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CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL) IN DEVELOPING THE LANGUAGE COMPETENCE OF BILINGUAL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This small-scale exploratory study examined the use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) with bilingual children of primary-school age. It investigated the didactic potential of CLIL for developing subject knowledge and language competence simultaneously in a non-native language. The study involved 24 children aged 7-9 and used structured classroom observation, analysis of instructional materials, pre- and post-cycle oral and written tasks, and brief consultations with two teachers. The instructional cycle comprised ten lessons organised around the CLIL 4Cs framework. Descriptive comparison indicated broader and more independent use of subject-specific vocabulary, less frequent complete reversion to the home language when difficulties arose, and greater willingness to participate in target-language communication. However, children with lower target-language proficiency sometimes experienced cognitive overload and required additional visual, gestural, or translation-based scaffolding. The findings suggest that CLIL can support functional language development in bilingual primary classrooms when tasks are differentiated and language support is carefully planned.

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Introduction

Children who grow up with two or more languages do not necessarily use those languages as separate and fully balanced systems. Their competence may vary by topic, setting, interlocutor, and communicative purpose. Consequently, educational approaches that rigidly separate language learning from subject learning may not fully reflect how bilingual children construct meaning. Bilingual education research instead emphasises the value of connecting linguistic development with cognitively meaningful classroom activity (Cummins, 2000; García, 2009).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) offers one way to create this connection. CLIL emerged as a European umbrella term in the 1990s and expanded through multilingual education initiatives (Marsh, 2002; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). In CLIL, a foreign or additional language is used as a medium for learning curriculum content rather than being treated only as an independent school subject. The approach is commonly organised through the 4Cs framework: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (Coyle et al., 2010). However, CLIL is not a single uniform model, and its boundaries in relation to immersion and other forms of bilingual education remain debated (Cenoz et al., 2014; Lasagabaster &

Sierra, 2010). For bilingual children, CLIL may be especially relevant because it resembles their everyday experience of using several linguistic resources while learning about the world.

At the same time, the use of CLIL in a bilingual classroom raises specific pedagogical questions. Children may understand a concept in one language but lack the vocabulary to express it in another. They may also combine languages strategically rather than remain within a single target-language code. Such mixed practices can be interpreted as translanguaging: the purposeful use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to construct meaning and participate in learning (García & Li Wei, 2014). A productive CLIL design must therefore develop target-language competence without treating every cross-linguistic resource as a failure.

The present study examined a bilingual primary-school group in which Uzbek and Russian were the most common language combination and English was introduced as an additional language. Its aim was to explore how a short CLIL cycle influenced children's use of subject-specific vocabulary, independent language production, and willingness to communicate, while also identifying implementation difficulties reported by teachers.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How did children's use of subject-specific vocabulary and independently produced target-language utterances change across the CLIL lesson cycle?
2. How did children use their available languages when they encountered communicative difficulty during CLIL tasks?
3. What instructional difficulties did teachers identify when preparing and delivering CLIL lessons for a linguistically uneven group?

Methods

Research design and participants

The study used a small-scale exploratory pre-post observational design conducted over one academic term. The participant group comprised 24 children aged 7-9 who displayed early bilingualism, predominantly in Uzbek and Russian, with varying additional exposure to English. The study did not include a control group; therefore, the analysis was intended to identify classroom patterns rather than establish causal effects.

Instructional cycle

The instructional cycle consisted of ten CLIL-based lessons planned around Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture (Coyle et al., 2010), with scaffolding principles informed by practical CLIL guidance (Mehisto et al., 2008). Subject content and language objectives were addressed within the same activities. For example, the water cycle was taught as science content rather than as an isolated vocabulary lesson. Terms such as evaporation, condensation, and precipitation were introduced in English through diagrams, teacher modelling, guided questioning, and a hands-on activity involving water and ice. Visual support and repeated contextual use were intended to make the language comprehensible without reducing the conceptual content of the lesson.

Data collection

Structured classroom observation was guided by three predetermined indicators: the frequency with which children used subject-specific vocabulary in the target language, the contextual accuracy of that vocabulary, and the extent to which utterances were produced independently rather than repeated verbatim after the teacher. Observations also recorded how readily children shifted between languages when they encountered difficulty.

Short oral and written tasks were administered at the beginning and end of the ten-lesson cycle. These tasks required children to retell the lesson topic in their own words, answer content questions, and write captions for illustrations. The initial and final responses were compared descriptively across the three observation indicators. In addition, brief consultations were held with the two teachers who worked with

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the group to record their impressions of changes in participation and the difficulties involved in preparing bilingual materials.

Analytical approach

The classroom records and task samples were reviewed for directional changes across the lesson cycle. The analysis focused on whether subject-specific vocabulary became more frequent and contextually appropriate, whether target-language contributions became more independent, and whether children relied differently on their home languages when communication became difficult. Teacher comments were used as supplementary evidence for interpreting observed participation and instructional constraints. Because the study was exploratory and the sample was small, no inferential statistical claims were made.

Results

Development of subject-specific vocabulary

Comparison of the initial and final tasks indicated a clear qualitative expansion in subject-specific vocabulary. At the beginning of the cycle, children commonly relied on everyday words, gestures, or broad descriptions when explaining natural processes. In the final tasks, many children independently used central target-language terms and linked them more directly to the relevant concepts. Pronunciation and word order remained inconsistent in some responses, but the vocabulary was generally used with greater functional relevance than at the start of the cycle.

Use of multiple languages and classroom participation

A second pattern concerned children's responses to communicative difficulty. In the initial lessons, difficulty often led to a complete return to the stronger home language. Later in the cycle, children more frequently maintained the subject term in English while constructing the surrounding grammatical frame in Uzbek or Russian. These mixed utterances were treated as transitional meaning-making strategies rather than as simple errors. They enabled children to sustain participation while gradually extending target-language use.

The teachers also reported that children appeared less anxious about speaking inaccurately during content-focused activities. When attention was directed towards solving a subject problem, such as explaining how rain forms, children were more willing to contribute orally than when the main purpose of the activity was grammatical correctness. This change was observational and should not be interpreted as a standardised measure of anxiety or motivation.

Instructional difficulties

The main difficulty was the uneven language competence within the group. Children with lower target-language proficiency sometimes experienced cognitive overload when they were expected to understand a new concept and unfamiliar vocabulary simultaneously. Teachers therefore had to vary the level of support, use additional visual and gestural cues, allow strategic translation, and simplify explanations without distorting the subject content. Preparing materials that maintained this balance required additional teacher time and subject-language coordination.

Discussion

The findings suggest that CLIL can create meaningful conditions for language development because vocabulary is attached to a concrete conceptual task rather than presented as an isolated list. Research across European CLIL contexts has reported potential language benefits while also stressing that outcomes depend on programme design, exposure, teacher expertise, and learner characteristics (Ruiz de Zarobe & Jiménez Catalán, 2009; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). This interpretation is consistent with the 4Cs model, in which communication supports the learning of content and cognition rather than functioning as a separate objective (Coyle et al., 2010). In the present group, children's growing use of subject-specific terms appeared to be connected to repeated contextual exposure, visual support, and the need to explain a real process.

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The mixed Uzbek-, Russian-, and English-language utterances also require careful interpretation. Research on CLIL classroom discourse shows that learners construct subject knowledge through interaction and may draw on partial or mixed linguistic resources while doing so (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Nikula et al., 2013). From a monolingual perspective, such utterances might be classified only as incomplete target-language performance. From a bilingual perspective, however, they can function as scaffolds that preserve meaning and participation while new linguistic resources are developing. This pattern accords with translanguaging theory, which views bilingual speakers' repertoires as integrated resources for learning rather than as isolated systems that must always be kept separate (García & Li Wei, 2014). The instructional goal is not to make mixed language permanent, but to use it strategically as a bridge towards more independent target-language production.

The results also support the need for differentiation. Bilingual children rarely have identical competence across all of their languages or across all subject domains. Cummins (2000) distinguishes conversational fluency from the language required for academic learning, while García (2009) emphasises the variable and socially situated nature of bilingual competence. Research on the roles of language in CLIL further shows that academic subjects require distinctive genres, registers, and ways of explaining knowledge (Llinares et al., 2012). In practice, a child who communicates confidently in everyday English may still need explicit support with the vocabulary and discourse patterns required to explain a scientific process. CLIL teachers therefore need to plan both the conceptual demand and the linguistic demand of each task.

Teacher preparation is central to this process. Effective CLIL materials must be conceptually accurate, linguistically accessible, and flexible enough to support different language profiles (Mehisto et al., 2008). Visuals, demonstrations, sentence frames, guided questions, and strategically permitted translation can reduce unnecessary language barriers. However, excessive simplification may weaken subject learning, whereas insufficient scaffolding may overload learners. The method consequently requires teachers to coordinate subject knowledge, language pedagogy, and formative observation rather than merely translate an existing lesson into English.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. It involved one group of 24 children, used no control or comparison group, and covered only a ten-lesson cycle within one academic term. The outcomes were analysed descriptively, and the report provides no standardised language-proficiency scores or inferential statistics. Teacher perspectives were obtained through brief consultations rather than a formally validated interview protocol. The findings may also reflect the selected topic, the teachers' individual practices, and the specific language profiles of the participating children. They should therefore be interpreted as exploratory evidence rather than as proof of the long-term effectiveness of CLIL.

Further research should use larger samples, longer observation periods, clearly documented proficiency measures, and comparison groups receiving separate language and subject instruction. This is particularly important because CLIL varies substantially across settings and should not be treated as a single standardised intervention (Cenoz et al., 2014; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010). Quantitative measures could be combined with detailed qualitative analysis of classroom interaction to examine when translanguaging supports learning and when additional target-language scaffolding is required.

Conclusion

This exploratory study indicates that CLIL can support the development of language competence among bilingual primary-school children when language learning is embedded in meaningful subject activity. Across the ten-lesson cycle, children showed broader and more independent use of subject-specific vocabulary, greater willingness to remain engaged when linguistic difficulties occurred, and increased use of mixed-language strategies to sustain communication. These patterns do not establish a

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causal effect, but they demonstrate the pedagogical value of linking content, cognition, and communication in a multilingual classroom.

The method is most effective when teachers differentiate support according to children's language profiles and treat cross-linguistic resources as temporary scaffolds rather than automatic errors. In the multilingual classrooms of Uzbekistan, CLIL may therefore provide a practical framework for developing subject knowledge and functional competence in an additional language, provided that teacher preparation, material design, and ethical research reporting are addressed carefully.

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