

***Promoting Intercultural Understanding for ESP Students Through CLIL:  
Teachers' Beliefs and Challenges***

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**Abstract**

The significance of intercultural understanding (ICU) in language teaching and learning has been recognized by many scholars, particular with the rapid development of globalization and integration. Currently, traditional teaching methods appear not to well support for the provision of intercultural understanding to ESP students. This paper aims to investigate teachers' beliefs of CLIL in promoting ICU for ESP students, specifically students of Business English and Tourism English; and the challenges they may face when using this model. Data were collected from teachers delivering Business English and Tourism English courses at University of Foreign Language Studies, the University of Danang (UFL\_UDN). The results not only indicate how teachers value the effectiveness of CLIL in teaching IC, but also reveal the challenges this method poses to teachers. The implications for tackling the challenges are also suggested in this study, which is believed to enhance teaching and learning quality at ESP Department, UFL-UDN.

Keywords: intercultural understanding; CLIL; ESP students; Business English and Tourism English.

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## **Introduction**

The rapid development of globalization has an enormous impact on cross-cultural relationships and increases the demand for international cooperation (Kawamura, 2011). On that trend, English is becoming increasingly important, acting as a common language for international communication. In Vietnam, the fact that the country is a member of TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement) has shown its efforts to integrate into the global economy. This positive change has opened up many job opportunities. This will result in the high demand for language skill as well as intercultural communication skill.

Teaching for students in English for Business and English for Tourism classes at ESP department, where I am working, shows that students' communication skills in real-life situations are not good enough to meet the increasing demand of society. One of the main causes is the lack of knowledge about intercultural communication. This must have influenced the quality of students' English learning.

There are many language researchers who value the importance of an intercultural understanding of English teaching and learning and emphasize the need for developing the intercultural skills, which is believed to enable students' communication skills in different cultural backgrounds. According to Dimitrova (2006, cited in Kawamura 2011), foreign language learning is seen as more than just gaining language proficiency but also includes learning about other cultures to develop intercultural competence. According to Byram (2002), the integration of cross-cultural field in a language program helps students achieve two goals at once: to achieve the necessary linguistic competence to communicate and to develop the intercultural awareness.

In fact, this issue has been neglected as it involves directly to the teachers, programs, textbooks, and especially teaching methods. Currently, traditional teaching methods (e.g. communicative approach) appears not to well support for the provision of intercultural understanding to students. Through practice in teaching and research, I found that the methods to integrate content and language (Content Language Integrated Learning - CLIL) in teaching English, especially in specialized subjects of Business English and Tourism English classes clearly reveals some certain advantages in providing intercultural understanding for students.

In a study, Coyle (2007) showed that CLIL could “raise learner linguistic competence and confidence”, and “embed cultural awareness and intercultural issues into the curriculum” (p.6). This teaching method is also supported by Bicknell (2009), who posed the question that why we should teach business English with traditional methods while CLIL can do it much more effectively. This method has also received the attention of some researchers in the country. In a recent scientific article, Nguyen (2014) has studied the necessary requirements of applying CLIL in teaching of International Studies subjects through English.

Therefore, providing students with intercultural understanding through the application of CLIL in teaching some English specialized modules is consistent with the trend of integration.

This study aims to study teachers' beliefs on applying CLIL to promote ICU for students in ESP classroom majoring in Business English and Tourism English and predicted challenges they might have with this new approach, in an attempt to promote the quality language learning for students in ESP context at UFL, Danang University. Specifically, the study will address the following questions:

- 1) What are teachers' attitudes toward CLIL approach in providing intercultural understanding to students of Business English and Tourism English classes? Are they aware of the benefits of CLIL and ready to apply CLIL in their teaching practice in order to improve students' ICU?
- 2) What challenges they have experienced or they might face when using CLIL to promote students' ICU?
- 3) What suggestions can they offer for the success of CLIL implement in teaching ICU?

## **Literature review**

### **1. ESP students – Business English (BE) and Tourism English (TE) class**

According to Dudley Evans and St. John (1998), one of the characteristics of ESP is that ESP is defined to meet specific needs of the learners, generally designed for intermediate or advanced students. It may use, in specific teaching situations, a different methodology from that of General English. David Carter (1983) identifies three types of ESP: English as a restricted language; English for Academic and Occupational Purposes; English with specific topics. In this case, English for Business and English for Tourism (or Business English and Tourism English) belong to the second type.

### **2. Intercultural Understanding (ICU) and the significance of teaching ICU in EFL classroom**

Mc Conachy (2008) defined ICU as the awareness that oral and cultural practices in different cultures are associated with different conversational patterns. It is also considered as the awareness and understanding development of one's own and other cultures, which means that people no longer look at things only in their culture's way, but tend to evaluate other perspectives also (Yassine, 2006).

In teaching context, Savignon (2006) suggested that the courses which have instruction containing intercultural awareness can potentially assist learners in developing social and cultural competence and can foster intercultural awareness. Another research of Xiao and Petraki (2007) revealed that that intercultural communication skills are essential and imperative in ELT because it is a crucial factor which may likely bring success in international business, or help to avoid misunderstandings caused by lack of intercultural knowledge.

In Vietnam, in a research carried out at ESP Department of UFL-UDN, Nguyen (2016) found that 88 % teachers support the idea that ICU should be integrated with English teaching and learning in Business English and Tourism English context, so

that students not only can acquire the language proficiency but also learn about other cultures to develop their intercultural competence.

### **3. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**

CLIL and intercultural understanding (ICU) received much attention over the past decades, which could be proved by various studies on the topic of CLIL as well as ICU.

#### **3.1 Definition of CLIL**

There has been a wide variety of definitions for CLIL. David Marsh, who is considered a leading expert in CLIL, defined CLIL as “a generic term that refers to the teaching of subjects in a different language from the mainstream language of instruction” (Marsh, 2008, p.233). According to Marsh (2008), the term CLIL was first coined in 1996 “to denote a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (p.234). In another study, CLIL was defined as “an innovative model for languages education”, in which “mainstream curriculum content is delivered through the students’ non-native language” (Cross & Gearon, 2013, p.6). In CLIL, a foreign target language (TL) is acquired to “pre-defined levels through using the language meaningfully as a medium of teaching and learning various contents across the curriculum together with the actual language of schooling.”(Wewer, 2017, p.278). In addition, Cross (2014) pointed out that the most striking difference between CLIL and similar content-related pedagogies is that CLIL focuses on developing both new content and language, rather than “on content while teaching through the medium of another language”, or “using content to simply frame language around particular themes or topics that might only be incidental to the teaching of language” (p.25).

#### **3.2 Types of CLIL**

The survey report published in 2001 laid the foundation for the description of CLIL types. Bentley (2010) classified CLIL into three types in the curriculum, which are:

-Soft CLIL: It is practised as part of a language course, in which some content topics are taught during a language period.

-Hard CLIL: It is practised as a partial immersion program, almost half of the curriculum is taught in the target language, and the subject would reflect what is taught in the target language.

-Modular CLIL: In this type, a subject is taught for a certain number of hours in the target language, and subject teachers select topics from the subject syllabus which they teach in the target language.

#### **3.3 Benefits and challenges of CLIL models in teaching ICU**

According to Cross and Gearon (2013), CLIL, as an “additive bilingual approach”, offers considerable benefits, which are : an academic achievement that typically

matches or surpass monolingual approaches ; positive gains in first language literacy development; and heightened levels of intercultural awareness and competence” (p.6).

In another research, Koro (2016) listed four main benefits of CLIL models, which include:

- Motivation: CLIL could contribute to the increase of young learners’ strong desire, willingness and competence to learn other languages and subjects. Also, teachers could benefit from CLIL in terms of their expertise and motivation “through the increased opportunities for cross-curricular cooperation, professional dialogue and collegiality that models such as CLIL require” (p.50).

- Linguistic competence: Thanks to “increased exposure” to the target language, many argued that CLIL could enhance the learners’ linguistic competence. However, it has not been fully justified that CLIL models foster learners’ performance in target language acquisition (p.52).

- Cognitive competence and challenge: The level of cognitive challenge is crucial for the success of learning. One of the major benefits of CLIL approaches is that learners are offered opportunities to develop their cognitive competence through “processes of conceptualization”. However, due to the difference of the cognitive competence between a native speaker and a learner of the same age, learners should be provided “sufficient cognitive challenge”, and “linguistic progression needs to be scaffolded to avoid demotivation” (p.53).

- Intercultural competence: CLIL classes' provision of 'added dimension of interculturality: is demonstrated through offering a variety of viewpoints on numerous topics, and an opportunity to solve different cultures (p.54).

Gimeno, ÓDónaill and Zygmantait (2013) also shared the same view when stated that CLIL offers students some great benefits such as : developing intercultural understanding, promoting content knowledge and language competence, enhancing students’ motivation and confidence.

Although there has been much attention paid to the effectiveness of CLIL in language teaching, especially in enhancing ICU, which had mentioned above, to the best of my knowledge, there are relatively few studies have examined teachers’ perception of the challenges of using CLIL in general, in providing ICU in ESP classroom in Vietnam. The study of Kondal and Bairi (2017) showed that selecting and adapting content and teaching materials are a time-consuming process. He added that guiding, designing and structuring a well content-based language instruction in the class also becomes an obstacle for most teachers in implementing CLIL.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

The data were collected through interviews, which were carried out at the beginning of 2018, with the participation of eight teachers of ESP Department, UFL-UDN. 12 open-ended interview questions were designed to ask about their attitude toward CLIL and the challenges they have experienced or might face when using CLIL to teach ICU in their classroom.

There are eight teachers agreeing to take part in this interview. The interviewees are selected based on the result from my previous study about teachers' perception of ICU in ESP teaching (Nguyen, 2016), who showed a positive attitude toward ICU and have implemented the integration of ICU in their teaching practices. All of the participants have had more than ten years' experience of teaching ESP at the university. Among them, two are teaching only in Business English class; two are teaching in Tourism English class, and the other four are teaching both in BE and TE class. The subject they cover includes the ones majoring in Business English or Tourism English, such as American-English culture, Cross Culture, Business English, Tourism English, Interpretation, Specialized Module, which focus on not only language proficiency but also the primary knowledge and the involvement of IC issues. The students in these classes are mostly at the high level of linguistic skills.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **1. Teacher's beliefs**

The study reveals that all of the eight teachers getting involved in the interview have not been trained in CLIL, though they all know about this approach through their own study. Despite this fact, it is surprising that they all believe in the great effect of CLIL in promoting student's ICU, and suggest that CLIL should form an important part in teaching ICU, especially for BE and TE students because of the requirements of the new age and future work requirements.

While lacking expertise in content knowledge is considered as one of the challenges faced by the language teacher (Kondal & Bairi, 2017), all of the participants are very confident and stated that it is not a problem when teaching ICU with CLIL. It is because culture is associated with language, and it can be easily acquired through their language teaching, their personal experience in the culture of the target language, or their academic study. The fact that all of the participants have taken PhD or MA degree in English speaking countries (England, Australia, New Zealand) is also the factors contributing to their confidence.

When asked about the preferred content subjects which is most suitable for the implementation of CLIL approach, some of the interviewees say that CLIL should be applied to some specific major subjects of BE or TE because students can not only learn the content but also use the language and culture of that language to develop cultural awareness, and also recognize intercultural problems.

As respect to the implement of CLIL in teaching ICU, there are only two of the participants having used CLIL in their teaching, though it is not a main method in every lesson or classroom. They use CLIL in some lectures whose content widely associated with IC issues, such as Cross Culture and American-English Culture. The others are willing to become CLIL teachers in future, however, based on their knowledge and teaching experience, they are not ready to use CLIL at present due to certain challenges that they have acknowledged in the interview.

## **2. Challenges**

### **2.1 Lack of CLIL training**

Most teachers in the interview are reluctant to implement CLIL in their current teaching. The main reason is that none of them is well- trained in CLIL approach. Even the ones who have been using CLIL, they are still uncertain about the way they should deliver a lesson in the CLIL class, and or even confused due to the similarity of CLIL with the topic-based or content-based method. The inadequate CLIL materials and resources are also listed as difficulty in preparation for a CLIL class.

### **2.2 Requiring more time and effort from teachers for teaching preparation**

Though being confident with the cultural knowledge, they still admit that teaching CLIL consumes more work for teachers. They share the same view with many scholars that lacking available content material for CLIL classes and lacking time to develop their own cultural resources are identified as a key problems (Kondal &Bairi, 2017; Koro ,2016; Hinnov, 2013). The interviewees acclaim that IC issues are quite diverse and often embedded in language, therefore teachers have to select proper ICU and link it to the content of each lesson, in order to meet the students' needs, and also have to design activities to get students' involvement and encouraging their motivation.

### **2.3 Difficulties in implementing ICU in a CLIL class.**

Kondal and Bairi (2017) stated that time management is one of the major problems because the activities conducted in the CLI class may take longer than they are expected. Based on this view, the participants have been asked whether time-constraint of applying CLIL in the course is a key problem. There are only two of the respondents being quite optimistic about this issue, who think the current schedule can ensure the use of CLIL to teach ICU if the teacher has a proper preparation. This is because culture issues are the main contents of the subjects they have been teaching, which are American- English culture and Cross culture. However, the rest of teachers say that applying CLIL takes more time than traditional method because teachers have to achieve the major content, the ICU, and language integrated goals at the same time. The combination of language skills and ICU may cause difficulty for a teacher to select which should be a focus on. Furthermore, how to deliver a successful lesson which integrating the module content and language is also considered as a challenge for teachers. Participants also find challenging to design the test and decide whether to assess content, language or both in CLIL approach.

In addition, although students' linguistic abilities are not considered as an obstacle in teaching ICU in this context, their attitude and motivation are seen as a problem. Some ICU categories are difficult and confusing to students, so it requires more effort from teacher to create an authentic class. What's more, in most subjects, culture issue is an optional content and is normally not taken into account in the test, so students do not pay much attention or set it as the priority in their learning.

### **3. Suggestions for applying CLIL to achieve the best results**

The last question of the interview is asking teachers to give some recommendations for the best use of CLIL in improving students' ICU. Among the mentioned suggestions, CLIL training was listed as their first concern. They need a workshop which can provide them with the training of CLIL methodology, and give them the opportunities to share and find the solutions for the difficulties they are facing.

Teachers from the interview also demand the strong collaboration from the colleague as well as the support from the Faculty Board. They believe that it is important to have a professional CLIL team, who not only are not only well trained in CLIL but also have deep understanding of BE or TE, to develop a proper curriculum and design a valid assessment tool to enhance teaching quality in general and promote students' ICU in particular.

#### **Limitations of the study**

This study has some limitations. First, it is restricted to a small scale of eight ESP teachers at UFL-UDN, so it hardly provides great reliability and validity. Secondly, all participants are not trained in CLIL, and not all of them have experience in CLIL teaching. Therefore the challenges they mentioned mostly from anticipating and predicting based on their teaching experience and self-study about CLIL.

#### **Conclusion**

The study examined the teachers' beliefs about the benefits as well as challenges of teaching CLIL to improve students' ICU. The findings suggest that although all of the respondents believe that CLIL is an efficient approach to teach ICU, there are several difficulties prevent them from implementing it in their teaching practice. Therefore, it requires teachers' proper preparation in how to deliver the contents and the activities in class to get the best result. It also asks for many concerns from the teaching and administrating staff before applying CLIL in teaching at ESP Department. The implications for English teaching and learning suggested in this study would help teachers enhance teaching quality. Thereby improving practical communication skills to students, equipping them with a certain understandings of intercultural, which are considered a great advantage for students when participating in future workforce.

The study is also the prerequisite to consider whether CLIL should be comprehensively and synchronously implemented in teaching at ESP department. It also contributes in proposing a long-term strategy in innovating English teaching and learning, which is considered as a key goal of the National Foreign Language Project 2020 was.

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