

Investigating the Opportunities and Obstacles in CLIL Implementation at the Tertiary Level

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Abstract: *This study investigates the perceived benefits and challenges of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) among 150 senior university students at a public institution in Vietnam. Using a mixed-methods approach, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, the findings indicate that CLIL enhances students' academic language proficiency, subject comprehension, and collaborative skills. However, challenges related to limited English proficiency, assessment fairness, and emotional pressures were also identified. Students expressed anxiety about making mistakes and concern over being judged more on language than content. These results highlight the need for improved language support, teacher training, and more equitable assessment practices to optimise CLIL implementation in higher education.*

Keywords: *CLIL – Content and Language Integrated Learning; 4Cs Framework - Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the study

Recent years have seen a rise in interest in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a cutting-edge teaching approach that blends language learning with subject-matter training. CLIL has been widely adopted in many educational contexts since its debut in Europe, especially in countries looking to increase their students' bilingual or multilingual ability (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). In order to prepare tertiary students for global academic and professional environments, CLIL is believed to improve students' language skills and subject-matter knowledge. Despite its growing popularity, contextual elements including student preparedness, instructor expertise, and institutional support are crucial to the success of CLIL (Pérez-Cañado, 2012).

Over time, CLIL has been shown to offer significant advantages, including enhanced learner motivation and greater cognitive engagement. However, studies have also pointed out key challenges, such as insufficient teacher training, limited instructional resources, and disparities in students' language proficiency (Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). While CLIL has been extensively examined in European contexts, research on its application in Vietnam remains limited, and its potential has yet to be fully recognized.

1.2. Aims of the Study

As CLIL becomes more common in higher education, this study examines its implementation at a public university in Vietnam. The research focuses on students' perceptions, as they are the primary beneficiaries of this approach. Data were collected from 150 senior students through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore their views on the perceived benefits and challenges of learning through CLIL.

The central research question guiding this study is:

What are university students' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of CLIL implementation at the tertiary level?

This research is expected to provide meaningful insights into the practical application of CLIL in higher education. By drawing on learners' real-world experiences, the study aims to inform future

improvements in instructional design, teaching practices, and assessment methods. Ultimately, the findings may contribute to evidence-based decision-making in educational policy and curriculum development related to CLIL in similar contexts.

2. LITERATURE

2.1. Definition and Principles of CLIL

To introduce the concept, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) is a teaching method that enables students to acquire both linguistic competence and content knowledge by fusing language acquisition with subject learning. "Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language," according to Coyle et al. (2010, p. 1). In contrast to traditional language teaching, this approach integrates language acquisition into academic disciplines, giving students exposure to the language in a relevant and authentic way (Dalton-Puffer 2011).

In multilingual and international educational contexts, CLIL is widely recognized for its ability to enhance subject-area expertise and language competency. By immersing students in academic information, CLIL aids in the development of both general and subject-specific language skills (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008). A thorough learning experience is produced by the system's organisation around fundamental components like communication, cognition, cultural awareness, and information acquisition (Ball, 2013). Due to its effectiveness in fostering language and disciplinary competence, CLIL is being utilised more and more in educational institutions worldwide, particularly in bilingual programs and higher education (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2016).

2.2. CLIL Models and Frameworks

Many theoretical frameworks have been created to enable the successful implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) since David Marsh initially proposed the idea in 1994. The 4Cs Framework, put forth by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2006), is one of the most influential. It highlights four crucial elements for effective CLIL instruction: content, communication, cognition, and culture.

This paradigm, which highlights how these four elements are interconnected to create meaningful and integrated learning experiences, has grown to become a pillar of contemporary CLIL pedagogy experiences. Effective CLIL instruction, according to this framework, involves more than just teaching foreign language content. Rather, it necessitates a well-rounded and integrated approach that concurrently advances students' subject knowledge (Content), improves their language proficiency for academic and social contexts (Communication), stimulates critical and creative thinking (Cognition), and cultivates intercultural sensitivity and understanding (Culture).

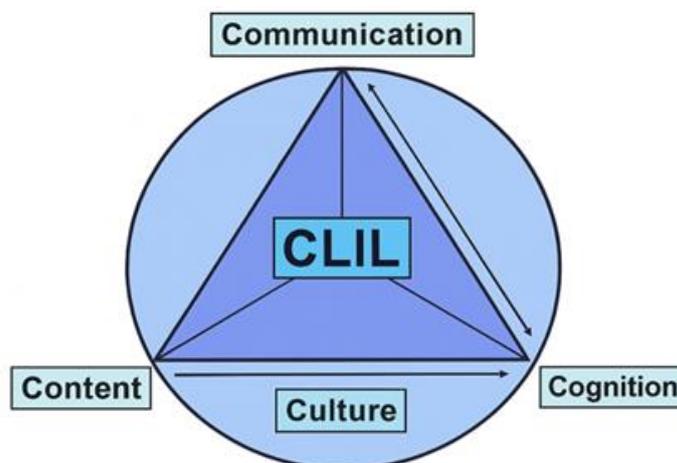


Figure X The 4Cs Framework of CLIL

This diagram illustrates the 4Cs Framework proposed by Coyle, integrating Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture at the core of CLIL methodology.

Note, Adapted from Do Coyle.

Figure 1. Representation of the 4C framework

Coyle (2006, p. 13-14) describes the four Cs conceptual framework as follows: (cited in Coyle 2007)

Beyond the 4Cs framework, several other models enrich the understanding of language use in CLIL. Coyle's (2007) Language Triptych distinguishes three dimensions—language of, for, and through learning—emphasizing that language is not just a medium but an evolving part of knowledge construction. Marsh's (2002) soft–hard continuum classifies CLIL from language-led to content-led approaches, allowing adaptation to curricular goals and learner proficiency. Complementing these, Meyer's (2010) CLIL Pyramid outlines four elements—input, processing, output, and scaffolding—to guide lesson design, ensuring active engagement with content while supporting language development.

2.3. Challenges in CLIL Implementation

Despite its advantages, CLIL also faces notable challenges. A major issue is the wide variation in students' language proficiency, which can hinder comprehension and participation, especially for lower-level learners (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Lasagabaster & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Dalton-Puffer, 2011). In Vietnam, research shows similar concerns: while students value CLIL for enhancing language and subject learning, problems include low English competence, weak course design (Nguyen & Sercu, 2021), and limited institutional support, time, and content expertise among teachers (Hien, 2022). Broader issues such as a shortage of qualified teachers, inadequate funding, and weak stakeholder involvement further constrain implementation, underscoring the need for better resources, context-sensitive strategies, and improved teacher training.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

To rigorously examine the perceived benefits and challenges of implementing CLIL at the university level, this study adopted a mixed-methods research design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The combination of these complementary methods facilitates a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Mixed methods are particularly suitable for educational research because they enable triangulation of data sources, thereby enhancing the validity, reliability, and interpretive depth of the findings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). In this study, quantitative measures were supplemented with qualitative techniques—most notably semi-structured interviews—to elicit participants' perspectives and to explore the underlying factors shaping educational outcomes (Bryman, 2016; Punch, 2014). By integrating statistical analysis with rich narrative accounts, the mixed-methods approach ensured a more holistic and robust understanding of the complex realities surrounding the adoption of CLIL in higher education contexts (Mackey & Gass, 2015).

3.2. Participants and Sampling

To select the participants, 150 final-year English language majors from a public institution in Vietnam participated in the study. Because they had completed most of their coursework, had significant exposure to CLIL-based instruction, and could critically reflect on their language learning experiences, these participants were deemed suitable for the study.

In the quantitative phase, all participants were invited to complete a structured questionnaire specifically designed to address the study's objectives. The instrument contained both closed-ended and Likert-scale items to generate measurable data on students' self-confidence, English communication practices, and perceptions of classroom interaction.

For the qualitative phase, a subsample of ten students was purposefully selected for semi-structured follow-up interviews. Selection was guided by participants' survey responses to ensure variation in language proficiency, confidence levels, and classroom participation. The interviews aimed to collect more nuanced accounts of students' experiences, challenges, and perspectives on English communication. Open-ended questions and in-depth discussions allowed for the elicitation of rich qualitative insights, thereby contextualizing and complementing the quantitative findings.

The use of a mixed-methods strategy in this study helps integrate quantitative breadth with qualitative depth, enabling triangulation and providing a comprehensive understanding of the research problem.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments and Analysis

In this study, questionnaires and interviews were used by the researcher as two main tools. Two main tools were used to collect data for this study: semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

Quantitative information about students' opinions of the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach, specifically its advantages and difficulties, was supplied by the questionnaire. To gather qualitative information and gain a better understanding of students' individual experiences with CLIL, semi-structured interviews were used. The findings' validity was increased by methodological triangulation made possible using both instruments. To find general trends, quantitative data from the surveys were examined using descriptive statistics. In the meantime, to identify recurrent themes and subtle insights, qualitative interview responses were coded and subjected to thematic analysis. A thorough examination of CLIL implementation at the tertiary level was made possible by this mixed-methods approach (Nguyen, 2023).

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Perceived Benefits of CLIL

Table 1. The questionnaire results regarding the benefits of CLIL perceived by students.

Categories	Items	Mean	St.D
Improved Language Proficiency	Learning through CLIL improves my confidence in using subject-specific vocabulary.	3.81	0.91
	I think that my speaking skills have improved since participating in CLIL classes.	3.71	0.89
	I can understand subject-related texts better in the target language.	3.62	0.86
	I have improved my writing ability through CLIL activities.	3.55	0.84
Deeper Content Understanding	I am able to describe subject concepts accurately in the target language.	3.89	0.92
	CLIL lessons help me understand the subject matter more thoroughly.	3.74	0.90
	I can connect content knowledge across different subjects more effectively.	3.70	0.88
	I can apply the knowledge learnt in CLIL lessons to real-life or academic tasks.	3.22	0.91
Increased Motivation and Engagement	Learning content through a foreign language makes the lessons more interesting.	3.56	0.85
	I am more motivated to study because of the CLIL approach.	3.42	0.84
	I usually engage actively in CLIL classes.	3.22	0.80
	I like working on activities where I learn both the language and the subject together.	3.05	0.83
Better Collaboration and Communication	I feel more confident discussing ideas with classmates in the target language.	3.67	0.89
	Group work in CLIL classes helps improve my communication skills.	3.65	0.86
	My classmates and I often work together to overcome difficult tasks in CLIL lessons.	3.33	0.85
	CLIL helps me develop teamwork and communication skills.	3.12	0.82

As shown in Table 1, CLIL was generally perceived positively across domains, with most mean scores above 3.5. Students consistently highlighted improvements in language proficiency, particularly in subject-specific vocabulary (M = 3.81) and speaking skills (M = 3.71). Besides, in the interview, one student commented, “Before CLIL, I hesitated to use academic words, but now I can explain key

concepts more fluently.” Another noted, “My speaking is more confident because I practice explaining ideas to my classmates in English every week.”

Content understanding was another strength, with the ability to describe subject concepts in English receiving the highest score (M = 3.89). Students also noted that learning through English deepened their engagement with subject matter. As one interviewee shared, “When I have to study science in English, I need to think harder, so I understand the concept more clearly.”

Motivation and engagement yielded more mixed results: although CLIL was described as interesting (M = 3.56), tasks requiring simultaneous attention to content and language were rated lower (M = 3.05), suggesting a cognitive challenge for some learners. Still, some students expressed enthusiasm: “CLIL makes learning less boring. I enjoy that I learn two things at the same time—English and my major subject.”

Finally, collaboration and communication were valued, with confidence in peer discussion (M = 3.67) and teamwork (M = 3.65) emerging as consistent benefits. For example, one student explained in the interview, “I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas in English when we work in groups, because my classmates support me and correct my mistakes.” Another added, “Working on projects together helps me use English naturally, not just from the textbook.”

4.2. Drawbacks of CLIL Implementation

Table 2. *The questionnaire results concerning the drawbacks of CLIL implementation as perceived by students.*

Categories	Items	Mean	St.D
Language Proficiency Gap			
	I often find it difficult to understand the lesson content because of my limited English proficiency.	3.61	0.89
	I hesitate to ask questions in class because I am afraid of making mistakes in English.	3.56	0.91
	I know what I want to say, but I struggle to express my ideas clearly in English during CLIL lessons.	3.22	1.05
Assessment challenges and emotional pressures			
	I feel that my grades in CLIL classes reflect my English ability more than my understanding of the subject.	3.45	0.92
	I often feel anxious about making mistakes when speaking in CLIL lessons.	3.31	0.88
	Studying subjects in English makes me feel less confident and motivated compared to studying in my first language.	2.99	0.95
	I worry about losing marks unfairly in subject exams because of my English mistakes.	2.85	.801

The main drawback identified was the language proficiency gap. Many students struggled to follow lesson content (M = 3.61) and were hesitant to ask questions due to fear of mistakes (M = 3.56). As one student confessed, “Sometimes I understand the subject in Vietnamese, but when it is in English, I get lost and cannot follow the lecture.” Another said, “I know what I want to ask, but I cannot form the English sentence correctly, so I stay silent.”

Assessment fairness and emotional pressures were also prominent concerns. Students felt their grades reflected English ability more than subject knowledge (M = 3.45), and they expressed anxiety about speaking mistakes (M = 3.31). One interviewee remarked, “I feel my exam results are not fair. I know the content, but I lose points because my English is not good enough.” Similarly, some reported reduced motivation: “Studying in English makes me nervous and less confident compared to studying in my own language.”

These qualitative accounts underline that while CLIL enhances linguistic and cognitive development for many, it also creates barriers for learners with lower English proficiency, leading to inequities in participation, confidence, and assessment.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that CLIL supports both language development and content learning, while also revealing persistent challenges. Consistent with Coyle's 4Cs Framework, students reported gains in vocabulary and oral communication, supporting Dalton-Puffer's (2011) view that CLIL fosters authentic language use. High scores for content articulation align with Ball's (2013) argument that integrating language and content stimulates higher-order thinking. Interview data reinforced these perceptions, as students emphasized how CLIL pushed them to use subject-specific vocabulary more fluently. For example, one student noted, "Before CLIL, I hesitated to use academic words, but now I can explain key concepts more fluently." Another explained, "When I have to study science in English, I need to think harder, so I understand the concept more clearly." These reflections illustrate how the simultaneous focus on language and subject matter stimulates deeper engagement.

Motivation results suggest that while CLIL introduces novelty and interest, some students experience cognitive overload, as noted by Pérez-Cañado (2012). While quantitative results revealed lower ratings for tasks requiring simultaneous attention to content and language, qualitative evidence offers nuance: some learners found the dual focus exciting. One student expressed, "CLIL makes learning less boring. I enjoy that I learn two things at the same time—English and my major subject." This contrast highlights the heterogeneous experiences of learners, suggesting that cognitive demands can be stimulating for some but overwhelming for others.

Collaboration was consistently valued, reinforcing claims by Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols (2008) about CLIL's role in fostering cooperative learning. Student comments also revealed that group work provided a supportive environment to practice English in authentic contexts. As one interviewee stated, "I feel more comfortable sharing my ideas in English when we work in groups, because my classmates support me and correct my mistakes." Such testimonies suggest that peer interaction mitigates individual anxieties and creates a space for scaffolding, aligning with sociocultural theories of learning.

The challenges identified—language barriers, assessment fairness, and emotional strain—mirror findings from Lasagabaster and Ruiz de Zarobe (2010). Students' concerns about grades reflecting language ability resonate with Marsh's (2002) critique of assessment in CLIL. One interviewee remarked, "I feel my exam results are not fair. I know the content, but I lose points because my English is not good enough." These voices stress that students do not only experience CLIL as a learning opportunity but also as a source of inequity and pressure. Emotional burdens, including anxiety and reduced confidence, were frequently expressed in interviews, with one participant admitting, "Studying in English makes me nervous and less confident compared to studying in my own language." Such qualitative evidence highlights the lived dimension of CLIL's drawbacks, which quantitative averages alone might obscure.

For CLIL to achieve its potential, institutions must provide scaffolding, train teachers in both language and content pedagogy, and adopt fair assessment methods that distinguish linguistic accuracy from subject mastery. As the qualitative findings suggest, addressing learners' anxieties and providing opportunities for collaborative practice are equally essential. These measures can reduce inequities and ensure that CLIL functions as an inclusive and effective pedagogical approach in higher education.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1. Conclusion

This study confirms several theoretical benefits of CLIL, particularly its role in enhancing students' academic language skills and subject comprehension. Participants reported increased confidence and deeper intellectual engagement, supporting the effectiveness of the 4Cs Framework. At the same time, challenges such as language-related stress, reduced motivation, and concerns about assessment fairness were also identified. These findings suggest that while CLIL holds considerable promise, its success depends on thoughtful instructional design, adequate linguistic and emotional support, and assessment methods that fairly balance content knowledge and language accuracy. Sustained attention to these issues is essential for improving CLIL practices in higher education.

6.2. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted at a single public university, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, the relatively small number of interviewees may not fully capture the diversity of student experiences. Third, reliance on self-reported data introduces potential biases such as social desirability and recall inaccuracies. Finally, the absence of teacher perspectives is a notable gap, given their central role in CLIL implementation. Future studies should therefore incorporate both student and teacher viewpoints, draw on larger and more diverse samples, and investigate the long-term effects of CLIL on both language proficiency and subject learning.

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