Lang. Teach. (2008), **41:2**, 295–298 © Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S0261444807004922

Research in Progress

The AILA Research Network – CLIL and Immersion Classrooms: Applied Linguistic Perspectives[1]

CLIL and Immersion Classrooms: Applied Linguistic Perspectives (www.ichm.org/clil/) is one of a number of research networks (ReNs) established under the auspices of AILA. It was founded after the first CLIL Symposium, held in Vienna in July 2005. The network connects applied linguists who focus their research interests on educational settings which make use of an additional language for teaching and learning diverse content areas and thus engage in content and language integrated learning, or CLIL. Thus, this ReN provides researchers with a platform for presenting investigations on any type of classroom-based learning undertaken in a language other than the learners' first or previous language of education. This includes not only typical immersion settings of immigrant learners being integrated into mainstream education and use of the dominant language but also, and more centrally, the more recent phenomenon of using a foreign language as the medium of instruction, which has become an increasingly popular teaching approach at all educational levels in Europe and beyond, as recent publications show (Eurydice Report 2006; Marsh & Wolff 2007; Wilkinson & Zegers 2007).

To date, CLIL-oriented research has largely focussed on socio-political and didactic issues (e.g. Breidbach, Bach & Wolff 2002; Marsh 2002), sidelining the actual teaching/learning processes manifested in classroom discourse (but see Nikula 2005; Dalton-Puffer 2007) and the ReN was initiated to ameliorate this imbalance. It focuses specifically on CLIL classroom interaction as the main social practice integral to teaching and learning. More precisely and as reflected in ReN-based publications so far (Dalton-Puffer & Nikula 2006; Dalton-Puffer & Smit 2007), research interests include discursive patterns in CLIL classrooms, how they compare with first-language (L1) or foreign-language classrooms, and also how they relate to classroom, subject-specific and attitudinal factors.

At the ReN's latest meeting (in Vienna, 20–22 September 2007), 41 participants from eight European countries and Australia presented, and engaged in discussion on, their latest research, findings and interpretations, which offered a detailed view of the diversity and complexity of CLIL settings and, at the same time, pointed out the complexity of the central issues as well as potential research questions to be explored in the future. Each of these three aspects will be outlined below; more detailed reports on the individual research projects can be found in Smit & Dalton-Puffer (2007).

[1] AILA: Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée, or International Association of Applied Linguistics; CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While the focus of the ReN is European rather than global, the many countries represented throw light on CLIL as it features in diverse educational systems, spanning the continent geographically from the North (Finland) to the South (Spain). What is true of most educational issues also applies to CLIL in that it comes in a wide range of shapes and sizes. There are differences as regards the population segments, ranging from elite to mainstream, from optional to obligatory, as well as age groups, starting at around year 4 at primary-school level and featuring increasingly at tertiary level. The learner groups themselves vary from relatively monolingual/monocultural in the dominant national language to highly multilingual/multicultural and, finally, the programmes come in diverse specifications as regards types of teachers involved, relevance of content vs. language learning, learner assessment and, very importantly, the type and amount of target language usage. While English is the by far the most popular choice due to its status as the main international language and learners' proficiency levels, CLIL is also undertaken in other languages, which can be other foreign or second languages. Well-researched examples of the latter are French-medium and Dutch-medium Belgian schools using the respective other language as the medium of instruction (e.g. Van de Craen, Ceuleers & Allain 2005).

The richness and flexibility of CLIL as a teaching approach is also reflected in the range of research perspectives pursued. Guided by the explicit applied linguistic and empirical research angle of the ReN, its members presently work on a wealth of diverse research foci, such as aspects of classroom discourse in university lectures, short- and long-term effects of CLIL on target language proficiency, contrasting teachers' performance in CLIL and L1 lessons, enriching CLIL teaching material by drawing on learners' personal experiences with the language, or pedagogical tools for CLIL teacher education. The resulting diversity of findings, however, should not distract from the orientation that all investigations share: to analyse the specificities of CLIL classroom practices in relation to student learning in the content subject and the respective language. While the ulterior motivation certainly is to arrive at a theoretical model of CLIL teaching, the complexity of the subject matter, combined with the early stages of research activity has made it very clear that generally applicable interpretations can only be reached step-wise, by focusing closely on the unique contextual features of specific CLIL programmes. In this regard, the symposium has provided the following insights and considerations on CLIL.

- Generally, CLIL seems to be advantageous to student involvement in classroom interaction and student language proficiency, especially in terms of their confidence in using the target language. Current research findings also suggest that CLIL may be helpful in learning content knowledge, although the relation between medium of instruction and knowledge construction is more complex and clearly requires more research.
- CLIL is no panacea for effective language or content learning and does have its weaknesses, e.g. in terms of appropriate teaching materials, which are generally not readily available and require extra effort on behalf of the teachers. A potential pitfall of CLIL lies in the aggravating effect it seems to have on less successful students who might feel overburdened by having to master the educational tasks in a foreign language.
- The advantageous effects of CLIL seem to require a certain 'minimal threshold' of foreign language use. What this 'minimal threshold' consists of, however, is unclear at present and requires further and more detailed research.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

- Analyses comparing CLIL and non-CLIL classes agree on the positive influence CLIL has on student participation in classrooms, although it is unclear at present to what extent such an effect is determined by the medium of instruction. Factors such as teacher and student motivation as well as teaching methods might also play a considerable role.
- The studies undertaken at different levels of education point to age as a relevant factor concerning language and content learning. Research into primary CLIL suggests a positive influence on cognitive development, while the few relevant studies at the secondary and tertiary levels are indecisive. Whether this is due to the different stages in cognitive development or other confounding factors is still open for investigation.
- Very importantly, recent research paints an interesting picture of the relevance of language proficiency in CLIL teaching for teachers and students alike. While the diversity of CLIL settings thwarts any efforts to arrive at generalized requirements, research points towards the necessity for teachers and students to be 'proficient enough' for the local communicative aims rather than to reach near-native levels. How to define 'proficient enough' certainly requires further research but the possibility that successful CLIL may not require any absolute ranking of proficiency provides interesting food for thought for the still ongoing native speaker vs. non-native speaker debate for (language) teachers (e.g. Llurda 2005).

As the numerous open questions and further research issues indicate, research into CLIL is in its infancy. Of the many potential research questions, ReN members have identified two as particularly urgent: firstly, to bring together insights drawn from local studies in various settings in order to investigate shared research questions; and secondly, to enlarge the applied linguistic aspects of the research done so far and – in collaboration with other specialists – use the available insights for materials development and teacher education. The ReN will hold its next symposium at the AILA conference in Essen, in August 2008, at which these and other research issues will be discussed further.

References

Breidbach, S., G. Bach & D. Wolff (eds.) (2002). *Bilingualer Sachfachunterricht: Didaktik, Lehrer/Lernerforschung und Bildungspolitik zwischen Theorie und Empirie*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.

Dalton-Puffer, Ch. (2007). *Discourse in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) classrooms*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Dalton-Puffer, Ch. & T. Nikula (eds.) (2006). *Current research on CLIL*. Special issue of *VIEWS* (*Vienna English Working Papers*) 16.3. <http://www.univie.ac.at/Anglistik/ang_new/online_papers/views/archive.htm> (accessed 4/1/2008).

Dalton-Puffer, Ch. & U. Smit (eds.) (2007). *Empirical perspectives on CLIL classroom discourse*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.

Eurydice Report (2006). Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at school in Europe. European Commission. <www.eurydice.org> (accessed 7/12/2007).

Llurda, E. (ed.) (2005). *Non-native language teachers: Perceptions, challenges and contributions to the profession*. New York: Springer.

Marsh, D. (2002). CLIL/EMILE – the European Dimension: Actions, trends and foresight potential. DG Education and Culture, European Commission.

Marsh, D. & D. Wolff (eds.) (2007). *Diverse contexts – converging goals: CLIL in Europe*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.

Nikula, T. (2005). English as an object and tool of study in classrooms: Interactional effects and pragmatic implications. *Linguistics and Education* 16, 27–58.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004922 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Smit, U. & Ch. Dalton-Puffer (eds.) (2007). *Current research on CLIL* 2. Special issue of *VIEWS* (*Vienna English Working Papers*) 17.3.
Van de Craen, P., E. Ceuleers & L. Allain (2005). Vier jaar stimulerend meertalig onderwijs in Brussel (STIMOB): Resultaten en toekomstvisie. *Schoolen samenleving* 10, 43–57.
Wilkinson, R. & V. Zegers (eds.) (2007). *Researching content and language integration in higher education*. Maastricht: Maastricht University Language Centre.

Ute Smit
Institute für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
Universität Wien, Austria
ute.smit@univie.ac.at

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004922 Published online by Cambridge University Press