Research Article

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Students' Perspectives on Implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning to Teach Business English at Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania

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Abstract

Due to free trade economy policies, the demand for English language use in Albania has seen a leap during the last three decades, thus becoming the main foreign language used for communication both at the international and national levels. Universities, as higher education institutions, should reflect changes that are taking place in the Albanian economy to ensure that graduates meet workplace needs for language and communication. Updated syllabuses should pinpoint the language and communication skills that economics students need to be successfully integrated into the labor market. This research paper aims to investigate the perspectives of students at the Agricultural University of Tirana (AUT) regarding the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Business English (BE) courses. CLIL, introduced in the 1990s, remains an innovative teaching approach that integrates language learning with subject content. Through a semi-structured questionnaire and interviews, this study focuses on 250 students, analyzing their experiences, challenges, and benefits related to this methodology. The findings aim to provide insights for an effective implementation of CLIL in BE courses in the future.

Keywords: *CLIL; Business English; Higher Education*

1. Introduction

The increasing demand for proficient English language use in communication in the global business environment has urged Higher Education Institutions in Albania to encourage the revision of foreign language teaching methodologies. Emerged three decades ago, but still considered an innovative and effective teaching approach, CLIL proposes a dual approach to language teaching, by integrating language learning with subject-specific content. The modern, interrelated global economy puts an enormous emphasis on the importance of effective communication in English, especially in expert fields such as business and agriculture. Due to the position of the English language as lingua franca in international business contexts, HE institutions must ensure to equip students both with language proficiency and content-related knowledge simultaneously. Through the use of this teaching

approach, students get involved with academic content in a second language, boosting not only their linguistic but also their cognitive skills.

The Agricultural University of Tirana, as one of the leading institutions in the field of Agriculture, deems Business English as paramount in equipping students with effective communication skills to succeed in their respective fields. While students receive language education, the effective delivery of Business English is essential for their future employment opportunities and to be successful in a competitive job market. The study investigates how Business English students at the Agricultural University of Tirana perceive CLIL. It aims to get insights into their perspectives on the effectiveness and implementation of CLIL for teaching Business English at this institution, focusing on students' engagement, motivation, perceived effectiveness, and any challenges faced during BE classes that implement CLIL.

Previous studies have emphasized the possible advantages of CLIL implementation, such as increased student engagement, motivation, and enhanced language acquisition (Dalton-Puffer, 2008; Prokop & Fancovicova, 2013). JRSP-ELT, & Rao, V. Chandra. (2021) conducted a study among economics students at the University of Tirana about their perceptions of CLIL implementation in the BE course. The results from the study data indicated "a big desire of the students to be more focused on the acquisition of profession-related language skills and such specific terminology" which would help them to meet the requirements of their future work. In another study, Kikidou and Griva (2023) implemented a CLIL-based program for 5th-grade students in Northern Greece to explore Greek vicinities and engage with subjects such as geography, history, and culture while using English. Integrating authentic materials supported English communication and facilitated language and content knowledge development, providing a motivating learning environment. Thus far, there has been no study on specific experiences and attitudes of students about CLIL within the context of AUT, remaining, therefore, relatively underexplored. This paper aims to bridge this gap by investigating students' perceptions on the integration of content and language learning in their Business English courses, shedding light on their experiences and providing input for future instructional practices.

Through the collection of qualitative and quantitative data utilizing semi-structured questionnaires and interviews, this research will present a comprehensive overview of students' attitudes toward CLIL. The outcome will contribute both to the existing body of knowledge on CLIL and offer practical insights into how this approach can be effectively implemented in the context of teaching BE in higher education institutions in Albania. While the demand for skilled professionals grows in the global labor market, getting a deeper understanding of students' perspectives on effective language instruction will be crucial to enhancing their educational experiences and outcomes.

The main purpose of this study is to evaluate students' perceptions of CLIL and its effectiveness in developing their Business English skills. The specific objectives include:

- To assess student attitudes towards CLIL.
- To identify perceived advantages and disadvantages of CLIL.
- To explore the impact of CLIL on students' engagement and motivation

2. Literature Review

a) An overview of CLIL, its principles, and its benefits for language acquisition and cognitive skills development.

As a definition, CLIL presents an educational approach that simultaneously teaches content (such as subjects like science, history, or mathematics) and a foreign language, thus aiming to enhance both the students' language proficiency and subject knowledge.

Below are some of the principles that encompass students' language acquisition.

Dual Focus: Provided also in the definition, CLIL highlights learning both content and language contextually (Davies, 2003). In other words, students engage with subject-specific material while practicing a target language at the same time.

Communicative Approach: Researchers emphasize the ability of CLIL to foster interaction through collaboration and discussion, which promotes a communicative environment where learners actively use the language (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).

Cognitive Skills Development: Implementation of CLIL approach challenges students to think critically and analytically about content, thus promoting higher-order thinking skills (Coyle et al., 2010).

Authenticity: Didactic Material resources and tasks are often authentic and real-world oriented, therefore allowing learners to engage with language and content relevant to their lives and future careers (Marsh, 2002).

b) Benefits of CLIL:

The benefits of implementing CLIL are as follows:

Enhanced Language Acquisition: According to various researchers, the integration of language with content, introduces learners to more practical and efficient uses of the language, leading to improved fluency and vocabulary retention (Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

Cognitive Development: The implementation of CLIL, stimulates cognitive engagement by encouraging learners to apply linguistic skills in problem-solving contexts, thus enhancing critical thinking and analytical skills (Coyle et al., 2010).

Motivation and Engagement: By relating language learning to subjects that interest students, CLIL can increase motivation and engagement in both language and content learning (Marsh, 2002).

Cultural Awareness: During CLIL implementation, learners are exposed to different cultures and perspectives, as e result promoting intercultural competence and understanding (O'Toole, 2010).

c) CLIL and the traditional language teaching

CLIL differs from traditional language teaching in many ways:

Integration of Content and Language: In CLIL, language learning happens simultaneously with subject content learning (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010) while traditional language teaching often focuses primarily on language skills such as grammar and vocabulary separately.

Contextual Learning: CLIL emphasizes the use of the target language in meaningful contexts related to specific subjects (e.g., science, history) (Marsh & Langé, 2000). In contrast, traditional methods may rely more on repetitive exercises and drills without real-world application.

Increased Focus on Communication: CLIL, in contrast to traditional methods that center more on written tests and formal assessments, promotes communication as a central component of learning, thereby encouraging students to use language as a tool to express ideas and understand content (Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009).

Cognitive Skills Development: Traditional language teaching prioritizes rote memorization and lower-level cognitive tasks while CLIL promotes higher-order thinking skills and encourages students to engage with complex concepts through analysis and problem-solving in a foreign language (Dalton-Puffer, 2007).

CLIL provides a more immersive and applied approach to language learning, making it relevant and engaging for students.

d) The importance of Business English for effective communication skills

Business English plays a crucial role in the economic sector as it is the primary medium for communication in the global marketplace. Proficiency in Business English enhances professional opportunities and facilitates effective collaboration and negotiation in a diverse business environment.

According to Jenkins (2006), in the context of global communication, being fluent in English enables professionals from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate effectively, fostering international trade and collaboration. In addition, it encourages professional competitiveness since fluency in BE is regarded as essential for career advancement. In their study, Linder, Sweeney, and

Renc-Roe (2020) highlight that employers prioritize candidates with strong English communication skills, which are paramount for engaging with international clients and partners. Furthermore, effective BE communication leads to improved negotiation outcomes and faster decision-making processes. Research indicates that clear communication minimizes misunderstandings, which can lead to costly errors in business dealings (Kirkpatrick, 2010).

Proficiency in Business English helps professionals understand cultural nuances and practices in different markets. Brandenburg states that this cultural competence is critical for successful interactions and relationships (Brandenburg & de Wit, 2011). In terms of interpersonal skills: effective communication in BE enhances interpersonal relationships within teams and organizations. In their study, Guffey and Loewy (2010), state that strong communication skills facilitate collaboration, motivate team members, and foster a positive work environment. Another contribution of BE is the development of effective communication skills to navigate and resolve conflicts. Kosslyn (2007), emphasizes that well-developed communication aids in addressing disputes constructively thus minimizing disruptions to productivity. Professionals often need to present ideas and persuade stakeholders. Meister (2013) emphasizes that the ability to articulate thoughts clearly and confidently is key to influencing decisions and driving business initiatives.

Finally, the rise of digital communication tools and remote working environments makes adaptability in communication modes essential.

3. Methodology of the Study

3.1 Research design

This study aims to investigate the students' perception of the implementation of the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach to teaching business English at the Agricultural University of Tirana, Albania regarding several issues such as students' engagement and motivation, their perception of the effectiveness of CLIL approach, challenges they face BE classes and so on.

By using qualitative research design the aim is to explore the "how," "why," and "what" aspects of a phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2014; Levitt, 2021). The study utilizes an exploratory research approach, counting on interviews and open-ended questionnaires to collect data.

3.2 The population of the study.

The participants in the study are 250 students enrolled in Business English courses at the Agricultural University of Tirana, Faculty of Economy and Agri-business. This study utilizes a purposive-convenience sampling method, that is all the students who were taking BE courses during the first year of their Bachelor studies took part in the process.

3.3 Data gathering tools

The study employed an online survey and an interview as data-gathering tools. The online survey was conducted through Google Forms and collected data for three questions addressed. 1) their general opinions on CLIL implementation, 2) challenges faced with CLIL implementation, and 3) the perceived effects of CLIL on their language education. Students were asked in the last section of Google Forms whether they accepted an online interview invitation. Fifteen of the participants agreed to a face-to-face interview. The second gathering tool, the online interview, tried to elaborate further on some answers to the survey about the learning experiences with CLIL, aspects of CLIL they appreciated or disliked, challenges encountered, and tools used to face those challenges. The interviews were conducted one by one at a time convenient for the participants by two researchers.

3.4 Data analysis

Data gathered through semi-structured questionnaires, and interviews were then triangulated and analyzed using thematic analysis to study common trends and perceptions. The researchers examined and verified the transcripts to ensure accuracy. Thus, the data were evaluated, simplified, and elaborated upon, potentially leading to the development of a taxonomy and hierarchy of features (Coker, 2021). The responses were carefully examined until significant themes were generated from the qualitative findings. Furthermore, an in-depth familiarization with the data was carried out, pursued by the generation of initial codes that seized key concepts and ideas. The codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes to address the research questions. In the end, quotations from the respondents were picked to represent each theme, adding to the context and depth to the findings

4. Findings

The result of the study regarding the perceptions of students at the Agricultural University of Tirana during the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning to teach Business English reveals the following insights into student engagement, motivation, perceived effectiveness, and challenges.

- **Enhanced Engagement**: According to the data, 76 % of the participants showed a positive attitude to engagement. They reported a noteworthy enhancement in engagement when Business English was taught through the CLIL methodology, partly due to, the integration of real-world economic contexts making the learning process more relevant, as students felt they were directly applying language skills to their field of study. Many indicated that hands-on activities and discussions related to agricultural business increased their interest in both the subject matter and the language. The following excerpt illustrates the positive attitude to engagement:

"Even though I feel confident in English when I engage in simulation activities such as negotiating a contract, I am positive I will come across this situation when I get a job, so I enjoy it more"

- **Higher Motivation Levels**: The questionnaire results noted that 82% of participants felt more motivated thanks to practical applications of language skills. One student quoted:

" There are some words that I think I will need to use when I start to work, for example in a bank. I do not come across these words when I learned general English"

Most students polled stated Business English through CLIL increased motivation towards learning. They valued the opportunity to learn vocabulary and concepts relevant to their future careers in economics. The interactive learning environment and dynamic nature of CLIL were considered significant factors in promoting intrinsic motivation

- **Perceived Effectiveness**: 70 % of students perceived CLIL as an effective method for language acquisition. They revealed that learning Business English within the context of Economics topics helped them grasp complex business terms and communication strategies better than traditional methods. Feedback from the questionnaire and the interview indicated that students believed that CLIL equipped them with practical language skills that are immediately applicable in their future careers. They further emphasized that CLIL improved confidence in their ability to communicate in professional business scenarios.

"There are situations when I simultaneously learn about the content of a business topic as well as using the right word collocations in English" one respondent emphasized during the interview

- **Development of Collaborative Skills**: The students participating in the study highly appreciated the use of group projects and peer collaboration. They stated that working together on projects enhanced both their language skills and their teamwork abilities. Around 90% of the participants indicated that they enjoyed group activities and discussions, due to the collaborative nature of CLIL which encouraged them to engage with peers, thus fostering a learning environment that prioritizes cooperation.
- **Challenges and Suggestions**: The respondents identified some challenges, despite the positive feedback. 60% of students reported difficulties balancing content and language learning, particularly when academic language was highly specialized and technical vocabulary was involved. One respondent said"

Even though I am aware that CLIL will prepare me better for my future employment tasks, sometimes I feel it is too much. I do not feel as comfortable with my English as my peers, and fear that certain terms are hard for me to grasp".

Among the suggestions provided was the need for additional support, such as language workshops or tutoring, which could help address these gaps. The feedback highlighted that the students felt they would benefit from targeted language support alongside content lessons.

- **Cultural and Contextual Relevance**: Another challenge emerging from the study was the students' response to the cultural and contextual relevance of using CLIL as a teaching approach. They highlighted the importance of contextual relevance in their BE courses. Those who found the Business English content relatable to their studies of Business and Economy felt more empowered to engage with the material. Students suggested integrating local case studies and examples relevant to the Albanian business context to further enhance the learning experience.

The outcome of this study highlights the positive impact of CLIL implementation when conducting Business English courses at the Agricultural University of Tirana. Students' responses revealed enhanced engagement and motivation. They also admitted the effectiveness of CLIL in developing their language skills within their specific field. Despite the positive feedback, some challenges need to be addressed in order to maximize the benefits of the CLIL approach in BE. Taking into consideration students' feedback and incorporating additional support, the CLIL framework can be optimized to better serve the needs of future professionals in the Business and Economy sector.

This feedback may serve as raw material and guide BE course designers and educational policy makers toward tailoring their methodologies and developing an effective CLIL curriculum that supports students' linguistic and professional growth and meets their expectations for language and communication skills.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study on the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning at the Agricultural University of Tirana for teaching Business English indicate a generally positive reception among students. The discussions below elaborate on several trends that both align with and contribute to the existing literature on CLIL, particularly regarding student engagement, motivation, perceived effectiveness, collaboration, and challenges in language learning and the implications of these findings.

5.1 Engagement

The increase in student engagement reported highlights the critical role that contextual relevance plays in language learning. By incorporating relevant topics into Business English instruction, educators successfully bridged the gap between language acquisition and practical application. This

study's finding is consistent with previous research findings that suggest students are more motivated when they see the relevance of their studies in real-world contexts (Bañados, 2006). The CLIL approach enables students to engage more deeply with the material as they apply language skills to situations pertinent to their future careers. The present study supports this conclusion by highlighting the importance of integrating relevant Business topics into Business English instruction, which makes the lessons more applicable and stimulating for students. Furthermore, research by Pavičić Takač (2008) suggests that students are generally more engaged when content and language are interwoven in meaningful ways, confirming our findings.

5.2 *Motivation to Learn*

The heightened motivation observed among students can be attributed to the active and student-centered nature of the CLIL approach. As many students indicated that learning through engaging activities and discussions related to their fields of study enhanced their intrinsic motivation. This aligns with the theories of motivation in educational contexts, which suggest that relevance, autonomy, and competence are key factors in fostering student motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Incorporating more practical applications of language use, such as role-playing real business scenarios, could further amplify this motivation.

5.3 *Perceived Effectiveness of CLIL*

The students' perception of CLIL as an effective method for language acquisition is significant. The reported improvements in vocabulary acquisition and understanding of complex concepts suggest that CLIL not only supports language learning but also encourages cognitive development (Dalton-Puffer, 2008). This finding supports the idea that when students learn a language in conjunction with subject matter, they tend to retain information more effectively and apply it in relevant contexts. Continuing to align Business English topics with actual agricultural practices will likely enhance this effectiveness even further.

5.4 *Development of Collaborative Skills*

The value students placed on collaboration underscores the importance of social interaction in language learning. Group projects and peer discussions not only foster linguistic development but also enhance critical soft skills, such as teamwork and communication. This collaborative aspect reflects constructivist pedagogical theories, which advocate that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and shared experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Incorporating structured group activities that simulate real business interactions could enhance these skills further and prepare students for interdisciplinary teamwork in their careers.

5.5 *Addressing Challenges*

Despite positive perceptions, there are also challenges identified by students that indicate areas for improvement. These challenges which relate to balancing content and language demands align with similar findings in the literature, such as Dalton-Puffer (2008) who acknowledges that students can struggle to engage with specialized academic language. They suggest the necessity for scaffolding differentiated instruction methods that cater to varying levels of language proficiency. The need for additional language support, mentioned by 60% of students in this study, highlights the necessity for differentiated instruction methods, which have been proposed by Tomlinson (2001) as effective strategies for addressing diverse learner needs. This also resonates with the concerns of Meyer (2010), who noted that without adequate support, students might feel overwhelmed by the dual demands of content and language learning. Course instructors might consider applying tiered assignments or

scaffolding techniques to provide appropriate and necessary support (Tomlinson, 2001). The expressed need by the participants in the study for additional language support underlines a proactive approach that could help students feel more comfortable learning academic language in a business context.

5.6 Cultural and Contextual Relevance

The students' feedback on the importance of cultural and contextual relevance reiterates the notion that curriculum design should echo the learners' backgrounds and experiences. It is important to introduce local case studies and examples relevant to the Albanian business outlook into the curriculum, in order to enrich the learning experience and promote a sense of belonging and relevance. According to Ladson-Billings, this culturally responsive approach may encourage increased engagement, aligning with principles of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition, they advocate for culturally relevant pedagogy that connects learning material to students' backgrounds and experiences. Students participating in the study showed a great interest in contextualized locally relevant case studies. This reflects a growing acknowledgment of vocabulary and business ideas in CLIL research and also the importance of local contexts in curriculum design, thus reinforcing the argument that language learned through content is retained more effectively (Marsh, 2002). This argument underpins task-based learning, where students are involved in meaningful tasks that require them to use language depending on the function.

6. Conclusion

The findings from the study corroborate and expand upon existing literature regarding the effectiveness of CLIL for teaching Business English in AUT. The discussion of the findings reveals that the implementation of CLIL showed increased engagement and motivation while perceived effectiveness was positive and there was an enhancement of collaborative skill development, and the necessity of addressing challenges are all themes similar to previous studies. It is important for course instructors to understand these perspectives as they improve CLIL implementations to fulfill the needs of students in specific contexts, ensuring that they both learn a language and effectively use it in their professional remit.

It is recommended future research explore how contextual relevance and structured support can promote CLIL outcomes, further contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding this instructional approach and for educators to remain attuned to student perspectives to refine CLIL methodologies that not only promote language skills but also prepare students for successful careers. Building on these findings, future research could explore the longitudinal impacts of CLIL on students' language proficiency and professional readiness over time.

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