

Evaluation of a National Pilot: The Potential of CLIL for Ireland

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Contents

	Page
1 Introduction	3
1.1 Context of the evaluation	3
1.2 The CLIL Fair Trade module	4
1.3 Evaluation aims and scope	4
2 Methodology	5
3 Key findings	6
3.1 Learning environment	6
3.2 Learner engagement	7
3.3 Learner identity finding	8
3.4 Teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing CLIL	9
4 Recommendations	11

1 Introduction

1.1 Context of the evaluation

Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI) introduced a 2-year CLIL pilot 2021/22 into Transition Year (TY) in secondary schools, against a background of attrition in foreign languages. It is part of *'Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017-2026'* in response to the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019. The pilot came at a critical moment for language learning in Ireland, given the importance of supporting all children and young people in an increasingly plurilingual society, and also given Minister for Education, Norma Foley's, announcement to introduce mandatory primary modern foreign language learning from 2025 as part of the new Primary Curriculum Framework.

The pilot was based on success in Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) secondary settings across Europe and beyond, in particular in Anglophone contexts. CLIL is a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both subject content and language. Reported benefits of CLIL for language learning relate to the fact that CLIL provides learners with opportunities for more authentic and meaningful language use in the context of learning about a subject or topic. This has been shown to have a positive effect on students' motivation and confidence in language learning, their intercultural skills, and their language proficiencies.

PPLI, a dedicated unit providing expertise and support for foreign languages education in Ireland was established with a remit of diversifying, enhancing, and expanding the teaching of foreign languages in second-level schools throughout Ireland. The core focus of PPLI's work remains on broadening the opportunities available to students for learning foreign languages that are relevant to Ireland's future cultural, social, and economic needs. Languages Connect is the context for PPLI activities and has four goals:

1. *Improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging language learning environment,*
2. *Diversify and increase the uptake of languages learned and cultivate the languages of the new Irish,*
3. *Increase awareness of the importance of language learning to encourage the wider use of foreign languages,*
4. *Enhance employer engagement in the development and use of trade languages.*

These goals are divided into key actions. Included under Goal 1 of Languages Connect is action 1.E.3 that seeks to explore the benefits of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in order to "support and reinforce language learning" and "to improve language proficiency by creating a more engaging learning environment".

1.2 The CLIL Fair Trade module

PPLI has established a 6-week CLIL module on Fair Trade, with content links to geography and maths, available in French, Spanish, German, and Italian for implementation in TY. The CLIL module includes Teacher Support Documents, Student Worksheets, and PowerPoint presentations as resources. PPLI provided professional learning for teachers, comprising of a one day in-person training event and three online evening sessions. 100% of participants had no prior training in CLIL and 87% no CLIL teaching experience. Inevitably, the flexible nature of TY content led to some revision of prior learning of key concepts in maths and geography. Hence these sections of the content were not new to learners, and this may have affected their views.

1.3 Evaluation aims and scope

The aim of this evaluation study undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University at the end of the 2-year pilot 2021/22 and 2022/23 is to explore the potential of CLIL to create a more engaging learning environment to motivate learners and thereby reduce attrition. The report presents the findings and recommendations of the research conducted into the introduction of CLIL using this pilot module. 220 students and 26 teachers from 24 post-primary self-selecting schools took part in the pilot; 22 remained engaged throughout the pilot. The evaluation study sample was drawn from the 12 schools implementing the pilot module during the second half of 22/23. The amount of CLIL undertaken during the pilot module and teachers' prior knowledge varied. One school had been implementing CLIL prior to the pilot and continued throughout TY, others had as little as six lessons of CLIL in the module. For the purpose of analysis of the data we drew from the full sample.

2 Methodology

The evaluation team visited a lesson to contextualise focus group interviews. They then undertook student focus groups in three schools selected by PPLI to reflect the range of contexts and two online teacher focus groups comprising a total of 15 teachers. An online survey was completed by 56 students across these 3 schools, representing the students involved in the lessons. End of TY logistics drove the sample and numbers of students participating in the evaluation activities. Findings were analysed against the themes of learning environment, learner engagement and learner identity, drawn from the Process Motivation Model (PMM) framework for investigating CLIL (Bower, 2017). The analysis also focused on teachers' experiences with implementing CLIL, including the challenges they faced.

3 Key findings

3.1 Learning environment

80% of learners found CLIL very or mostly enjoyable, and students overwhelmingly described CLIL lessons as "fun" and conducive to learning. Several key features of integrated learning were identified as fostering positive emotions:

- Learners described CLIL as a more practical, hands-on approach that made learning feel less like memorization. Learning content through CLIL was seen as an effective way to remember and apply knowledge.
- CLIL was perceived as a dynamic, conversation-driven approach, making it feel less like a traditional class and more like an interactive experience. Learners highlighted the high levels of interaction and group work in CLIL lessons as a significant factor in their enjoyment. The interactive nature of CLIL lessons fostered positive emotions and a sense of achievement, irrespective of the perceptions that the learners may have of their academic abilities.

"I like the style of learning as I'm not very academic and find it harder to learn in a typical classroom environment, and CLIL is way more fun and hands-on work"
- Learners preferred integrated language learning over traditional language instruction, emphasising the opportunities to speak the language. CLIL was seen as a more practical and effective way to learn a language conversationally. Learners reported improvements in speaking and communication skills and felt that they were picking up more variety in the language and that they were doing so more naturally.
- CLIL's language scaffolding and support for accessing content in a second language were seen as beneficial for students. The approach helped learners access subject matter more effectively, as non-CLIL teachers often assumed students had the language skills necessary to understand content.

"It was just described a lot, like in detail. Because we wouldn't really understand if it was a bit harder. When our English teacher speaks to us, they speak in formal language and language that we should know, whereas in the French [CLIL] language she kind of like made it much easier to understand"
- Learners reported feeling less pressure in CLIL classes compared to traditional language classes. The absence of strict correction and the focus on conversation rather than grammar contributed to this perception. Students' confidence in their language abilities increased, thanks to the relaxed and interactive nature of CLIL lessons. Students' perceptions of CLIL as "less pressured" were influenced by the fact that CLIL took place during Transition Year, which lacks the usual exams and tests. The absence of academic pressure during this year may have enhanced students' positive perception of CLIL.

- 20% of learners reported their CLIL experience as less enjoyable. Learners primarily reported this to be due to the content matter being repetitive or boring. CLIL was noted for its ability to help learners integrate knowledge from different subjects and deepen their subject knowledge in that way. Other learners reported difficulties understanding, feeling that there was too much vocabulary to learn in one lesson, and that they needed more explicit teaching of language structure to participate in the learning.
- Students in one DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school setting reported that only 24 students from the whole year group of circa 120 students participated in TY. For those 24 students some modules in the transition year were compulsory including the Fair Trade module in languages. For financial reasons, disadvantaged learners are less likely to participate in TY, given the additional cost of some TY activities, and the opportunity to finish school and enter paid employment a year earlier, whether leaving at age 16 or going straight on to senior cycle.

3.2 Learner engagement

84% of learners reported giving maximum or good effort in class. The CLIL environment was seen as a departure from traditional foreign language and Irish classroom settings, with learners feeling more immersed in the learning process. The positive CLIL environment influenced learners' engagement in several key ways:

- The integrated learning challenge required CLIL learners to work harder. Students found that CLIL kept them more focused and engaged in their learning, preventing boredom and low-level linguistic repetition.

"I didn't feel like really challenged and I felt that all the stuff was very repetitive, but I feel like learning through French [CLIL] you are doing both things. You are trying to understand the French but also understand the geography, which I think kind of helps with that, because I was understanding more, because I was interested. I was like 'what does that mean?' instead of it just being, like, this is here and that is there and rocks"
- CLIL provided a context for meaningful learning that learners found motivating and engaging. Learners were motivated to work hard when they perceived the content and language skills as something they could apply in real-life situations and as having practical implications beyond exams.
- Learners used language in a meaningful way within CLIL, which contributed to their engagement. CLIL helped learners view language as a tool for effective communication, rather than isolated grammar and vocabulary.
- Learners expressed a strong interest in developing conversational skills in the target language. They saw CLIL as an opportunity to learn how language is used in everyday conversations and situations. This focus on conversational skills made language learning more meaningful and engaging for students.

3.3 Learner identity finding

Participation in the CLIL module had a profound impact on students' self-concept as language learners:

- Despite a relatively short period of CLIL instruction, students expressed a strong sense of achievement. Learners believed they had improved their fluency in French and gained the ability to understand spoken French. They felt capable of mastering a second language.

Q: "What do you think that you've achieved through being in the Fair Trade module?"

R: "Being able to speak French."
- Learners who may not have considered themselves "academic" or "language people" found the CLIL approach to be engaging and accessible, which boosted learners' morale and confidence. The CLIL environment offered a lower threshold for asking questions and seeking help, contributing to students' confidence, self-assuredness and self-concept.
- Learners reported the development of confidence and the ability to learn from context as a significant outcome of their CLIL experience. They described breaking down sentences, understanding key words, and making sense of sentences or paragraphs through context. This development of contextual learning strategies was seen as a transferable skill applicable to lifelong learning.

"Like, instead of having or knowing everything, we can break down sentences like we did in class and try to understand them even though we might not be the best at it"
- Teachers also observed increased confidence among CLIL students, which they believed helped them cope with gaps in their knowledge. The newfound confidence gained through CLIL extended beyond the CLIL lessons and beyond language learning. Students felt more confident speaking out in different subjects and were less afraid of making mistakes.
- Less positive self-related feelings included, conversely, an increase in learner anxiety when speaking in groups and to the class. However, this was reported as something that simply takes time to get used to, and as one of the areas that learners felt proud of and that contributed to an increase in confidence.

"I am kind of proud of how much we worked together. Like we do have our own little groups in the class, but at the end of the class we all come together and share opinions and share ideas, and there are some of us that might have been comfortable doing that, and even in [mainstream] French you kind of see people are getting more confident with the language, people are getting more comfortable with the topics, and it's kind of nice to see"

3.4 Teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing CLIL

Teachers described participating in the CLIL pilot as an opportunity to re-energise their teaching and their language learners. For some of the teachers, these expectations were met, and all of them talked about the benefits they saw for their learners. However, all teachers faced challenges when implementing CLIL:

- Because of the linear nature of progression in language learning, the frequent absences of students associated with the location of CLIL in Transition Year posed serious challenges to teachers' ability to support and progress language learning.
- Teachers revealed that they were still developing their understanding of CLIL as a pedagogical approach. They occasionally conflated CLIL with the specific Fair Trade module, rather than seeing it as a broader teaching and learning approach.
"I did think that there were moments in the CLIL programme where you could naturally pause and maybe do some grammar or something more traditionally... but, just the nature makes it really difficult, you feel like they are completely doing one thing or completely doing the other"
- Teachers needed more guidance on how to effectively integrate language teaching and learning with content instruction, as CLIL demands a different teaching approach compared to traditional language teaching. Teachers found it challenging to transition from a foreign language approach to a CLIL approach. Teachers were uncertain about how much language focus and correction was appropriate within the context of CLIL.
- Teachers had students with varying language proficiency levels in their CLIL classes. They needed to adapt activities and feedback to accommodate students with different language skills, which posed a challenge as teachers tried to balance content and language learning.
- Teachers expressed insecurities in teaching content, particularly subjects they were not specialists in. Collaborative efforts with subject area experts (e.g., maths or geography teachers) were sometimes necessary to deliver content. Teachers who had both language and disciplinary knowledge found the CLIL experience invigorating and rewarding.

4 Recommendations

The evaluation found that the CLIL approach appealed to students and increased their confidence in a range of skills, enabling them to make good or better progress. Both the CLIL approach and the positive experience of learning and achieving in this way, proved highly motivating. We therefore recommend that CLIL is available to more students, both in TY and also within the main curriculum. In supporting plurilingualism in schools, consideration should be given to the integration of CLIL approaches, including pluriliteracies, across both foreign languages and Irish, and the wider curriculum.

Further recommendations to support wider implementation of CLIL.

- The evaluation found that overall students were very positive about CLIL in TY, but teachers less so. As for any other linear subject, TY limits the potential of CLIL as some students were not able to attend all lessons due to frequent absences linked to activities and extra-curricular commitments associated with TY. It was more successful when introduced earlier in TY.
- Because access to TY for DEIS students may be limited by economic reasons, we recommend that CLIL is also introduced in other curricular programmes in post-primary education, such as Junior Cycle, the established Leaving Certificate, or the other Leaving Certificate programmes, such as the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA), or the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP).
- Consider the introduction of CLIL in primary settings where, as generalists, teachers have expertise and are confident teaching content in a range of curriculum subjects. This is particularly important as Ireland begins to introduce foreign languages into primary education.
- Consideration should be given to planning for continuity and transition across primary and secondary phases.
- To motivate learners to be able speak all languages including Irish, consider adopting CLIL approaches in all areas of language learning. Pedagogical approaches to the integration of language and content have evolved and include pluriliteracies.
- The limited understanding of CLIL by a large majority of teachers and the challenges they highlighted underlined the need for greater and continuous professional learning (PL) in CLIL. PL should focus on equipping teachers with the necessary skills, strategies and knowledge to effectively implement CLIL as a pedagogical approach. Building communities of practice through training, collaborative efforts and sharing of best practices among teachers would be a beneficial means of addressing these challenges.

- Ongoing professional learning should equip teachers with a greater understanding of CLIL and empower them to gain expertise in developing their own lessons and materials suitable for their own contexts. Teachers should be taught how to plan for CLIL effectively. PL should enable them to be confident in teaching the content, skills and concepts. There is great potential to begin with the secondary teacher's second specialism where this is not a language. Such PL would be relevant to all language teachers including teachers of Irish. Consideration should be given to how language and subject discipline teachers might co-develop CLIL modules.
- If CLIL teachers are to be confident facilitators of meaningful interaction within target language teaching, upskilling and refresher courses should be offered in relevant languages. Consider offering a pilot course focussing on meaningful interaction in subject disciplinary language.
- To achieve the full potential of CLIL for Ireland, these pedagogical approaches should be introduced and practised in Initial Teacher Education.