL principles only if, apart from the language-related benefits, they also bring students an enrichment from the content point of view. This means that the language teacher should extend his/ her area of specialisation and, starting from the students' curriculum, they should have a deep insight into the subject

area content, with a view to proposing students relevant and up-to-date topics and materials.

Another dimension of the CLIL framework is represented by culture. According to Coyle, Holmes and King (2009, p. 13), CLIL strengthens the students' understanding of both their own culture and of cross-cultural variables, being "an appropriate vehicle for exploring the links between language and cultural identity, examining behaviours, attitudes and values". It has been underlined that certain language specialists argue that the cultural competence is not within the province of foreign language classes (Frendo, 2005, p. 6), but given the area of specialisation of the students under consideration, it could well be regarded as paramount. The culture component can easily be transferred into the business English class on a constant basis if students are provided with opportunities to find out about and reflect on different national and organisational cultures, on the characteristics that make them unique or similar to others. Thus, in reading and listening activities, the teacher can introduce elements connected to national customs and traditions, cultural differences, stereotypes or prejudices, organisational behaviour, which can be further expanded on during speaking or writing activities.

Cognition is the fourth integral part of the CLIL framework, pointing to the need for ongoing construction and development of competences. The ultimate CLIL aim is actually the learner's progress in both language and subject content competences, and, given the complexity of the approach, this progress can be achieved only by means of cognitively demanding operations. Thus, all major categories from Bloom's taxonomy would be used, from knowledge and comprehension, to analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which makes learning challenging, but equally rewarding.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Considered an efficient and motivating method for both language learning and for advancing knowledge in specialised fields, CLIL has been strongly endorsed in the EU official documents and substantial financial support has been offered for developing the methodology, for issuing guidelines for particular disciplines and for training teachers. But the effective implementation of the methodology has not proven to be such easy job, as it entails significant changes in the curriculum and in the organisation of the subject content, also requiring trained academic staff and time.

The present paper advocates that, when the adoption of the dual-focus CLIL is not possible, this methodology could still significantly benefit undergraduate business students as regards foreign language learning, provided its principles are integrated in the language for specific purposes classes. The elements brought by CLIL would not be utterly novel in such classes, but the "CLIL-ization" (Foran Storer and Sancho Guinda, 2009), the reframing of the business English classes considering the dimensions of content, communication, culture and cognition would definitely foster existing elements, such as jargon teaching, communication in real-life professional situations, the use of authentic materials. Apart from developing the linguistic and discourse competence, this approach would also reinforce business students' intercultural competence and their knowledge in disciplinary subjects, as well as important soft skills

such as critical thinking, teamwork, assertiveness, active listening, negotiation, decision-making or linguistic diplomacy, thus bringing added value to their learning experience and to their academic and future professional performance.

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