Teaching Listening through the CLIL Method

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Abstract

The study outlines how the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) method can be used in the classroom to improve the listening skills of students. It uses three activities to demonstrate how this method works. The study was conducted in the Aviation and Hospitality sectors of two vocational and skill development institutes in Guwahati, Assam. The paper discusses the language and the cognitive scaffolds used. It concludes by giving insights into how CLIL influences the listening skills of students and the teacher's opinion about CLIL.

Introduction

This study was conducted in the year 2019 and involved learners from the aviation and hospitality sectors. The study aims to show how the CLIL method can be used to teach listening skills in English in classrooms.

Importance of Listening

Listening skills are receptive skills that help learners garner information to produce language. It is essential for both academic and communication purposes. It is central to the language learning process (Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2002). Vandergrift (ibid) points out that researchers realized the criticality of listening from the early 70s, as is evident from the works of scholars such as Asher, Postovsky, Winitz and Krashen. He asserts,

> *"Listening skill is an interactive interpretive process where listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in the understanding of a message. The degree to which listeners use one process or choose to use the other will depend on their knowledge of the language, familiarity with the topic or the purpose for listening."*(p.2)

Besides hearing, the role of the listener is to understand, acknowledge and respond appropriately. Suitable listening activities and materials provide situations for acquiring and expanding the language skills of the learners.

What is CLIL?

CLIL is an approach that teaches content and the second language simultaneously.

For example, when students learn Math or Science in English, they learn about the subject, subject appropriate English vocabulary and also develop their language skills. The approach includes the use of project work, class exams, drama, chemistry practicals, mathematical investigations, physics models, life science experiments, performance art, and so on (Coyle 2006). Although CLIL is associated with learning mother tongues or indigenous languages, it is predominantly perceived as an approach to English language and subject learning. Graddol (2006) sees CLIL as a part of a growing trend in many parts of the world to use English as a medium of instruction.

How is CLIL Different From Similar Methods?

CLIL as a method of teaching differs from the traditional language courses and courses such as teaching English as a Foreign language. In such language courses, content is chosen according to how well it supports the syllabus (Richards & Rodgers, 2016) and no subject is taught through it. CLIL differs from Content-Based Language Learning as the language teachers teach the subjects. For instance, in the Mathematics class, the language teacher teaches Math with a focus on the language and not on Math. It differs from the conventional English medium education (also called the immersion model), where the focus is on the subject and not on the language. The following table (Table 1) gives a snap shot of the differences between the various approaches to language learning:

Table 1
Differences between CLIL and Other Approaches to Language Teaching

Educational approaches	EFL/language courses	Immersion/English mediuminstruction	CBLT	CLIL
Who teaches?	Language teacher	Subject teacher	Language teacher	Subject teacher or expert language teacher
Feedback focus	Language	Subject	Language	Subject and language
Assumption	Language is learnt by studying the content	Content is learnt without specific attention to language	Language is learnt by studying content	Language depends on the content and vice versa
*Teaching listening	Language	Content	Content	Content and language

*inserted by the author
Source. https://www.clilmedia.com/different-types-of-language-learning-explained/#:~:text=Immersion%3A%20Integration%20of%20the%20subject&text=The%20main%20difference%20with%20CLIL%20is%20thus%20obvious.,an%20immersion%20course%20does%20not.

Teaching Listening through the CLIL Method

Like all the other skills, listening develops through practice. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) classes provide students with suitable materials for listening practice.

The problems in listening comprehension come from two sources—the language (the accent of the speaker, the delivery speed, use of complex structures); and the content (background knowledge about the subject and conceptual complexity). The teaching of listening skills should factor in these two barriers. Listening in CLIL promotes active and strategic comprehension and thinking. It uses a variety of materials such as teachers' input, peer suggestions and interactions, and informative materials such as videos, and podcasts. The teacher provides the cognitive scaffold by activating background knowledge, thereby giving opportunities for prediction, evaluation, comparison, and so on. Through repetition, rephrasing, questioning and feedback, the teacher provides the language scaffolds. Teachers integrate these scaffolds through instructions in the pre-listening, during listening and post-listening activity phases. This study uses some of these strategies to demonstrate to the teachers how CLIL can be used in the classrooms.

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in two vocational and skill development institutes in Guwahati. The participants were in the initial stages of their training and were enrolled in either Aviation or Hospitality programmes. There were fifty participants in this study and their age group ranged between 16 and 25 years.

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Excluding the planning of the study, the interaction with the students and teachers took sixty hours spread over one month. The tests used in the study were as follows:

Before the Study
A Needs Analysis was conducted to assess whether the students were aware of the importance of listening skills. Materials provided by the British Council were used to design the test. A language competency test was used to assess the current levels of participant proficiency levels.

During the Study
Teachers had to observe student's engagement with the tasks in the CLIL classes using an observation checklist.

At the End of the Study
Interviews were conducted with the students and teachers to know how they felt about the study.
The students were asked to fill a questionnaire to understand what they had gained from the CLIL method.

The CLIL Method

The first step towards designing the CLIL lessons involved meeting the content and language teachers responsible for the two programmes. The purpose of these meetings was to understand the aims of the programmes. These discussions helped in designing the material and planning activities for the study. The activities discussed by Ball, Kelly and Clegg (2015) and the suggestions given in the "Directed Activities Related to Texts" (DARTs) by Davies & Greene (1984) helped in shaping the activities. In any CLIL method, activating the knowledge of a topic, the purpose of listening and the

scaffold plays a central role in promoting strategic listening comprehension. This core idea influenced the setting of expectations and defining what students had to do during and after the listening activity. Three activities were designed for the programme. These are detailed as follows.

Real-Life Situations
In this activity, learners listened to a real-life audio conversation related to aviation/hospitality. Before starting the activity, participants had to think of situations at the workplace which required them to communicate with their guests. This allowed them to use their background knowledge to draw conclusions and to predict the responses of their guest's behaviour. While listening to the audio recording, participants were encouraged to take notes and to write the keywords that gave them clues about the conversation. After listening to the audio recording, participants shared their answers to inferential questions. They also gave clarifications and summarizations of the conversation and evaluated their own and others' answers.

Cloze Activity
In this activity, participants had to listen to an audio recording of a discussion between a manager and a member of the staff. They then had to fill in the gaps in the recording with words and phrases that fit the situation and the intent of the communication, in a worksheet. The gaps were both content and language-driven. As part of the pre-thinking activity, participants had to think about the topic and the rules of grammar that it could potentially involve. For example, if X talked about a room cancellation that happened last week, would X use the past or present tense? What phrases would X use to convince the guest to not cancel?

After the activity, the participants shared and discussed their answers.

Label the Map

Maps are an essential part of the aviation and hospitality sectors, and understanding maps and instructions are a vital part of the job profiles of these two programmes. Participants had to listen to an audio recording of a set of instructions and label a map (seating arrangement on Flight 101). Before the start of the activity, learners had to make assumptions about the function of maps. After marking the map, the participants shared, discussed and evaluated their answers.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to show teachers the use of the CLIL method. It was not concerned with showing the effectiveness of the CLIL method. However, I will touch on the affective consequences of the study on learners and the thinking of teachers.

The findings of the Needs Analysis showed that the participants were not aware of the importance of listening or reading skills. They did not see their inadequate listening skills as problems. They wanted to improve their speaking skills. The pre-test on language competency showed that most of the students had difficulties at the word level. Their sentence and paragraph-level writing were better, and this is perhaps because our education system emphasizes these skills. Participants had problems with the content questions as they did not understand them. Their vocabulary was also inadequate. Student participants were extremely hesitant while writing the pre-test and exhibited low self-esteem about their language and content skills.

After the study, a majority of students reported that they realized the importance of listening in their daily lives and were keen to improve their listening skills. They said that the design of the activities made thinking compulsory, listening inevitable and understanding crucial, throughout the process. The participants also mentioned how the content and language-driven listening activities gave them a better idea of the vocational sector they were venturing into. The activities helped them understand their content areas and use of language. The participants showed increased confidence, a readiness to share their thoughts, clarity in their thinking, and enhanced competency in forming correct sentences. They were less afraid of making mistakes.

Two teacher observers, one from each programme, had been asked to observe the class using a checklist. The teachers observed that students taught through the CLIL method were more engaged and participative compared to the traditional method. They reported that such an approach would aid in bridging the gap between content and language, and hence benefit the students. The teachers had found it difficult to teach listening skills. This study gave them insights into how they could engage and develop strategic listening skills in the learners.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the study helped to demonstrate the use of the CLIL method in classrooms to enhance listening skills in content and language. While increased awareness of the importance of listening skills was the direct benefit of this study, there were several affective benefits as well. The learners' confidence increased, they became less fearful of committing mistakes and started enjoying the learning process. A language is best

learnt under nonstressful conditions. In this environment errors become learning opportunities and perhaps acts as a catalyst for developing listening skills. Scaffolding from the teacher's end is equally necessary. This study shows that the CLIL method of teaching promotes cognitive, content and language skills in listening.

A limitation of this study is that very few activities were used. The use of more such activities will enrich teaching of the listening skills. This study attempts to bring the CLIL method into the higher academic levels of education in the vocational sector. It provides a direction for improving listening skills in vocational and skill development courses—something that the New Education Policy (2020) emphasizes with the view to transform vocational education.

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