

Use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) for Teaching Reading Skills in Saudi Universities

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Received: June 22, 2021

Accepted: July 9, 2021

Online Published: July 14, 2021

doi: 10.5539/elt.v14n8p1

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n8p1>

Abstract

This research paper endeavors to evaluate, assess and assert the expediency and efficacy of employing content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in teaching Reading skills to EFL students. It is a qualitative paper which examines and underscores the usefulness of developing EFL reading comprehension skills by using the CLIL teaching. The outcome of this teaching and learning methodology is predicted and determined by presenting and evaluating considerable researches carried out in this field by eminent language researchers. These studies unequivocally demonstrate that the application of CLIL in classrooms with regard to the acquisition and retention of EFL reading and vocabulary skills among college students has proved to be very helpful and palpable. It must be understood that CLIL does not help in making the teaching content simple or revising what learners already know. CLIL courses actually blend language and content together so as to enhance the language as well as the thinking abilities of the learners. The significant amount of research interest in this subject and its growing demand as a foreign language teaching approach necessitate intensive research and analysis as to its efficacy in other parts of the world. In this context, this paper examines and validates its efficacy for the Saudi EFL learners, in view of its ostensible advantages related to language awareness and content knowledge. This paper aims to address the problems and concerns of Saudi learners and teachers of EFL, and lays down the plans to implement CLIL courses in Saudi universities for the benefit of the students in this part of the world. The research concludes by encapsulating and analyzing the researches undertaken in this field and explaining the lessons learnt by employing CLIL courses at the graduate and undergraduate levels in Saudi universities.

Keywords: CLIL, cognitive skills, content and language teaching, comprehension strategies, EFL learners, language immersion, reading and vocabulary skills, Saudi universities

1. Introduction

The ever-increasing globalization of economy, human thought, and culture have encouraged peoples and nations to intermingle as a homogenous group alongside their different cultures and economic systems (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013). Language is one of the most dependable and significant instruments of communication in the globalised world. The acquisition and the understanding of a foreign language necessarily foster confidence and facilitate healthier interaction. The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach covers a wide-ranging category of functions related to language learning which refers to learning any academic area of study in any language other than the native language and acquire that language by studying the content-based subject (Darn, 2006).

The term CLIL was devised by some language experts from Europe during the 1990s (Beacco, Bouquet, & Porquier, 2003; Beliard & Grave-rousseau, 2009; Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Cross, 2016; Perez-Canado, 2012). In the early 1990s, the CLIL approach was confined to a limited number of European language teachers who were engaged in teaching languages specified and planned by the European Commission. Since then, various language experts have applied it outside the boundaries of Europe and a number of researchers have analyzed and deliberated on the implementation of the CLIL approach in those academic institutions. They have arrived at the conclusion that integrating content with language teaching not only facilitates the attainment of linguistic and academic skills and abilities, but it also carries several advantages of enthusiasm, reasoning, and

understanding (Cummins & Swain, 2014; Griva & Mattheoudaki-sayegh, 2017). CLIL is not confined to the use of a non-native language as a tool to teach subject content. The objective of the approach is to foster and strengthen students' acquaintance with different academic specialties through a foreign language to solve problems and improve critical thinking (Perez-Canado, 2018).

According to the definition above, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), therefore, is a language teaching methodology through which learners acquire the knowledge of an area of academic study and a foreign language simultaneously. A student can be taught any subject under the syllabus as core subjects through the medium of the English language in such a manner which would equip him/her with the knowledge of not only that particular subject but also of the English language skills, particularly the reading and vocabulary skills, because the course depends on reading texts with vocabulary specific to the content area. CLIL methodology is not a restrictive language teaching approach but one that covers learners of any age or any academic level. The course contents and the language skills are planned with the intention of keeping an eye on the students' requirements and making the entire teaching content learner friendly. It is a common mistake to confine CLIL to school level teaching. Contrary to that, this language teaching approach can be very successfully implemented at the various university levels also. In fact, in many universities CLIL courses have become the regular and accepted ways of teaching a foreign language. The language lessons are so planned that the students find them much interesting and stirring to learn than the outdated and hackneyed language expressions and subjects that they had studied in their conventional language classes. These courses are not forced and manufactured language courses, but more natural and interactive language building lessons that encourage creative and critical thinking which help in the acquisition of the subject knowledge and the attainment of natural and advanced communicative skills with a high level of linguistic competence. Since the content subjects in CLIL are not in the native language of the learner, a high-level knowledge of that foreign language becomes a must for learning the contents.

Reading is an essential skill in any language teaching, since it fosters language comprehension and vocabulary building without which a language can never be acquired. Understanding and conception are the fundamental objectives of reading, which is why the significance of vocabulary improvement cannot be overestimated. A rich vocabulary helps in the awareness and proficiency of other language skills also. In the CLIL lessons, the content subjects and the foreign language are blended evenly in language teaching. Fostering reading comprehension is key to the CLIL approach (Wolff, 2005, p. 16), because it enables students to integrate language with contents. The CLIL reading texts are especially designed for the teaching of the subject selected by the students to accomplish their academic career for their intended future pursuits. So, it necessarily enhances the student's reading proficiency in English very subtly since they see the text as a challenge to achieve their goals. In CLIL classrooms reading is particularly imperative since it triggers the students' knowledge of the subject in tandem with the foreign language knowledge, and assists them in retaining new content information. This indicates towards the inevitability and the prospect of offering students diverse reading ways and strategies. The course books are so designed that the lessons include units with subject matters: history, geography, math, science etc., with equal emphasis on language and content matter. (Yang, 2015)

Since the 1990s an increasing number of Saudi Arabian institutions have incorporated CLIL into their curriculum. Like other globalizing countries, in Saudi Arabia also English language teaching, and using English as a medium of instruction has been fast expanding in schools as well as universities. The CLIL approach has gained attraction and momentum in the Kingdom producing immensely competent and highly educated graduates in all fields and equally competent speakers of the English language (Al-Kahtany, Faruk, & Al Zumor, 2016, p. 49). Many universities in Saudi Arabia use English as the only medium of instruction (MOI) introducing significant and ground breaking changes in the Saudi educational policies (Al-Nasser, 2015). The paper explicates, analyzes and concludes with references from significant researches successfully attempted by eminent scholars in the field, and the experiences of various teacher scholars which have substantiated beyond doubt that the CLIL approach of teaching English to Saudi students has come to stay and is proving advantageous in producing competent job seekers in various departments and fields in the Kingdom.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

- Exemplify and emphasize the importance of CLIL for teaching Reading and Vocabulary Skills in Saudi Arabian institutions.
- Assert on the importance of Reading as a lead-in to other language skills. Prepare for future studies and / or working life.
- Analyze and discuss the importance of the acquisition of Reading and Vocabulary Skills with respect to Saudi students.

- Analyze and exemplify how CLIL methodology is vigorously helpful for Saudi students in the achievement of the EFL goals in a globalized world.

1.2 Questions of the Study

The following three questions are addressed:

- How does the CLIL programme change the Saudi learners' Reading performance in English?
- What is the difference between CLIL and non-CLIL students in terms of their Reading comprehension?

2. Literature Review

A significant improvement in learners' foreign language reading skills and vocabulary acquisition has been found in Europe after using the CLIL approach in classrooms (Dalton-Puffer, 2017). Further researches have established the efficacy of CLIL in improving students' linguistic proficiency in the Saudi context. Outside the Western world, not much extensive studies were conducted in the Arab world. But a few very important ones that have been undertaken have invariably shown that CLIL learners made considerable progress in Reading skills and vocabulary retention positively impacting their other language skills. Furthermore, these CLIL learners displayed tremendous self-confidence in their outstanding linguistic accomplishments (Rogier, 2012). The findings of Sanad and Ahmed (2017) maintain that the CLIL approach has a positive impact on improving reading comprehension and vocabulary skills among Saudi College students. They assert that CLIL teaching methodology "engages students in topics of their interest" simultaneously improving thereby and enhancing their EFL vocabulary retention, making them capable of summarizing and connecting ideas that they can fluently present in a foreign language (Sanad & Ahmed, 2017, p. 122).

The present study has explored and examined the experiences, observations, and approaches of eminent researchers and teachers who have investigated and adopted the CLIL approach to language teaching in general, and reading and vocabulary in particular as it is applicable in the Saudi perspective. Hashmi (2019) interviewed EFL teachers in order to find out how they perceived the usefulness of the CLIL approach in language classrooms. The data collected from the interviews suggested that a good number of Saudi EFL teachers felt that it might not produce the desired good result because of the cultural, linguistic and motivational predilections of the Saudi EFL students. Nonetheless, the teachers were of the view that with proper time management and the inculcation of a positive attitude, Saudi EFL learners can reach an advanced level of English proficiency if the CLIL contents were included in their lesson plans (Hashmi, 2019).

In a landmark and exhaustive study on the implementation of the CLIL program in Saudi universities, Jawahar (2012) underlines the need to investigate the necessity and importance of introducing CLIL inside classrooms. A large number of universities in Saudi Arabia have adopted the CLIL methodology, and Jawahar's (2012) study "looks into CLIL classrooms as discourse environment for learning in general and foreign language in particular" (p. 34). It has also found that the approach is fruitful in the improvement of English vocabulary retention and recovery, and in summarizing and connecting ideas in the reading classrooms.

This research investigates and explicates the studies that have highlighted and have come up with facts and hard evidences of the usefulness of the CLIL methodology to teach EFL students so that their knowledge of the course contents and the English language both improves with significant successes. Observing its success in the Western world and to a large extent in the Asian countries, a good case can be made in its favor as a tenable and beneficial English language learning tool in the Saudi classrooms, particularly with respect to reading and vocabulary building, since language comprehension, decoding of words, restating facts, analyzing and evaluation are those elements of reading and vocabulary that go a long way in helping the acquisition of other language skills, and motivating students to learn the language simultaneously with the course contents. Most of the researches that have observed classroom interaction in CLIL have based their analysis and assessment on the communication strategies or by taking language in a social context, including its effect on the speakers. Researches have distinctly realized that language experts and teachers must also undertake an "in-depth research that explores the micro details of talk-in-interaction in CLIL contexts using computer assisted language learning, particularly in higher education" (Jawahar & Alnofie, 2016, p. 241). Jawahar & Alnofie (2016) have come up with their analysis by relying on their observations of sixteen post-secondary level CLIL lessons in order to comment and stipulate on the collaborative capabilities of Saudi CLIL classrooms. Their study also provides an in-depth investigation of the ways in which Saudi students display orientation to knowledge within this instructional setting (Jawahar & Alnofaie, 2016).

Content and Language Integrated Learning puts equal emphasis on course contents and foreign language teaching. It provides language teaching with a subject-based syllabus which offers the learners a meaningful, real

life situation where they acquire focused language knowledge. Bayram, Ozturk, and Derin, (2019) led a research on Turkish EFL students and found that though the study was a limited exercise yet it showed that CLIL had a very positive impact on the learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition abilities. Similar results can be achieved in the Saudi Arabian context if proper care and expert teachers are employed to teach English language through a content-based syllabus.

So far, no significant, full-fledged and broad-based research work has been conducted in Saudi Arabia on the teaching through the CLIL approach in the Saudi context, so an exact and actual data cannot be presented at this stage to show its progression. The CLIL teaching in Saudi Arabia is still in its beginning stages. Therefore, there is a lack of enough evidence regarding the gains of CLIL. But a careful and well managed implementation of it can change the education scenario in the country for the benefits of the increasing number of college-going students in the country. During recent years, Saudi Arabia has been overhauling its educational policy and its teaching emphasis on EFL in a big way in order to compete in the global market. In this context, universities have started to use English as a teaching medium and the need to reinforce the importance of the CLIL approach is rising ever more rapidly. To cope with this rapid change, teachers and students are being encouraged to implement communicative strategies to study course contents in English language with an eye on the improvement in the knowledge and application of both. English language has been employed in a much more effective manner to motivate students and enable them to use it as a tool for learning their core subjects enriching simultaneously their reading comprehension skills, and their inferring and evaluating abilities (Almenieci, 2005; Al-Noghaimishi, 1985; Filemban, 1981).

3. Discussion

There is not enough research about the gains of the CLIL teaching approach for EFL learners in the areas of reading comprehension and vocabulary retention, at the university levels, in the Saudi Arabian context. The purpose of this paper is to look closely and circumspectly, and examine, elucidate, illustrate and justify the employment of the CLIL teaching methodology for teaching English language to Saudi learners, and measure its feasibility and advantages in enhancing their acquisition of the elements of reading and vocabulary skills. The quint essence of CLIL is that it is related to the teaching and learning of a particular subject in a language that is crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The teaching of CLIL depends on the consistent and reasonable understanding that effective and sustained learning is only possible when the learners' core optional subject motivates them and draws their interest, which is very important for them in order to achieve better results. A heightened awareness of the language helps to a great extent in the knowledge of the subject matter. So, in CLIL content and language are integrated. Repeated reading of the content is inevitable to remember its salient features and gain its complete knowledge. In addition to it, the context-specific language renders meaningful vocabulary which makes it easier and motivating to understand words placed in their natural context. CLIL, therefore, offers a hands-on and practical methodology for the acquisition of the foreign language and the subject simultaneously, enhancing thereby cross-cultural understanding. And this can be applied to language teaching in various educational settings. Under this methodology, language is taught lexically rather than grammatically, and words are learnt through "scaffolding and brainstorming" (Hanesova, 2014, p. 41).

In the light of the well-informed and ground-breaking researches conducted on the practicability of teaching foreign language through the CLIL method, it has been observed in the foregoing pages that the CLIL approach functions on the hypothesis that it has talented and well-trained course teachers who are capable of using the offered texts for language learning with the help of an all-encompassing reading of the text. As it is a content focused approach, it engages students in reading the text and acquire the words, reinforcing enthusiasm and allowing students to explore the meanings by themselves. This transfer of initiative towards the students endows them with responsibility and confidence with respect to learning the language in which the text is presented. The researches have unequivocally established that CLIL also stimulates language learners to adapt naturally with the language and its functions as they are repeatedly exposed to it and are asked to recall the information that they have received in their newly acquired second language. (Yang, 2015)

3.1 Challenges in Implementing CLIL in Saudi Arabian Universities

In order to utilize language learning through CLIL in Saudi Arabian universities on a large scale, it is imperative to introduce language in a variety of settings and contexts in order to enable students to learn a language in a more natural and conducive atmosphere. Since those students learning a foreign language through CLIL are also required to read and assimilate a foreign language in a real perspective which is related to their academic and professional interests, they are driven to learning the language well enough to read and understand the vocabulary and the message of the contexts. It is imperative, therefore, that teachers taking up this approach, especially in the

Saudi Arabian context, should choose a suitable content that fulfils the demands of the course curriculum on the one hand, and plan language strategies and vocabulary in tandem with the demands and limitations of the learners, on the other hand (Straková, 2015). The course contents and language should envisage the clear objectives and results for which the syllabus was planned. It should be such that is easily comprehensible to learners who have little or no reading skills and whose vocabulary knowledge is below average.

Researchers have invariably shown that those students who have studied through the CLIL language teaching program have performed considerably better than non-CLIL students. The reason behind their excellence is that CLIL teaching and training improves their reading proficiency because they are trained to reading a number of varying texts on various subjects, which necessarily helps them to read faster and understand better. They are capable of reading with the same speed, even those authentic texts with which they were hitherto not quite familiar. The aim of this thesis is to showcase and assert that the CLIL reading program enables students to read without help and with ample understanding (Admiraal, Westhoff, & de Bot, 2006; Hamidavi, Amiz, & Gorjian, 2016), and it can be very comfortably used in the Saudi Arabian institutions of higher learning.

As regards the vocabulary skill, it has been proved through various researches that CLIL students were better than the non-CLIL students. The texts in the CLIL syllabus include vocabulary which is specific to a particular subject or topic. Reading and comprehension of these texts can help students understand the exact and the metaphorical or deep cultural meaning of the vocabulary, broadening their abilities of reasoning and thinking. In addition to offering the textual or literal meaning of the course contents, these academic texts also guide and prepare students to employ those words in their regular verbal communication. CLIL offers a combination of diverse elements of language, or to be exact, two language patterns coalescing and synchronizing them into a whole. The course in its essence is a blend of two educational patterns which can be explained as the subject teaching course and language teaching course. These courses are shaped into agenuine and effective instructional entity which the students must understand and become proficient in so as to achieve a certain excellence in a foreign language as well as succeed in their academic as well as professional fields. While individual learning abilities of language understanding and production may play a significant role in language learning, these CLIL courses inevitably motivate language learners to a great extent. The way language, and the course content and its terminology, are presented in the text, it puts forth a considerably positive impact on the attainment of the vocabulary skills (Adolphs & Schmitt, 2004).

3.2 Effectiveness of CLIL Methodology for Saudi EFL Learners

With regard to the linguistic or motivational differences between the Saudi and the Western learners of the CLIL there may not be a very hopeful scenario in the Saudi perspective at present. But the research conducted in the area speaks clearly and loudly in favor of the advantages that this teaching methodology carries without any difference of countries, borders, and cultures. Nevertheless, Jawahar (2012) and Sanad & Ahmed (2017), two important researchers who intensively studied the outcomes of CLIL teaching methodology on Saudi EFL students came to the conclusion that this approach enhanced learners reading and vocabulary skills to a considerable extent. They hold the view that if students maintain and display a positive attitude, the teachers will be encouraged to include CLIL components in university courses with higher level of achievements in English reading and vocabulary proficiencies. Al-Kahtany et al. (2016) and Almeniei (2005) consider CLIL a useful method in initiating and fostering an atmosphere which simplifies and expedites learners' reading and vocabulary skills, particularly when teachers are completely conscious of the diverse characteristics and aspects of CLIL and the excellent pedagogical tools with respect to the most challenging perspective of Saudi EFL teaching and learning. Furthermore, to be successful in the Saudi EFL context teachers should undergo context-specific training, so as to achieve the linguistic requirements of their learners. The CLIL approach can be particularly helpful in teaching reading and vocabulary skills to Saudi EFL learners since its components are reading comprehension texts and context specific vocabulary items which are incorporated in the syllabus. In this way EFL learners will get authentic texts in which their language will develop naturally and help them in achieving the objectives and developing their communicative and linguistic competence. Forthcoming studies on the subject can investigate and analyze this aspect of CLIL methodology in Saudi Arabian universities to suggest and support the employment of CLIL in higher levels of Saudi academic institutions.

4. Conclusion

The present paper supplements the ongoing researches in the field of the applicability and feasibility of the CLIL approach to teaching reading and vocabulary skills to the Saudi EFL students in the universities. It also examines and substantiates similar researches already undertaken in that area that offer extensive proof of the students' enhanced knowledge of reading and vocabulary skills through the implementation of the CLIL approach. The

researches discussed and examined in this thesis recommend the assimilation of CLIL and instructions on reading and vocabulary skills to help EFL learners to acquire academic and professional competence in the English language. Adolphs & Schmitt (2004) and Hashmi (2019) have highlighted the importance of a structured and reliable instructional methodology in enhancing reading skills that can lead to a successful vocabulary acquisition. They are of the view that the reading program offered by CLIL contain sample opportunities for the language engagement in view of the bilingual academic environment of Saudi Arabia, affording students an comprehensive and advanced level of English language comprehension and communication in a native-like manner. And so, reading and vocabulary curriculum can be modified according to the explicit requirement of the language learners. In accordance with the investigations and literature reviews discussed in this study, syllabus designers are required to evaluate and recommend different levels of reading comprehension strategies and vocabulary exercises under the CLIL approach to be taken up in Saudi Arabian universities. This modest qualitative study has assumed an interpretive approach to investigate and understand the usefulness of the CLIL approach in teaching reading and vocabulary skills in the Saudi EFL context.

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