

New trends in CLIL

(Study: In Focus : CLIL in Germany : Results from Recent Research in a Contested Field of Education
Stephan Breidbach and Britta Viebrock, International CLIL Journal, 2012)

New trends in CLIL research: underachievers and linguistic diversity in the classroom

New trends in CLIL research in the German-speaking world can be detected in a shift towards learner groups that were usually neglected in the highly selective implementation of CLIL – underachievers as well as multilingual speakers. The most recent studies also display a more critical attitude towards the pre-supposed “added value” of CLIL by definition and try to shed light on some critical and complex or even negative aspects.

Aspel’s ongoing research project is concerned with underachievers and drop-outs (cf. in this volume). While Zydati (2007) has already found evidence that CLIL learners turn their back on CLIL classes for strategic reasons, i.e. better grades when participating in non-CLIL classes, Aspel attempts to provide a statistical overview of all cases of a selected region as well as in-depth studies of individual cases. Following Bohnsack’s documentary method as the overarching theoretical framework, Aspel tries to determine the factors responsible for failing CLIL programmes and possibly create certain learner profiles (types). It is his intention to link the findings to existing theories concerned with weak performances of learners in comparable circumstances (such as Cummins’ above mentioned threshold hypothesis in immersion settings).

Rauschelbach’s (in progress) project is concerned with the individual learner’s multilingual background and its relationship to successful learning in CLIL settings. Within the theoretical discourse in German on CLIL, the fact has usually been neglected that CLIL does not only involve the foreign language and the official school language, but also needs to be related to the linguistic diversity of the learners and the numerous heritage languages that might be represented in contemporary classrooms. For many learners CLIL is not a second language learning activity, but it rather involves three or four languages of various competence levels. This aspect becomes increasingly important in the context of the latest developments in educational policy such as the implementation of CLIL programmes for learners of various abilities. Taking into consideration the allegedly “elitist” nature of the CLIL-approach mentioned above, it is understandable that the theoretical discourse was biased by assumptions of more or less homogeneous classrooms with little linguistic diversity. This conjecture probably resembles an over-simplistic model from the start since there is always variation in learners’ motivation, cognitive abilities, and aptitude among other factors. Apart from this, such a model is certainly no longer feasible in view of the linguistic and cultural heterogeneity of today’s learners.

National large-scale education studies such as DESI (DESI Konsortium 2006), which looked at learners’ achievements in the EFL classroom and German, have shown that students with a multilingual background, i.e. learners who grew up with two languages or learned German in early childhood in addition to another mother tongue are particularly successful in the language

areas of reading comprehension, grammar and listening comprehension. The study also provides evidence for an increased socio-pragmatic competence of multilingual learners, i.e. the ability to accurately identify and classify speaking intentions and use the English language appropriately with regard to contact, situation and addressee. Against this background, Rauschelbach poses the question whether CLIL environments offer favourable circumstances, which enable the learners to employ their multilingualism as a valuable resource. In contrast to the achievement studies, Rauschelbach is more interested in questions such as the learners' attitudes and their self-concept as a multilingual speaker and beneficial teaching methods to foster the multilingual learners' assumed potential. An in-depth study of individual cases is located in the realm of qualitative interview and classroom observation studies and will probably not yield broadly generalisable results. But it will most likely provide valuable insights from the learners' points of view, which will be able to serve as additional explanations for the outcomes of the large-scale achievement studies. The topic as such is certainly of great importance particularly against the background that much of what is considered to be "monolingual" content learning (thus making use of the official school language for instruction) already is some kind of a CLIL setting for many multilingual speakers whereas the focus on an additional foreign language in CLIL adds another dimension of complexity that needs to be analysed and reflected in the professional discussion.

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8. Conclusion

This overview shows that research in the German-speaking world has been carried out in a number of fields. Even though the context may be rather specific, the results are certainly of a more general value. As a general tendency it can be stated that the early CLIL projects were driven by a rather positivist attitude, essentially assuming an "added value" by definition, and when this was confirmed by research little attention was given to the specifics of a selected learner population. The perceived positive effect of CLIL has been generalised to a more diverse student profile by policy makers who have fostered the implementation of additional CLIL programmes to additional Grade levels and types of schools. This spread of CLIL needs to be viewed with caution if teachers do not receive the requisite training. After all, CLIL teaching is first and foremost concerned with good teaching: it has to face similar pedagogical challenges as those faced in mainstream programmes. Many CLIL issues are by no means CLIL-specific.

From our point of view, considerably more research needs to be carried out to substantiate the CLIL approach for all learner types. In more recent projects, a greater awareness of critical aspects of CLIL teaching can be found as well as a further diversification of topics including subjects or learner groups that were formerly neglected. As a general tendency, there is more diversity among CLIL learners, among CLIL approaches and among CLIL subjects, which needs to be taken into consideration and reflected in future research.