

# Balancing content and language in CLIL

## The experiences of teachers and learners

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This research study examined the experiences of teachers and learners as they engaged with a CLIL programme, a physical education course being taught through the medium of the Irish language (L2) in English-medium primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. Five primary fourth grade teachers and the students (9–10 years old) in their classes from three primary schools in the Republic of Ireland participated in a unit of physical education (4–8 lessons) through the medium of the Irish language. Qualitative data collection and analysis included direct observation of lessons, an interview with each teacher, teachers' written reflections and a focus group with 3–5 students from each class. Teachers reported that students became highly motivated as they were given the opportunities to use the Irish language in situations of personal choice. This new autonomy and motivation in turn fostered confidence and competence in language use. Several complex and persistent pedagogical challenges (e.g. balancing content and language in instruction) were uncovered in the analysis of data. This study increases our understanding of the complexity of the processes underlying and shaping a coherent CLIL pedagogy. Findings shed light on the yet-to-be-realised potential of CLIL as a lived embodied reality for all.

Additional abstract(s) at end.

**Keywords:** physical education, Irish language, second language education, language input, integration, teacher identity, CLIL pedagogy

### 1. Introduction

The factual educational realities of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) can differ considerably from situation to situation as each CLIL programme is culturally and contextually bound (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). In the European context, research focusing on CLIL has grown rapidly in the last

decade. Nevertheless, there is a significant dearth of research in relation to CLIL programmes in the Irish context even though educational policy in Ireland has long advocated for the learning of Irish through other curricular areas (Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Government of Ireland, 2010; Harris, Forde, Archer, Nic Fhearaile, & O' Gorman, 2006). There is a clear and urgent need for research that explores CLIL in the Irish context.

The research presented in this paper focuses on the experiences of teachers and learners as they engaged with a CLIL programme in the Republic of Ireland, specifically physical education (PE) taught through the medium of Irish (L2) in English-medium primary schools. It is only when learner and teacher perspectives and experiences are taken into account that it will be possible to determine how language and content can best be integrated in CLIL in the Irish context, and to reach a deeper understanding of the theoretical basis for CLIL that can underpin effective classroom practice.

### 1.1 Irish (Gaeilge) in the Irish education system

Irish, or *Gaeilge*, is an autochthonous language spoken in the Republic of Ireland and is a compulsory subject in government-funded English-medium primary schools. Primary education consists of an eight-year cycle: junior infants, senior infants, and first to sixth classes (grades). The curriculum for primary education covers the following key areas: Irish; English; mathematics; social, environmental, and scientific education (SESE) incorporating history, geography, and science; arts education including visual arts, music, and drama; physical education; and social, personal, and health education. The same teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects. The Irish language is taught as an L2 subject to students from age 4 to 12/13 and is part of the core curriculum during the years of compulsory schooling (ages 6–15). The Primary School Curriculum: Introduction (Government of Ireland, 1999a) recommends a minimum of 3.5 hours of instructional time for Irish per week and 2.5 hours respectively for Infant classes. Results however are deemed to be inadequate in spite of the 1500 class hours that a student spends being taught Irish as a subject. It is a general view that both the quantity and quality of Irish teaching in English-medium primary schools varies greatly (Department of Education and Skills, 2007; Department of Education and Skills, 2013; Harris et al., 2006). A notable majority of students fail to attain mastery in Irish listening, speaking, and general comprehension skills (Harris, 1984, 1988, 1991; Harris et al., 2006; Harris & Murtagh, 1999). In accordance with the Department of Education and Skills' Chief Inspector's Report (2013, p. 49):

The quality of Irish teaching was problematic in one fifth of the lessons inspected during incidental inspections and the quality of pupils' learning of the language was problematic in approximately one quarter of those lessons.

Implementing a convincing pedagogy is only one of the challenges experienced by teachers. The lack of linguistic proficiency among some teachers is also well documented (Department of Education and Skills, 2005, 2007; Harris et al., 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2008). Also, for both students and teachers, the absence of a functional context impacts negatively on Irish language learning, on attitudes towards the language, and on the motivation to learn the language. "Irish depends on the attitudes, efforts and commitment of individual schools and teachers in a way that other subjects do not" (Harris, 2007, pp. 37–38). In light of the challenges outlined above, we argue that creative responses to the teaching of Irish are clearly called for.

## 1.2 PE in the Irish education system

Like Irish, PE too is compulsory and is offered as a subject area to all pupils from age 4 to 12/13. The Primary School Physical Education Curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999b, 1999c) recommends one hour per week of PE, which is delivered by the generalist classroom teacher whose experiences and challenges in relation to the teaching of PE are similar to those of other primary teachers internationally (Fletcher & Mandigo, 2012). In most English-medium schools in Ireland PE is taught through the medium of English and many students in Ireland have a positive attitude towards PE (Philips & Silverman, 2015). The quantity and quality of PE instruction varies greatly and is games-dominated (Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013; Woods, Tannehill, Quinlan, Moyna, & Walsh, 2010). PE classes offer significant potential for language learning (Bell & Lorenzi, 2004; Block, 2001; Clancy & Hruska, 2005; Humphries, Bidner, & Edwards, 2011; Irwin, Irwin, & Hays, 2011) and PE also provides opportunities for second language learning (Bell & Lorenzi, 2004; Gómez & Jiménez-Silva, 2012; Lieberman, Columna, de la Vega Mansilla, & Martinez Taylor, 2010). In the context of PE instruction, students' intrinsic motivation for movement has a positive influence on learning a second language (Bell & Lorenzi, 2004; Coral, 2010) enabling them to become more confident language learners (Christopher, Dzakiria, & Mohamed, 2012). By engaging with language through PE, students move beyond mere auditory-receptive language use (Rottmann, 2007) and acquire language through the construction of meaning (Devos, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the research team considered PE to be an appropriate content focus to promote Irish language development through a CLIL initiative.

### 1.3 A CLIL approach

Educational policy in Ireland advocates for the learning of the Irish language through other curricular areas (Department of Education and Skills, 2007; Department of Education and Skills, 2011; Government of Ireland, 2010; Harris et al. 2006; Harris & Ó Duibhir, 2011), yet fundamental issues in relation to CLIL in the Irish context remain unexamined. Pedagogical tools and theoretical constructs unique to CLIL in the Irish context are yet to be identified. An underlying aim of this research study was to examine the experiences of teachers and learners as they engaged with a CLIL programme. It is our belief that teachers and learners are in a position to illuminate the strengths and shortcomings associated with CLIL in the Irish context. These insights in turn may advance our theoretical understanding of how teaching content in an L2 is realised and develop our capacity to nurture CLIL in school contexts unique to Ireland.

Learning content in a CLIL context “is construed as processing a kind of meaningfulness that is believed to be absent from typical language instruction” (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2007). In order to capitalise on the potential of CLIL, and taking into account the discussion on PE in the preceding text, it was decided that PE may offer students an opportunity for Irish language learning and use while simultaneously offering teachers an opportunity to practice an innovative approach to teaching Irish as an L2. By engaging with PE through Irish, it was anticipated that students might become motivated to learn the Irish language in a more positive, more meaningful, identity-affirming, and communicative way and not just in a vacuum as a subject in their Irish language lesson classes. In other words, PE offered a very hands-on, concrete, and meaningful context in which to learn Irish.

## 2. Content and language integration

During the last fifty years, there has been a general shift in second language (L2) education away from teaching language in isolation toward integrating content and language instruction (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003; Genesee & Lindholm-Leary, 2013; Snow, Met & Genesee, 1989). Learning academic content through the medium of a second or additional language is often referred to as CLIL or content-based instruction (CBI). The term CLIL is mainly used in the European context (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe & Jiménez Catalán, 2009) while CBI is used in North American contexts (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 2003). Even though CBI and CLIL have been referred to as umbrella terms to describe approaches to integrating language and content instruction (Cenoz & Ruiz de

Zarobe, 2015; Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008; Tedick & Cammarata, 2012), they are not always used the same way.

## 2.1 Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL): A definition

Different educational and contextual settings shape the dynamic and diverse nature of CBI/CLIL pedagogical programmes. Met (1999) provided “a continuum of content and language integration” which distinguishes different programmes from each other according to their position on the continuum, whether “content-driven” or “language-driven”. Programmes range from the most content-driven (e.g., total immersion) to the most language-driven (e.g., language classes with frequent use of content for language practice) (Met, 1999). In all programmes, “students engage in some way with content using a non-native language” (Met, 1999, p. 2). A CLIL (or CBI) programme in which there is full integration of content and language lies in the centre of Met’s (1999) continuum (Massler, Stotz, & Queisser, 2014). In this type of programme, the learning of academic content while simultaneously acquiring language proficiency is the goal. This study focuses on this type of CLIL programme i.e., PE being taught through the medium of Irish (L2) in English-medium primary schools in the Republic of Ireland.

The term CLIL emerged in Europe in the 1990s and is often associated with teaching content through the medium of English (Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, & Smit, 2010). Coyle et al., (2010, p. 1) define CLIL as “a dual-focused educational approach” to language learning where the target language is used as a vehicle to teach both language and content. Knowledge of the target language becomes the means of learning content knowledge, i.e. CLIL uses the target language for a curricular purpose, so that the language becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This dual-focused form of instruction where attention is given to academic subject matter and second language skills is used extensively in a variety of language learning contexts in Europe and has been adopted as an umbrella term for varied types of approaches to bilingual education in Europe. Grin (2005, cited in Coyle, 2007) identified 216 forms of CLIL programmes based on factors such as the starting linguistic level, intensity, duration, compulsory status, and entry grade level. As such, CLIL programmes vary according to context, content, language, learning, and culture (Coyle et al., 2010).

## 2.2 CLIL: What the literature says

The implementation of CLIL takes different forms which are shaped by the social, cultural, political, educational and contextual settings in which it takes place. Due to the varied realities of CLIL programmes, it is unlikely that “research findings,

policy statements, or pedagogical practices that are applicable to one variety of CLIL would be appropriate for all renditions of CLIL” (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014, p. 258). What works in one context may not be as fruitful in another. Pérez-Cañado (2012) argues that the one aspect in the literature on which there is complete consensus is that there is a paucity of research on CLIL. Due to the hybridity of CLIL approaches, varied research outcomes have emerged. Some arguments in favour of CLIL will now be considered:

- CLIL has a positive effect on language learning, development and use (Gallardo del Puerto, Gómez Lacabex, & García Lecumberri, 2009; Martínez Adrián & Gutiérrez Mangado, 2009; Moreno Espinosa, 2009; Ruiz de Zarobe & Zenotz, 2015; Várkuti, 2010; Whittaker, Llinares & McCabe, 2011);
- CLIL has positive repercussions on content matter acquisition (Jäppinen, 2006; Serra, 2007; Ullmann, 1999; Wode, 1999);
- CLIL induces learners to be more cognitively active during the learning process (Jäppinen, 2006; Lamsfuß-Schenk, 2002; Navés, 2009; Van de Craen et al. 2008; Wolff, 2003);

Many investigations provide strong support for CLIL in terms of language learning; however, some studies conducted in CLIL and immersion contexts show detrimental effects on content learning and are not equally encouraging (e.g., Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2000; Sylvén, 2004; Washburn, 1997; Yip, Cheung, & Tsang, 2003).

### 2.3 Towards a CLIL pedagogy of implementation

Notwithstanding the general effectiveness of CLIL, the primary issue lies in the difficulty to formulate a systematic and coherent pedagogy with respect to how to integrate language with content instruction so as to maximise language learning while maintaining high levels of academic achievement. In CLIL, instructional decision-making is intended to be driven by both content and language outcomes and never at the exclusion or expense of one or the other (Coyle et al., 2010). CLIL teaching and learning practice involves the “planned pedagogic integration of contextualised content, cognition, communication and culture” (Coyle, 2002, p. 45). Many challenges associated with the implementation of a CLIL programme point to the complexity of balancing content and language in instruction (e.g., Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Mehisto, 2008; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2010).

Teachers implementing CLIL need to develop many types of expertise. Some facets of this expertise will now be considered. Snow et al. (1989) have argued that teachers need to identify content-obligatory and content-compatible language objectives. Content-obligatory language includes technical vocabulary, discipline-specific terminology, and unique content-related discourse styles which enable

learners to develop, master, and communicate about the content under study. Content-compatible objectives complement, extend, and enhance the content-obligatory language objectives, but are not required for successful content mastery. While the identification of separate language objectives is perceived as critical by many, Donato cautions that language cannot be taught “out of the context of the discipline” but needs to be taught in an integrated manner and situated in the learning of content and conceptual development (2016, p. 30). Teachers also need to identify the appropriate content to be taught and challenges to content learning; they need to deploy teaching and learning strategies to support language learning in content classes [such as Lyster’s (2007) “counterbalanced instruction”]; they need to draw on knowledge and theories from language learning fields; they need a wide range of knowledge and skills related to methodology and assessment, and they need to link all these components in an integrative nature (Marsh, Mehisto, Wolff, & Frigols Martín, 2010). The overall challenge in the development and implementation of a coherent CLIL pedagogy is its integrative nature.

As important as a CLIL pedagogy of implementation may be, it is just one among many other features successful CLIL programmes have in common. CLIL programmes vary considerably with respect to student background characteristics, sociocultural context, programme structure, language being taught, age of entry to a CLIL programme, starting linguistic level, intensity, compulsory status, duration, etc. Even though CLIL instruction has been identified as a key area in need of further research (Pérez-Cañado, 2012), some CLIL scholars, however, have identified particular features of successful CLIL programmes in terms of pedagogy (Table 1).

Although features of successful CLIL programmes have been identified, a pedagogy for optimal integration has yet to be fully realised. This is also the case in the Irish context where a pedagogy of implementation which can guide teachers as they integrate the Irish language in content instruction through CLIL has yet to be formulated. We have yet to understand what balancing content and language in CLIL really means for learners and teachers in Ireland. We have yet to identify appropriate CLIL pedagogies in the Irish context which could “revolutionise and reawaken the Irish language through the education system” (Ó Ceallaigh & Ní Dhonnabháin, 2015, p. 179). The implementation of CLIL in Ireland will differ significantly in comparison to other countries due to the unique historical, social, cultural, and educational differences associated with our national language. A key focus of this research, therefore, is to critically examine the range and nature of experiences of teachers and learners as they engage with this particular CLIL programme, PE taught through the medium of Irish. This research may help narrow the divide between theoretical and pedagogical concerns.

**Table 1.** Applicable features of successful CLIL Programmes

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Teachers employ active teaching behaviours, e.g., giving clear instructions, accurately describing tasks, pacing instruction appropriately, communicating their expectations for students' success, maintaining learners' engagement in instructional tasks by maintaining task focus.

Teachers use appropriate strategies such as modeling, paraphrasing, frequent comprehension checks, outlining, using visual aids, realia and graphic aids, using body language, gestures and facial expression, building redundancy, scaffolding, linking new information to learners' previous knowledge, etc. to ensure that input is comprehensible and context-embedded.

Teachers monitor student progress and facilitate form-focused processing by providing immediate feedback related to both content and language as appropriate, e.g., recasts, clarification requests, elicitation, metalinguistic feedback, explicit correction, repetition, and confirmation checks.

Teachers facilitate output production by encouraging learners to respond in a wide variety of ways, e.g., L1, L2 or non-verbal responses, by working in different interactive formats and practicing creative forms of oral and written output production.

Programme design is anchored in the consistent integration of cognitively demanding academic content and the target language.

Teachers facilitate the use of compensation strategies by stimulating learners to overcome challenges in language comprehension and production.

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[adapted from de Graaff, R., Koopman, G.J., Anikina, Y., & Westhoff, G. (2007) and Navés, T. (2002)]

### 3. The study

#### 3.1 Research context and participants

Five teachers of fourth class level (Grade 4) and 110 students (aged 9–10) in their classes in three English-medium primary schools in the south of Ireland participated in the study. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the participants' identity.

All five teachers involved in the study had between five and fifteen years of teaching experience. As generalist classroom teachers, they all had experience teaching both the Irish language and PE separately as part of the primary school curriculum. The teachers had no previous experience teaching PE or any other subjects through the medium of Irish and had no background experience with CLIL. One participant, Maedbh, had spent time teaching English as a foreign language in Spain, which is noteworthy as she implemented strategies from those experiences as part of her teaching within the initiative. Motives to participate varied. The opportunity to engage students with Irish language learning in a novel way through PE was the main motivator for teachers to get involved. The teachers identified the initiative as an opportunity to possibly gain new content ideas for



teaching PE. Both Tríona and Fran were motivated to improve their own language competency. Three of the teachers (Sadhbh, Laoise, Maedbh) placed a value on the Irish language and were confident in their own Irish language abilities. They saw the research as an opportunity to promote the Irish language within their classrooms. Most of the teachers were comfortable with teaching PE, and Fran was particularly confident in this area.

Prior to the initiative all teachers reported that most students in their classes articulated a very positive attitude towards PE. They also reported that students' attitudes towards the Irish language varied more widely, where some children were not as enthusiastic about Irish as they were about PE. These varied attitudes reflected the students' different academic abilities, dispositions towards language learning, and subject preferences.

### 3.2 Purpose of the research

There is little empirical research on the experiences of teachers and their students when L2 learning is promoted in the context of PE instruction (Kirk, MacDonald & O'Sullivan, 2006) despite much advocacy for the potential for language learning in PE in practitioner publications (e.g., Clancy & Hruska, 2005; Gómez & Jiménez-Silva, 2011, 2012). Our research question was: What are the experiences of teachers and learners of a CLIL approach i.e. PE taught through the medium of the Irish language (L2) in English-medium primary schools in the Republic of Ireland? We adopted a qualitative approach that involved classroom observations, written reflections, and interviews and focus groups with participants. Insight on their experiences can inform the development and implementation of future CLIL initiatives.

### 3.3 The research initiative

The teachers attended a two-hour workshop which focused on preparing and supporting the teachers to deliver the instructional initiative. The workshop included:

- an overview of CLIL and the proposed initiative;
- an opportunity to review and discuss the schedule of lessons and the data collection templates;
- an overview of possible PE content activities;
- a presentation on CLIL planning processes: content-obligatory language objectives, content-compatible language objectives, strategies to support learning in both Irish language and PE content within a CLIL approach;

- a demonstration of and participation in a range of relevant games activities through the medium of the Irish language so as to familiarise participants with PE content taught through Irish;
- a group discussion at the end of the workshop focused on anticipated pedagogical challenges and possible solutions.

During the following eight-week time frame each class teacher delivered a unit of PE (4–8 one-hour lessons) through the medium of the Irish language. Each lesson focused on the curricular strand ‘Games’, which provided a purposeful and motivating context for learning the associated communicative functions, structures, styles, and registers of Irish. The games activities allowed teachers to identify learning outcomes related to physical development through a focus on fundamental motor skills (such as throw, catch, kick, dodge) as well as social development through games with an emphasis on communication, teamwork, and cooperation.

Teachers were encouraged to include both specific language learning and PE learning objectives in each lesson. The research team was available to support and advise teachers throughout the initiative. Only one teacher contacted the team for extra advice on planning.

### 3.4 Data collection and analysis

A number of data collection tools were used to capture the breadth and richness of participants’ experiences – a focus group with teachers, teacher written reflections, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student focus groups. All five teachers participated in a focus group conducted prior to the workshop. The questions focused on the teachers’ knowledge, competence, and confidence in teaching PE and Irish as well as their previous experiences with teaching these subjects. During the initiative the teachers completed a written reflection after each teaching episode which focused on the challenges and opportunities for both language and PE learning and teaching.

Observations were conducted separately by two members of the research team. A member observed an Irish/PE CLIL lesson for each class group, for a total of five one-hour observations. The observation protocol included questions such as “Are the children able to communicate with each other informally in Irish?; Are they able to use Irish to play the game?; What strategies are being utilised to enable students to use the language?” It was not possible to videotape these observations. Therefore, to promote reliability of interpretation the two observer-researchers observed a lesson together in one school before observing independently. They recorded their observations separately. Immediately after the lesson the two researchers shared and discussed their observations. This process promoted

consistency in the observer activity across settings based on shared understandings of both what was being observed and how it was recorded on the observation template.

At the end of the initiative an individual interview with each teacher was conducted. Questions focused on their experiences with planning and implementation across lessons in relation to language and content integration, how they might approach future CLIL opportunities, the types of supports needed, and their perspectives on the children's learning. Focus groups were also conducted with 3–5 students from each class to capture their views and experiences. Questions were related to their experiences throughout the initiative, what they liked and disliked, and aspects found easy and challenging about learning language and content simultaneously as well as what they had learned through participation. All interview data were audio-recorded and transcribed and all written reflections were transferred to electronic format.

All three researchers were involved in analysis of these data. Initially, the “raw” data were organized into natural units of related data which seemed to fit together (Creswell, 2009). These units were labelled under codes. All three researchers individually completed systematic coding through reading and rereading all data. Our approach was to examine the data for each individual teacher across time (three interviews, a focus group, a classroom observation, and reflections). Then, researchers re-examined alongside the data from the children in their class to identify commonalities and differences. We next examined all teacher data to identify patterns across contexts, and then completed the same process with all children's data. The researchers then met and shared their preliminary analyses, identified commonalities in coding, and discussed discrepancies. Through a succession of examinations of the relationship among existing units, we found that some codes were subsets of others and therefore could be amalgamated (Cohen, Mannion, & Morrison, 2000). This regrouping process highlighted the richness of the data, as substantial relationships existed between and among units. Through back-and-forth discussion, agreement was reached on the central ideas within the data in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Progressive drafts resulted in the “firming up” of themes (Woods, Boyle, Jeffrey, & Troman, 2000). We then individually re-engaged with the data set to check that these ideas were representative for both teachers and students across contexts. During a further cycle of discussion, we refined and labelled the central agreed-upon themes in relation to language learning. Themes with a specific PE focus are presented elsewhere (Ní Chróinín, Ní Mhurchú, & Ó Ceallaigh, 2016). Trustworthiness of the findings was strengthened through triangulation across data sources to confirm patterns within the data set (Guba, 1981; Skenton, 2004) as described above.

## 4. Findings

The following presentation of findings describes key dimensions that captured the teachers' and students' experiences during this CLIL initiative:

1. confidence & competence in *Gaeilge*
2. impact on PE learning and attitudes
3. exclusive focus on vocabulary
4. a balancing challenge
5. a positive experience.

These themes are now explored in more depth in an attempt to uncover better understandings and essential meanings in relation to CLIL.

### 4.1 Confidence and competence in *Gaeilge*

This CLIL initiative provided the students with additional exposure to Irish/*Gaeilge* in authentic and meaningful PE contexts. Teachers reported that the initiative provided conditions for naturalistic language learning and meaningful use of the Irish language in a stimulating and enjoyable context. They also reported that students became highly motivated because they were given the opportunity to use the Irish language in situations of personal choice. This new autonomy and motivation in turn fostered confidence and competence in language use. One teacher reported:

*De réir mar a bhí an tionscadal ag gluaiseacht ar aghaidh, d'éirigh siad níos muiníne sa chaint.*

As the initiative progressed, they became more confident in their oral language.

[Tríona, Int]<sup>1</sup>

This newly acquired confidence impacted very positively on their willingness to take a chance and try using the language whether accurate or otherwise. This language use, in turn, provided a foundation on which the teacher could improve accuracy and raise levels of competence. Teachers noted important differences in their reflections between the lack of competence and confidence observed in language usage in the first few lessons to their ability to use relevant content specific vocabulary and social language toward the end.

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1. Int denotes interview.

*Bhí na páistí cúthaileach maidir leis an nGaeilge a labhairt ar dtús. Is dócha nach raibh an teanga acu. De réir ama, d'éirigh siad níos muiníne agus d'úsáid siad téarmaí CO nuair a bhí siad ag teastáil.*

Children were very shy about speaking Irish at the beginning. They didn't have the necessary language I suppose. As time went on, they became more confident and used the specific PE language when it was needed. [Fran, Int]

Productive language skills played a greater role once students' confidence levels began to rise. Teachers facilitated meaning-focused processing by encouraging the students to request new vocabulary items. Lesson observations revealed that teachers often acted as language reservoirs as students sought assistance with regards to variety of speech styles and registers, i.e. the academic language register of the PE lesson and the non-academic *vernacular* powered by the authentic communicative context of social interaction that inevitably emerged during the lessons focused on games. Peer learning particularly in relation to informal or social language was also observed. Students used Irish to stimulate and encourage participation during PE lessons by using words such as *Brostaigh* (*hurry*), *rith go tapaidh* (*run quickly*), *maith an fear* (*well done*), *anseo* (*here*) [Triona's class, CO].<sup>2</sup>

There is ample evidence to show that meaning-focused instruction is highly effective in enabling learners to develop fluency and confidence in using the L2 (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). Meaning-focused instruction which integrates interesting, meaningful, and relevant PE content can be seen as a means of developing learners' linguistic resources in the L2. Other international CLIL studies have shared similar findings (e.g. Moreno Espinosa, 2009; Martínez Adrián & Gutiérrez Mangado, 2009).

While the development of learners' confidence and linguistic resources are particular positive outcomes of this CLIL initiative, another outcome has been the transferability of Irish use to other contexts. Teachers reported that the Irish language regularly featured in classroom and playground discourse outside of the CLIL initiative, discourse which, prior to this CLIL initiative, was conducted in English. During a focus group, a student in Sadhb's class shared the following insight:

I go out playing with my brothers – playing soccer. So some of the time I use those words when playing with my brothers. [Student X, Sadhb's class, FG]<sup>3</sup>

Teachers attributed this additional L2 output to raised motivation, increased confidence, and a subjective aspect of learning a new language in a different way.

2. CO denotes classroom observation.

3. FG denotes focus group.

Learners appeared to develop an emotional identification with the Irish language and a fresh and vibrant outlook towards using Irish.

Teachers, too, had positive language learning experiences. When reflecting on the challenges the initiative presented for her, Fran noted during an interview that confidence in language use was her greatest challenge:

I actually found it great just to be able to kind of find my way with it, and build my confidence, because that really was for me the problem, was my own confidence, my confidence in speaking the Irish, just in conveying what I wanted to the children, so I felt that having that time really built up my own confidence, and probably not being (constantly) observed was good from that point of view. [Fran, Int]

Participation in the project impacted positively on her linguistic competence and confidence in general. During their interviews, Laoise reported that involvement in the initiative enabled her “to think a lot more about speaking Irish,” while Meadbh stated that a “positivity” towards Irish had “come across the whole school” as a result of the initiative. Other teachers also shared similar experiences.

#### 4.2 Impact on PE learning and attitudes

Both the students and the teachers had a positive attitude to PE at the start of the initiative as the excerpt from the focus group below illuminates:

I like PE because like we get outside and we get to go in the fresh air, and we get to exercise, and it gets us fit, and we get to... get fresh air, so we won't be in class the whole day. [Student Y, Sadhbh's class, FG]

The students' positive attitudes to PE were mostly unaffected by the initiative, as their perspectives were largely similar to those they had before learning PE through Irish. When asked during a focus group if using Irish made the games more fun or .... less fun, a student in Triona's class replied “It didn't make any difference”. (Student W, Triona's class, FG)

The post-lesson reflections completed by the teachers revealed their positive experiences with teaching PE through Irish. They used the lesson ideas provided to structure and sequence physical activity experiences for the students:

I got new ideas for the PE lesson, that was a big bonus [of this initiative]...we enjoyed the PE class more. [Triona, WR]<sup>4</sup>

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4. WR denotes written reflections.

Both teachers and students recognised that the skill demand of some of the games played in the first few lessons was too easy for the students, but the teachers also recognised that the language demands of these games were appropriate.

In Irish ... we do easier games. [Laoise, Int]

Well, at first we played like kinda babyish games in Irish, but then when we got like... we understood it more, we got to play funner games and stuff.

[Student W, Tríona's class, FG]

I got less PE done as I had to ensure that children understood me [Fran, WR]

These comments suggest that the limits of language usage had an effect on the amount and complexity of content matter taught and, as a consequence, PE achievement. Less cognitively demanding PE content was taught as a consequence of the lack of students' receptive and productive skills in Irish. Other CLIL studies also show detrimental effects on content learning (Marsh, Hau, & Kong 2000; Sylvén, 2004; Washburn, 1997; Yip, Cheung, & Tsang 2003).

When reflecting on PE lessons taught one class teacher used the following adjectives "busy, happy, active, good, exhausted, tired" to describe the students and the lessons [Fran, WR]. Another teacher (Tríona) pointed out "It was still a PE class...I was still teaching skills," [Tríona, WR], and a third teacher (Laoise) felt the games focused on cooperative activities supporting social outcomes within the group [Laoise, WR]. While these reflections may not always include learning of game skills in PE, the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999b, p. 11) also recommends cooperative activities, enjoyment and achievement through movement, and developing positive attitudes towards participation as broad objectives.

#### 4.3 Exclusive focus on vocabulary

All the teachers in this study firmly believed that planning for language instruction contributed enormously to the success of the CLIL experience. They indicated that the teaching of vocabulary was necessary for students' interpretation of content. In an interview, Fran commented:

I just felt as well that I needed to do more in the class, and to make sure that they had enough vocabulary to... and that they had the understanding, and once they got all that right, then I felt it really fell into place. (Fran, Int).

Nevertheless, the teachers were inclined to focus on vocabulary for the purposes of comprehension more than for drawing attention to the formal properties of words. As the primary focus was on comprehension of content, content-specific vocabulary served as a vehicle to teach content without any particular focus

on word-formation or morphology. There were many observed instances of this type of vocabulary instruction from all teachers. Cameron (2001, p. 81) claims that “vocabulary development is not just learning more words but it is also about expanding and deepening word knowledge.” The vocabulary selection was largely restricted to nouns serving as key content concepts.

We would have gone through a lot of preparation alright, well not a lot of preparation, but maybe five minutes before we went out, and we would have gone through the words as *Gaeilge* (in Irish). [Triona, Int]

In the excerpt above, Triona highlights her approach to language teaching in CLIL. All teachers indicated that they taught vocabulary with an explicit and intentional focus in an isolated fashion in Irish language lessons. Isolated language lessons, however, do not enable students to relate *words* to the communicative functions in meaning-orientated content lessons and appear to have minimal effect on students’ grasp of their linguistic systems (Donato, 2016). The ability to embed teaching and learning experiences in authentic, socioculturally appropriate and engaging CLIL contexts is an essential component of teacher knowledge which enables students to make connections and consolidate and integrate their linguistic understandings and skills.

The provision of a dual-focused, meaningful, authentic, and engaging context in which the Irish language was used for the learning and teaching of both PE and Irish challenged the teachers in this research study. During interviews, Fran noted that she was not sure how to identify the language in her planning, while Laoise believed that she “couldn’t really plan” for language development as it was difficult “to predict all the language that was needed.” (Laoise, Int). These comments highlight the multitude of considerations at play in the work of teachers in designing content and language integrated pedagogy in a CLIL programme. While research suggests that an exclusively comprehension-based and lexically-orientated approach to language instruction falls short of “tapping” the full potential and variety of speech styles and registers required by students (e.g., Cammarata & Tedick, 2012), this research finding may be of little use if teachers do not know how to do so. An ability to identify relevant language objectives related to content and proficiency levels is critical in order to balance content and language integration in CLIL. The identification of content-obligatory language (i.e. domain-specific expressions and technical vocabulary), however, is a necessary step in the systematic integration of language in content instruction (Cloud, Genesee, & Hamayan, 2000; Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989). While teachers need to be aware of CLIL language and content objectives (Lightbown, 2014), it is equally important that language is not taught in isolation and away “from the situated learning of content” (Donato, 2016, p. 30). It is also important to note that, apart from vocabulary, there are



other aspects of language knowledge to be integrated into a coherent pedagogy of content instruction, for example, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse features associated with specific subject domains.

An inability among the teachers to develop the language, build on the language levels, and also integrate language in the context of content instruction at the same time was noted by all three researchers. Teachers struggled to design effective content-driven and language focused tasks to *push* (facilitate) their students' linguistic output. Fran elaborated:

*Ní féidir leat dul isteach sa rang corpoideachais ar an Aoine agus an rang a mhúineadh, mar beidh siad ag féachaint ort, agus like ní thuigfidh siad, ach ní bheidh an teanga ag na páistí chun freagra a thabhairt duit, nó like chun a bheith ag caint le na cailíní eile agus rudaí mar sin.*

You can't go into the PE lesson on Friday and teach the lesson, because they will look at you, and like, they will not understand, and they will not have the language to give you an answer or to speak to the other girls and things like that. [Fran, Int]

#### 4.4 A balancing challenge

Striking a balance between context-embedded communication and context-reduced communication while simultaneously catering for cognitively demanding communication is a complex task for CLIL teachers (sources). The balance between PE learning and Irish language learning was not always achieved, as the teachers were more focused on language development than on PE learning. When asked in an interview if she found it difficult to teach the PE skills through the medium of Irish, Laoise responded:

That was actually one of the problems that I noted down...I found I was concentrating more on the language towards the end than I was on the actual [PE] skills. [Laoise, Int]

In interviews, teachers acknowledged that they had placed a greater emphasis on skill learning in previous L1 PE classes and that in this initiative more focus was placed on Irish learning than PE learning.

*do chonac go soiléir cuid des na cluichí, you know, go raibh páistí laga agam ó thaobh you know bheith ábalta liathróid a láimhseáil ó thaobh slí amháin nó slí eile, but toisc go raibh an tionscnamh ar bun agam, ní fhéadfá saghas idirdhealú a dhéanamh idir na páistí láidre ó thaobh an chorpoidéachais de agus na páistí a bhí b'fhéidir dyspraxia orthu mar shampla. Ní raibh tú ábalta an dá thrá a fhreastal.*

I clearly identified children in some of the games, you know, who had weaker ball-handling skills but because my focus was on the Irish language, I found it difficult

to differentiate between the more skilled and less skilled children, such as children with dyspraxia. I wasn't able to emphasise both language and skill differentiation simultaneously. [Sadhbh, Int]

Sadhbh's comment also identifies that the limits of language usage had an impact on the level of differentiation of content and challenge provided. A more complicated and challenging PE activity for the more skilled players or different extension tasks usually require more sophisticated and linguistically challenging language. This tension between differentiating tasks by ability to provide enough challenge to support learning and the attention and time needed to identify and communicate these extension tasks in an L2 needs further investigation. More research is needed to identify how teachers can balance language and content learning in activities that require a more sophisticated lexicon. In the focus groups, students also emphasised Irish language learning as their main learning during the initiative.

During interviews, teachers explained this discrepancy as they, as class teachers, were more focused on language learning than PE learning. The teachers were happy if all the students were actively playing the game in Irish regardless of the quality of the PE learning. PE learning was not prioritised, and tasks were not differentiated or assessed during the initiative. The research design team may also have impacted on this lack of focus on PE learning, as much of the initial workshop and subsequent supports provided to teachers focused on Irish language learning. More supports, resources and guidance on the integration of PE content learning and Irish language learning may have provided a better balance.

Laoise commented during an interview that content coverage in a CLIL lesson "was at a slower pace than normal" and indicated that she required further support and guidance in relation to content and language integration. Fran voiced a concern during an interview regarding student content achievement and hoped that a CLIL approach "would not hinder students within the subject area." While most CLIL studies show very positive results with regard to content learning, Washburn's (1997) study in Sweden found that non-CLIL students outperformed CLIL students in the subjects studied. Slyvén (2013) suggests that "non-specific contextual factors" may offer explanations for inconsistencies in findings across CLIL contexts in Europe. This issue is deserving of further scrutiny in the Irish context.

It seems that CLIL presents itself as a *balancing challenge* for the teachers in this study, a balancing challenge shaped by time constraints and content complexity. When asked in an interview to identify a pedagogical challenge, Sadhbh offered the following insight:

*Ní bhíonn an t-am ag an gnáth-múinteoir ranga, you know, just bíonn an iomad rudaí le déanamh.*

The ordinary class teacher hasn't got time, you know, there are so many things to do. [Sadhb, Int]

A clear understanding of the critical connection between language and content and an ability to integrate language and content-based instruction in CLIL pedagogy are imperative. Moving forward requires additional guidance and support for CLIL teachers in the formulation of a coherent instructional pedagogy. A shared emphasis on content and language outcomes may ensure that neither content nor language alone drives instructional decision-making independently of the other.

#### 4.5 A positive experience

Despite some of the challenges summarised within several of the themes above, both the teachers and the students recognised the potential complementary nature of PE content and Irish language learning. Teachers found it beneficial to use visual demonstrations and modelling of activities to address gaps in language understanding which are also very conducive to PE instruction:

...because I used a lot of modelling, so even if they didn't understand every word, they had the gist, and they had the model as well.

[Laoise, Int]

Teachers also expressed an interest in participating in future CLIL developments and recommended the initiative to other colleagues in their schools.

One student in Sadhb's class identified some of the benefits of combining language learning with PE content learning:

I thought it was fun... it made us better in Irish, it was like being in the classroom doing the Irish, except we were outside getting fit while using the Irish, so we were learning and exercising at the same time.

[Student T, Sadhb's class, FG]

The students also advocated for the initiative to be expanded within their schools. They suggested that they would happily continue with this approach in PE in future years; that other classes would be very open to doing PE through Irish; and that other subjects like Mathematics and History could also be a possibility for themselves and for other classes.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The overall experiences of this CLIL initiative, as reported by participants, were positive. Teachers reported that students became highly motivated learners demonstrating increased confidence, satisfaction, and Irish language proficiency. Teachers, too, noted positive language learning experiences. These findings present evidence of the potential for CLIL (*Gaeilge/PE*) in Irish primary schools to support Irish language learning. Other studies have also highlighted that CLIL has a positive effect on language learning (Gallardo del Puerto, Gómez Lacabex, & García Lecumberri, 2009; Martínez Adrián & Gutiérrez Mangado, 2009; Moreno Espinosa, 2009; Ruiz de Zarobe & Zenotz, 2015; Várkuti, 2010; Whittaker, Llinares, & McCabe, 2011).

While some CLIL studies point to enhanced subject matter learning (Jäppinen, 2006; Serra, 2007; Ullmann, 1999; Wode, 1999), this particular study does not. Even though students' positive attitudes to PE were unaffected by the initiative, less cognitively demanding PE content was taught as a consequence of the lack of students' receptive and productive skills in Irish. This suggests that students' lack of proficiency had an effect on the amount and complexity of content matter taught and as a consequence, PE achievement. Other studies have also shown unfavourable effects on content learning (Marsh, Hau, & Kong 2000; Sylvén, 2004; Washburn, 1997; Yip, Cheung, & Tsang 2003).

Teachers came across as involved, committed, and eager, and they saw CLIL both as a challenge and as a source of professional satisfaction. The complexity of balancing content and language in instruction (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Mehisto, 2008; Pérez-Vidal & Juan-Garau, 2010) was also a pedagogical challenge for teachers in this study. The balance between PE learning and Irish language learning was not always achieved. The task of integrating language with content instruction so as to maximise Irish language learning, while simultaneously maintaining high levels of academic achievement in PE, puzzled teachers. They struggled to design effective content-driven and language focused tasks to *push* (facilitate) their students' linguistic output. The identification of relevant language in instructional planning challenged teachers; they became more focused on language development than on PE learning and they placed an exclusive focus on vocabulary teaching. The identification of these pedagogical struggles from a classroom-based, teacher-informed perspective enhances our understandings of the key issues and complexities at the core of language and content integration in CLIL. They pose significant and searching questions regarding the potential to bring about deep and sustained reform and improvement of CLIL in Ireland.

## 5.1 Study limitations

Developing quality CLIL is a complex undertaking, and CLIL teachers come in various guises. CLIL teachers professional growth and expertise is multilayered, develops over time and is progressive by nature. Sylvén (2013) identifies teacher education as a critical contributory factor to successful CLIL outcomes. We acknowledge that a two-hour workshop was insufficient to enable the teachers involved in this research study to examine and craft an integrated CLIL pedagogy and to develop expertise, autonomy, and agency in CLIL. Teacher observations and researcher observations were the only forms of assessment used during the initiative. In hindsight, a more rigorous assessment approach would also have enriched our findings and also informed the teachers of the learning both in PE and in Irish and supported and guided them to reflect on the learning process. Assessment concerning both content knowledge and language should figure prominently in any future CLIL study. Research-based empirical studies into the linguistic and content outcomes of CLIL education should be given priority. This CLIL initiative consisted of a unit of physical education (4–8 lessons) taught through the medium of the Irish language. Clearly the length of exposure to CLIL shapes outcomes. A longitudinal CLIL study could shed light not only on student outcomes over time, but could also help to unpack the complexities of language and content integration in the Irish context. A mixed research design combining both qualitative and quantitative research methods could also be beneficial in providing additional relevant research findings about the effects of CLIL instructional practices.

## 5.2 Taking stock and moving forward

Opportunities for professional development across the continuum of teacher education, which enable teachers to push back the frontiers of CLIL knowledge and understanding, are a professional necessity if CLIL policy in Ireland is to be translated into practice. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities of this nature will increasingly explore and unmask the potential of CLIL. Teachers in this research study reported pedagogical challenges associated with language and content integration in CLIL. Dual-focused CPD opportunities which cater for the mandatory linguistic competencies and associated pedagogical practices of CLIL teachers are therefore required. It is important to note that any model of CPD in CLIL needs to take stock of a teacher's own biography and of the unique learning context if we are "to pin down the exact limits of the reality that this term refers to" (Alejo & Piquer, 2010, p. 220). We believe that a model of continuous support for teachers could enrich CLIL endeavors into the future. The development of supportive professional cultures within which CLIL teachers can learn is vitally important.

We argue that any future model of CDP designed to target the multifaceted demands of the CLIL teacher in English-medium schools in Ireland could incorporate, among other, the following components:

- A rigorous approach to planning to ensure:
  - identification of language objectives (content-obligatory and content-compatible) in terms of content output;
  - identification of content (skills, attitudes, knowledge) in terms of linguistic output;
  - creation of enhanced and detailed instructional scaffolding;
  - design of effective learning sequences anchored in content and language integration;
  - differentiated instruction (in terms of students' varied skills, knowledge, and language);
  - strategies to support students' language production;
  - the creation of authentic and meaningful learning environments and experiences for CLIL learners; and
  - incorporation of a range of assessment, monitoring, and recording strategies for both language and content learning.
- A model of sustained support composed of:
  - workshops to stimulate enquiry, reflection, and evaluation and to detail pitfalls and potentials of CLIL; and
  - a “support tutor” designated to work with teachers in schools who could provide informed support and encouragement to ensure CLIL as an ongoing initiative as opposed to a once-off effort.

There is clearly scope for continuing research into all of the themes uncovered by this research study. CLIL pedagogy is vastly under-researched and under-utilised in the Irish context and warrants further investigation. Moving forward requires careful consideration of a number of key areas in urgent need of research, such as linguistic and content matter outcomes of CLIL education, the identification of the key variables of a coherent CLIL pedagogy, and CPD models which enable CLIL teachers to successfully integrate language and content. It is only then that we will be in a position to analyse the outcomes in relation to the educational and linguistic implications of CLIL. Further research is critically needed to guide and stimulate a more comprehensive and systematic approach to CLIL in the Irish context.

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## Achoimre

Sa staidéar taighde seo, féachadh ar eispéiris na múinteoirí agus na bhfoghlaimeoirí a ghlac páirt i gclár dírithe ar Fhoghlaim Chomhtháite Ábhar agus Teangacha (FCÁT), cúrsa corpoideachais a bhí á theagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge (T2) i mbunscoileanna ina bhfuil an Béarla mar chéad teanga i bPoblacht na hÉireann. Féachtar ar thionchar FCÁT sa staidéar taighde seo .i. an Corpoideachas á theagasc trí mheán na Gaeilge (T2) i mbunscoileanna Béarla i bPoblacht na hÉireann, trí shúile (agus trí ghuthanna) na múinteoirí agus na bhfoghlaimeoirí. Ghlac cúigear múinteoirí rang a ceathair agus a gcuid daltaí (9–10 mbliana d'aois) páirt in aonad Corpoideachais (4–8 gceacht) a rinneadh trí mheán na Gaeilge. Ar na modhanna bailithe agus anailísithe sonraí, áiríodh breathnóireacht dhíreach ar cheachtanna, agallamh le gach múinteoir, machnamh na múinteoirí i scribhinn, agus fócasghrúpa de 3–5 leanaí ó gach rang. Thuairiscigh na múinteoirí go raibh na daltaí an-spreagtha mar tugadh deiseanna dóibh an Ghaeilge a úsáid ar bhealach a thug rogha phearsanta acu. Ar an ábhar sin, cothaíodh muinín agus inniúlacht in úsáid na teanga leis an neamhspleáchas agus leis an spreagadh sin. Rinne na múinteoirí iad féin a shainiú go príomha mar mhúinteoirí ábhair seachas mar mhúinteoirí teanga sna ceachtanna corpoideachais. Thángthas ar roinnt dúshlán oideolaíoch a bhí casta agus buanseasmhach i rith phróisis teagaisc FCÁT (mar shampla, comhtháthú ábhair agus teanga). Cuireann an staidéar taighde seo leis an tuiscint atá againn ar a chasta atá na próisis atá mar bhonn le hoideolaíocht stuama FCÁT agus a théann i bhfeidhm ar an oideolaíocht sin. Soiléiríonn na torthaí taighde na toimhídí a nglactar leo agus an fhéidearthacht atá fós le baint amach maidir le FCÁT mar ghné den oideachas atá ann go fóir.

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