# USING LANGUAGES TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO USE LANGUAGES

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The future doesn't just happen, it is shaped and modelled by our actions.

TIE-CLIL

# An Introduction to CLIL for Parents and Young People

This booklet is about learning languages. It invites you to look at an approach which could be developed in your school which is called Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). This approach involves learning subjects such as history, geography or others, through an *additional language*. It can be very successful in enhancing the learning of languages and other subjects, and developing in the youngsters a positive 'can do' attitude towards themselves as language learners.

## Learning & Acquiring Languages

There is much scientific research on how we learn languages, which now gives us greater understanding of the role of 'acquiring language' in relation to 'learning language'.

Infants and young children can be very good at *acquiring* languages when they are used in the home, and this is one reason why people sometimes think that we learn languages best when we are very young.

Older children and adults tend to be taught languages, usually in language learning classrooms or increasingly through computer-aided programmes. Successful language learning can be achieved when people have the

opportunity to receive instruction, and at the same time experience real-life situations in which they can acquire the language.

## Natural Ways of Picking up Languages

Even though there may be differences in how the brain works as a child grows older and becomes an adult, a key issue in 'picking up' languages relates to the *opportunities* we have for learning languages. This is where CLIL can be of interest. One reason why very young children seem so good at picking up language is often to do with the *naturalness* of the environment around them. A language classroom, where learners go through the often difficult process of sorting out sounds, structures, grammar or vocabulary is rarely natural.

The language classroom is essential for the learner to understand the 'nuts and bolts' of language – the architectural plans. But there is rarely enough time in the classroom for the language teacher to go beyond this essential part of the learning process. Learners need time to build things with the 'nuts and bolts' – to build the house which they see in theory on paper.

What CLIL can offer to youngsters of any age, is a natural situation for language development which builds on other forms of learning. This natural use of language can boost a youngster's motivation and *hunger* towards learning languages. It is this *naturalness* which appears to be one of the major platforms for CLIL's importance and success in relation to both language and other subject learning.

## Different Personal Language Learning Histories

Too many people leave school being able to use very little of the languages which they spent so many hours learning.

For some of us those hours spent in language lessons, practising grammar, learning words, through speaking, reading and writing, will have been enjoyable, easy and successful. For these people the school experience will have given a firm foundation for using different languages throughout their lives.

But for many, the investment of time and effort in language classrooms may have

had more disappointing outcomes. Even when they leave school, and later in their lives, they find it difficult to use the language actively, as a *tool* for real-life communication in everyday situations. Somehow it does not make sense for some people to have spent all this time learning a language, and then leave school and find that they simply cannot use it in real-life situations.

## Being Good at Languages: Natural talent or a matter of opportunity?

Are some people naturally gifted in learning languages? Will others struggle just because they are not 'made that way'?

When a baby is born it has a natural ability to acquire language, which it does from the earliest point of life. This ability to acquire language lays the basis for learning language, learning about the world and developing skills of human communication. But if a parent hardly bothered to speak or otherwise attempt to communicate with his/her baby, then that child would be unlikely to learn language as well and as quickly as other children of the same age.

In other words, although babies are born with the capacity to learn language, it is the opportunities they have to use this capacity and *learn by doing* which is a key success factor.

It is not so much *what we know* but *how we use it* which is so important when we consider effective language learning and communication.

So, are some people naturally gifted in learning languages? Undoubtedly, yes, just as some people are gifted in music, science, sports or the visual arts, we are all

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drawn in different ways towards differing forms of learning. But so much of this question of being *gifted* depends on how we have experienced the world around us; what has made us excited, enthusiastic, disappointed, or otherwise disinterested.

## Different Children, Different Learning Styles

Children learn in different ways according to their personal *learning styles.* These may differ, even a great deal, from person to person.

Schools find it very difficult to accommodate different learning styles because they need to standardize what and how subjects are taught to suit the *learning profile image* of the up to 30 youngsters sitting in each class. And yet, each of those youngsters will have different backgrounds, needs and aspirations. This means that their personal learning styles may not fully suit the approach which the school uses. This issue affects all subjects, but particularly mathematics and languages.

Children and young people also prefer differing *language learning styles,* which means that certain types of language teaching methods may suit some, but not others. For example, some children prefer learning about the language, others prefer 'learning by using the language'. By offering an extra support experience, CLIL can give more children even better opportunities to develop their language skills in your school.

## What is CLIL?

CLIL offers opportunities to allow youngsters to use another language naturally, in such a way that they soon forget about the language and only focus on the learning topic.

It is usually done through putting aside some time in the school week for learning subjects or special modules *through another language*. In CLIL the learning of language and other subjects is mixed in one way or another. This means that in the class there are two main aims, one related to the subject, topic, or theme, and one linked to the language. This is why CLIL is sometimes called *dual-focussed education*.

It can be done in many ways. For example it might involve 8 year olds having 30 minutes of *language showers* per week, in which they sing songs or play games in the other language. It could involve 13 year olds learning as much as half or more of all their lessons in the other language.

Good results have been found with very different CLIL types, and it is clear that a small amount of CLIL can go a long way towards improving a youngster's hunger, willingness and capability to learn both other languages, and other subject matter.

> *Building self-confidence and a hunger to learn"*

## Why CLIL?

Imagine learning to play a musical instrument such as a piano without being able to touch the keyboard. Consider learning football without the opportunity to kick a ball yourself. To learn how to master a musical instrument, or a football, requires that we gain both knowledge and skill simultaneously. In other words, we learn effectively by experiencing both learning about the instrument, and having hands-on practice at using the instrument, at the same time. This is as true of music and football as of language.

In the evening, or at school, a youngster may be given time to practise music by

*playing the piano*, but do you, or your children, have the opportunity to practise *playing the language* during or after school? If not, then what is learnt in their language lessons may be wasted to some extent. In CLIL, we have an opportunity to try to prevent this from happening by giving opportunities to youngsters *to practice what they learn whilst they learn*.

## Looking at Language

The ability to use a language is much more than knowing its words and grammar, and speaking in *perfectly formed sentences*. Language learning is surrounded by myths, many of which give a very false impression of what best helps achieve success. If we are to think about the best interests of our youngsters, we could usefully re-consider some of these beliefs and views.

Language and communication are one of the most complicated aspects of human behaviour. Our desire to measure success in terms of exam results and so forth, which is a basic part of school culture, sometimes blinds us to other learning qualities which can be highly advantageous for any person.

Just as an infant can have extraordinary powers of communication with only a few words, so our ability to *communicate* in a language can be reasonably successful, even if our grammar is faulty, knowledge of words is weak, or pronunciation poor. We should all challenge the idea of *waiting until I think I am good enough in the language* to use the language. Rather we should use the language as a tool for communication and learning from as early a point as possible.

Experience of CLIL can make this possible. It can nurture a youngster's *feel good* attitude as they themselves see that successes can be achieved, however modest, and that the road towards improvement and development is truly open to them. The secret here is to capitalize on the positive attitudes which the youngsters may have towards languages, whether because of CLIL or not, and use their motivation to reach the best possible outcomes in terms of learning the language, and the other subject.

Language is complicated. Few of us can even use our first language effectively in very different situations. This is because languages are made up of different

*varieties.* Learning the language is one thing, but learning to use different varieties for different purposes is another matter. People who share the same language simply don't use it in the same ways. They differ with respect to their individual skills.

We get these skills, not so much as a matter of being naturally gifted, but from being given opportunities to learn different styles and varieties, and, crucially, from believing that what we want to learn is within our grasp.

## Language and Thinking Skills

We often underestimate our child's ability to learn languages. The brain offers enormous capacity for languages. If a child learns different languages then this will develop the thinking processes within the brain itself. This is why the ability to 'think' in different languages is so often seen as an advantage.

What we need to realize is that the ability to use different languages, even to a modest extent, can have a positive impact on the youngster's thinking processes. Being able to see the same phenomenon from different angles, as though looking through different language 'spectacles', can have a very interesting impact on our ability to think and understand. In other words, being able to frame their thoughts in more than one language can give advantages to a youngster in terms of thinking and studying.

CLIL doesn't only promote linguistic competence. Because of the different 'thinking horizons' which result from working in another language CLIL can also have an impact on conceptualization, literally *how we think.* Being able to think about something in different languages can enrich our understanding of concepts, and help broaden our *conceptual mapping* resources. This allows better association of different concepts and helps the learner go towards a more sophisticated level of learning in general.

In CLIL, we provide a situation in which the attention of the child is on some form of learning activity which is not the language itself. So what we are doing is providing the opportunity to learn to 'think' in the language, not just learn about the language itself as the major learning focus.

## Social Dimensions of CLIL

CLIL is not new. On the contrary, it has been used for centuries to provide linguistically-enhanced education which results in certain youngsters leaving school with the *plurilingual* ability to use two or more languages. Societies, knowing that some citizens should have the *gift of speech* in different languages, have long been involved with forms of CLIL.

However, these educational opportunities have very often been restricted to small groups of youngsters who had been picked, for whatever reasons, to join the socio-economic and political elites of a society. In other words, if you look back in time, even in your own country you will probably find that education had at some point been geared to providing an elite with the ability to use certain additional languages. This would have reflected a view that only certain people are capable of benefiting from additional language learning.

Even now, in some European societies, it is the privileged schools, often private, sometimes government supported, which are still in a position to hand-pick certain youngsters to excel in additional languages. And even now, this education can pay dividends when it comes to the opportunities any child has when entering the labour markets.

CLIL offers us all an opportunity to dismantle such legacies of the past. It provides *all youngsters*, regardless of social and economic positioning, the opportunity to acquire and learn additional languages in a meaningful way.

## Postscript

We have heard and seen a lot about the ways in which our societies are changing, particularly within Europe with changes brought about because of the processes of integration. The impact of computerisation alone is constantly making the world a smaller place – a place in which the benefits of being able to speak different languages are becoming more and more obvious. It is these realities, alongside state-of-the-art understanding of language acquisition and learning, which have provoked so much excitement towards CLIL.

We know that there are social, economic, cultural and ecological advantages to be gained through promoting plurilingualism through language learning right across our societies. CLIL offers one additional means by which to give our youngsters the opportunities to develop their capacity to use language and to reap the benefits in their present and future lives.

Frequent

# Questions and Answers

Questions and Answers

**Q: Could learning in the additional language hurt the child's first language?**
A: In CLIL, the development of the first language carries the utmost importance. Remember that *integrating content and language learning* should not mean that the focus on learning 'another' language results in your childs' first language being neglected.
Children will initially mix sounds and words when they are operating with more than one language. As the child learns to master two different languages there will be some degree of *interference*, which is what happens when elements of one language come into the use of another. Interference is part of the normal process of language learning and is not a sign of a problem unless it becomes unacceptably recurrent.

**Q: Will my child learn the main content as well as if s/he studies only in the first language?**
A: Yes, although the learning process may slow down, particularly at the beginning. There is even the possibility that the learning could be more successful when an additional language is used. This may be due to the child having to work harder at decoding in the additional language, the teacher stressing the main learning points, or other reasons such as high learner motivation resulting from the sense of 'fun' which some children experience.

**Q: What if my child is not as good at languages as the other children in the classroom?**
A: All people are different in ability when it comes to language command, regardless of the language. CLIL classrooms always have children with mixed abilities in terms of not only the additional language, but also other forms of knowledge and skill. One key part of CLIL methodology requires that children

use the language actively with each other during the lessons so that they learn from each other. All children can benefit from CLIL, not just those that we think of as being *good at languages*.

**Q: Should my child already have a background in the additional language, like having lived abroad or used it with family members or friends before starting CLIL?**
A: Each CLIL class should start at a level which is suitable for the children involved. Many classes are started with the assumption that the children do not have any prior knowledge of the language. Yes, it can be a help, but no it is not a requirement.

**Q: Is it likely that my child will have to do more work, and possibly face more stress, if s/he joins the CLIL class?**
A: It is possible that the CLIL class may be perceived as 'more demanding' by the child, for the simple fact that listening, reading, speaking in an additional

"Take an active interest

language is tiring until we get used to it. Therefore it is possible that the workload will feel heavier for the child, but it is up to the school to ensure that this is kept to an acceptable level. Remember that some work can be fun, and some boring. If the child enjoys the CLIL experience then the extra workload will not be seen as a problem. Each school has a responsibility to ensure that its pupils' exposure to negative stress is kept to an absolute minimum, and this is as true for CLIL classes as any other.

**Q: What is the responsibility of parents in CLIL?**
A: As is the case with education in general, parents need to be involved with the CLIL process, offering whatever support is possible and relevant. The key responsibility can be summed up as 'take an active interest', not just at the beginning of CLIL, or at the end, but through the whole process. Taking an active interest means that parents should talk to their sons and daughters so that they can share successes and concerns during the CLIL teaching process. In the case of young children in particular, parents should remember that

although CLIL may happen at school it is the home which remains the most important place for development of children's communication skills, particularly in the first language.

**Q:Is it important that the parent can also speak in the CLIL language?**
A: No, in some cases youngsters can have great fun from acting as the language teacher of the parents! It is important that the parent shows interest, and looks for opportunities to activate use of the language.

**Q:What if I cannot help my child with his/her homework?**
A: The child should be able to do most of his/her homework without help being given by parents. If this is not the case then the teacher should be consulted so that adjustments can be made to the type of homework tasks being given. One of the characteristics of CLIL methodology emphasises the importance of group work when doing problem-solving tasks in class. It may be that sometimes contact with another child from the class could be a help when facing task-based difficulties with homework. In CLIL, teachers often have to guide pupils rather carefully in terms of homework and this means that problems, if they surface, are likely to be quickly identified and handled.

**Q:Will I have to spend more money on materials if my child goes into a CLIL class?**
A: This depends on the school policy regarding availability of materials. If you wish to actively support the development of the CLIL language at home then it is likely that this will involve some extra costs.

**Q: Who are the CLIL teachers?**
A: It has been found that some of the most suitable CLIL teachers are those who speak the majority language as their first language, and the CLIL language

through the whole process.”

as a second language. This is particularly important when dealing with young children because these teachers are often sensitive to the ways children learn in the first language, and are familiar with the points of transference which come about from using the CLIL language.

**Q: Will the teacher use the youngster's first language if things become too difficult in the CLIL language for him/her to understand the content?**
A: Most CLIL classes involve use of two languages, the majority language and the CLIL language. This is one reason why this CLIL approach is called *integrated* because it includes switching from one language to another when it is in the best interests of learning. Often the main issues are given in the first language and then learning activities carried out in the additional language.

**Q:Does CLIL encourage a multicultural policy which recognises the importance of all the children's languages in the school, or is the focus only on the CLIL language?**
A: CLIL is carried out in one language, but combined with the use of the language of the larger environment. A major outcome of CLIL is to establish not only competence in these two languages, but also nurture a 'can do' attitude towards language learning in general. So very often the CLIL language will itself only be a platform by which the youngster may ultimately take an interest in other languages and cultures as well. If the child has a home language which is not the language of the wider environment, then CLIL can lead to an even greater appreciation of that home language.