

# The Development of Pragmatic Competence in CLIL Classrooms<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

One of the most important conditions needed to acquire pragmatic competence —knowing the rules of a language and how to apply them to communicate—is exposure to the target language. That is why research has concentrated on observing how this competence develops in different language learning contexts such as second language (L2), foreign language (FL), bilingual, immersion, and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programmes. This review focuses on how existing research has approached the development of pragmatic competence in CLIL classrooms. CLIL is an educational approach in which content subjects are taught through a foreign language. Its objective is to develop students' language skills without risking their knowledge of curriculum content. In CLIL classrooms, learners are exposed to natural occurring language that more than likely will lead them to acquiring pragmatic competence. A well-developed CLIL programme will integrate language learning and subject learning through the development of intercultural understanding.

## Resumen

Una de las condiciones más importantes para adquirir la competencia pragmática, que es la capacidad de conocer las reglas del lenguaje y saber cómo aplicarlas para comprender y producir un lenguaje con fines de comunicación, es la exposición al idioma meta, y es por eso que la investigación se ha concentrado en observar cómo se desarrolla esta competencia en diferentes contextos de aprendizaje de idiomas, como en programas de segundo idioma (L2), idioma extranjero (FL), bilingües, inmersión, y programas de aprendizaje integrado de contenidos y lenguas extranjeras (AICLE). Esta revisión se centra en cómo la investigación existente ha abordado el desarrollo de la competencia pragmática en las aulas AICLE. AICLE es un enfoque educativo donde las materias de contenido se imparten a través de un idioma extranjero. Su objetivo es desarrollar las habilidades lingüísticas de los estudiantes sin arriesgar su conocimiento del contenido curricular. En las aulas AICLE los alumnos están expuestos al lenguaje natural que probablemente los llevará a adquirir competencia pragmática. Un programa CLIL bien desarrollado integrará el aprendizaje de idiomas y el aprendizaje de materias a través del desarrollo de la comprensión intercultural.

## Introduction

The overall objective when learning a new language is to be able to communicate successfully and to function within the society in which that language is used. To use a language accurately, one needs to learn its grammar and vocabulary; however, to appropriately use the language in context, it is more important to know how to use its linguistic forms and functions. Thus when acquiring a new language, it is also important to acquire pragmatic competence which is the ability to comprehend and produce language for communication.

Before describing how the development of pragmatic competence in CLIL classrooms has been examined, it is important to remember what pragmatic competence is and how the development of pragmatic competence in L2 is conceptualized.

## Pragmatic Competence and Interlanguage Pragmatics

Pragmatic competence is the major influence behind the speakers' choices for using language in socially appropriate ways in their first, second, and additional languages. Pragmatic competence includes knowing the rules of language and having the skills to apply these rules correctly. In Bialystok's (1993) words,

*Pragmatic competence entails a variety of abilities concerned with the use and interpretation of language in context. It includes speakers' ability to use language for different purposes – to request, to instruct, to effect change. It includes listeners' ability to get past the language and understand the speaker's real intentions, especially when these intentions are not directly conveyed in the forms – indirect requests, irony and sarcasm are some examples. It includes commands of the rules by which utterances are strung together to create discourse. (p. 43)*

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Important research has concentrated on studying second language pragmatic competence and how it is developed among second language learners. The field of study of this development is known as Interlanguage Pragmatics (ILP) which was defined by Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) as "the study of non-native speakers' use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language (L2)" p. 10). ILP examines learners' use, awareness, and acquisition of pragmatic competence, and analyzes the factors that can influence its development. It also describes how pragmatic aspects are taken into account in the language classroom and in the last years in immersion and bilingual classrooms. LoCastro (2012) argues that language teachers and language learners need to be aware of the existence of interlanguage pragmatics to better understand how people comprehend and convey meaning in particular contexts.

The development of L2 pragmatic competence has been studied from two different standpoints: a cognitive and a sociocultural perspective. From the cognitive standpoint, pragmatic learning is seen as a mental and individualist process. Studies of pragmatic learning as a cognitive activity have been carried in experimental and quasi experimental conditions. Data have been collected through written and oral discourse completion tasks and discourse evaluation tasks. Conversely, the sociocultural perspective considers the development of pragmatic competence as a mediation process that takes place on the social and cultural context of learning. Sociocultural research has shown that social interaction (i.e., opportunities to participate and communicate in the classrooms) helps to develop pragmatic competence (Alcón Soler, 2008). An example of research that takes a sociocultural perspective is that of Evnitskaya and Morton (2011). This study combined the learning framework of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2000, 2010; Lave, 1993) with conversation analysis to examine interaction and identity formation in two CLIL classrooms. The results of the study showed the ways in which different CLIL classrooms were constructed as communities of practice, and how different identities emerged (Evnitskaya & Morton, 2011).

### **Influential Factors**

Interlanguage pragmatics examines language use and language learning in context, and it also studies the factors that can influence the development of pragmatic competence among second language learners. Roever (2006) enumerates the factors influencing second language acquisition and the development of pragmatic competence in an interlanguage system: "transfer, overgeneralization, simplification, transfer of training, amount and quality of input, attention and awareness, aptitude, motivation, and other individual differences" (p.230).

ILP research has examined how these factors affect learners' pragmatic competence. Additionally, research in ILP identifies exposure to input, L2 proficiency, length of stay, transfer, instruction, and context (L2, FL, CLIL) as factors that influence the use and development of pragmatic competence (Alcón Soler, 2008).

### **Pragmatic Competence in Content and Language Integrated Learning Classrooms**

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach that originated in the early 1990s as a result of the triple pressure of integration, expansion, and modernization that the European Union was experiencing. Various issues preventing the achievement of the goals of the European Integration were identified and a language barrier appeared to be a major one. In many countries, it was evident that language learning was not providing the desired learning outcomes; citizens were not able to use the language they were learning effectively. Experts in the field of language learning looked for ways to strengthen the language learning process and to develop multilingualism in the Union. The term CLIL was then adopted in 1994 and later launched in 1996 (Marsh & Frigols Martín, 2013).

CLIL is defined as a dual-educational environment "where curricular content is taught through the medium of a foreign language, typically, to students participating in some form of mainstream education at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level" (Dalton-Puffer, 2011, p. 183). The most important influence for designing CLIL was the Canadian Immersion programme implemented across Canada in 1960. The main goal of this enriching bilingual programme was to promote bilingualism and biliteracy where "French is used as a medium of instruction for much of the school day in the early grades of school in order to enable the majority group of English-L1 speakers to acquire fluency in French" (Cummins, 2013, p. 6).

Although CLIL has its roots in bilingual education, there are many characteristics that differentiate it from traditional bilingual programmes. A CLIL instruction programme uses a foreign language and not a second language (as in the case of French immersion in Canada). Students are exposed to the language used as the means for instruction only in the classroom (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Teachers in a CLIL context are not,

normally, native speakers of the target language or experts in language teaching. They are content teachers; experts in content subjects from academic and scientific disciplines who use the target language as the means for instruction. Dalton-Puffer (2011) claims that "CLIL is usually implemented once learners have acquired literacy skills in their first language (L1)" (p. 184), and are able to transfer these skills to the acquisition of their second language. Naturalistic L2 learning, without formal instruction, can take place in educational environments like CLIL.

CLIL has been compared with Content Based Instruction (CBI) as content is one of its major components; however, these two approaches differ. CBI focuses on the integration of language teaching with content instruction (Snow, 2014) without giving equal importance to language and content-learning (Stoller, 2002). CLIL focuses on teaching content subjects (included in the curriculum) with and through the target language. "CLIL lessons at school are usually scheduled as content-lessons (e.g., biology, music, geography) while the target language also continues as a subject in its own right in the shape of foreign language lessons taught by language specialists" (Dalton-Puffer et al., 2010, p. 3).

As has been mentioned previously, CLIL deals with both language teaching/learning and content teaching/learning, rather than one or the other. As stated by Wolff (2009) "in this context it was found that language awareness of learners who are instructed in such an integrated context is more developed than when language teaching takes place in isolation" (p. 560).

Research carried out in CLIL contexts has shown that well-implemented programmes could be highly effective for learning content and language. They can develop strong target language skills at no cost to students' knowledge of curriculum content taught through and with the target language (Cummins, 2013).

CLIL's theoretical foundations relate to language learning aspects and to learning processes in general. Within language learning, CLIL is based on language awareness, second language acquisition, psycholinguistics, and foreign language learning. In regard to learning processes, CLIL foundations relate to the learning theories of constructivism and cognitivism. A successful CLIL programme must be built on its theoretical principles; it has to go beyond integrating content and foreign language learning at the practical level.

In order to support the development of CLIL pedagogies and to provide a basis to the integration of CLIL components, Coyle (2007) designed a conceptual framework that does not consider content and language as two separate elements, but that supports their integration as the condition to achieve quality CLIL. The 4Cs framework (as named by Coyle) emphasizes in content (subject matter), communication (language), cognition (learning and thinking), and culture (social awareness of self and otherness). It "positions content in the 'knowledge for learning' domain (integrating content and cognition) and language, a culture-bound phenomenon, as a medium for learning (integrating communication and cultural understanding)" (Coyle, 2007, p. 549).

The 4Cs framework illustrates how language learning and subject learning are linked together through the development of intercultural understanding, whose main function is to integrate the elements of CLIL (Coyle, 2009) Furthermore, she (2009) suggests that progression in understanding and knowing the content, engaging in cognitive processes such as those which involve higher order thinking skills, interacting with others through and with the language, and understanding the self and the otherness in the intercultural levels are necessary elements for CLIL to be effective. Programmes that are developed within this framework seek to achieve goals that are directly and indirectly related to language development. Ruiz de Zarobe (2010) presented the aims that are considered the most important by the CLIL compendium.

- Develop intercultural communication skills
- Prepare for internationalisation
- Provide opportunities to study content through different perspectives
- Access subject-specific target language terminology
- Improve overall target language competence
- Develop oral communication skills
- Diversify methods and forms of classroom practice
- Increase learner motivation

Previous research (Bialystok, 2005; Cummins & Swain, 1986) has shown that different language competences and language skills developed in different times and levels in a CLIL classroom. Receptive skills, vocabulary, morphology, creativity, risk taking, fluency, quantity, and emotive and effective outcomes showed clear gains in CLIL contexts; whereas syntax, writing, informal and/or non-technical language, pronunciation, and pragmatics seemed not to be affected (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010). Jiménez Catalán et al. (2006) assessed students' English knowledge and use in CLIL and non-CLIL classrooms. Learners had to complete a cloze test (lexical, grammatical, and discursive aspects of language production), a reading comprehension test, a vocabulary test, and a written composition. The results in the cloze and reading comprehension tests (receptive skills) revealed that CLIL students had better performance. When the productive skills were analyzed through vocabulary and written tests, the results showed that CLIL students produced fewer words and fewer types of words than non-CLIL students. Overall, the study showed that CLIL instruction had stronger effects on receptive skills than on productive skills (Jiménez Catalán et al., 2006).

Other research studies have demonstrated that students in CLIL programmes improved considerably in terms of pragmatic and discursive competence. Gassner and Maillat (2006), in their study of a CLIL classroom in Switzerland, showed various excerpts from a biology course taught to 3<sup>rd</sup> year high school students that demonstrated their higher order linguistic competence. Students successfully took part on discursive collaboration, which required competent discourse participants. Learners showed skillful management of overlaps and collaborative construction of turns where several discursive strategies to get the message across were needed. A multi-paired collaborative turn was evidenced in which students and teacher worked together to solve a case of interference between L1 and L2. Based on their analysis, Gassner and Maillat (2006) suggest that an important area to research in the CLIL context is sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence.

The fundamental conditions for language learning and for the development of pragmatic competence are language input, and the role it plays in different contexts namely second, foreign, bilingual, or immersion language programmes. CLIL is not only about language learning; it is a term that describes programmes that have chosen to use a foreign language as the means of instruction. Therefore, there is a considerable amount of language input occurring in a CLIL classroom which, according to ILP, promotes the development of pragmatic competence.

CLIL classrooms offer students many opportunities to develop their pragmatic competence as they provide authentic input and continuous use of the target language. CLIL researchers argue that when the target language is used as the medium of instruction, acquisition takes place naturally, and the ability to communicate appropriately through that language develops more easily than in formal language teaching (Nikula, 2008). Learning content matter becomes more meaningful, and the exchanges between learner and teacher or between learner and learner become more elaborated; the exchanges do not happen exclusively within the typical Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) pattern. According to Nikula (2007), in CLIL classrooms, the teacher's language has different functions such as guiding the learners in understanding content, language, and the different types of classroom registers.

Additionally, Nikula (2008) argues that pragmatic proficiency ought to be seen in relation to the overall management of interaction. In a CLIL classroom students become active participants of multiparty conversations within their community of practice. They are able to express personal opinions, negotiate meaning, take different stances on matters, and handle content subject.

Interactions in CLIL classrooms seem to rely mainly on an informal register which may be due to the naturalistic way in which language is used. During the acquisition process different conditions of language in use take place. It is expected that in the beginning stages of a CLIL programme, learners will face more limiting conditions and will rely on inferential processes that will make up for their limited repertoire of formal structured language. This may be considered problematic, by some, because it distances learners from acquiring the expected native speaker model, and from using pragmatic strategies as native speakers would use. However, if language is seen as the instrument to comprehend and produce appropriate utterances, pragmatic success should be examined within a particular context and not as something that has to meet a fixed native form. That is precisely the reason why ILP focuses on interactional success rather than meeting native speaker norms. "Looked at from a pragmatic perspective, then, the strength of CLIL classrooms lies in the opportunity they provide for students to participate in a range of activities which bring

about various social demands that they have to try and take into account when using their L2" (Nikula, 2008, p. 110).

Supporting Nikula's contributions to the study of the development of pragmatic competence in CLIL classrooms, Maillat (2010) claims that pragmatic competence should be researched not as a component of language competence, but as a cognitive system that allows the production and comprehension of language during the acquisitional stages. In Maillat's (2010) study on naturally occurring classroom interaction in CLIL classrooms in Switzerland, it can be observed that the spoken ability of learners benefits greatly in these educational environments. He suggests that the conditions imposed on the use of the target language by the CLIL environment seem to liberate learners' oral production. Based on his observations, he argues that a "pragmatic effect is triggered in an immersive environment like CLIL which releases some of the constraints affecting language in use, thereby lowering anxiety. This pragmatic effect is called the mask effect" (Maillat, 2010, p. 51).

The mask effect is a pragmatic strategy within CLIL that has shown to have an impact on the spoken production of learners and on the learning process itself. Maillat (2010) explains that in CLIL, the target language functions as a mask which is an affective filter that lowers anxiety and facilitates learning. The mask effect can be possible and applicable depending on the status of the target language as the means for instruction (as in the case of CLIL programmes), and not as the subject matter.

The mask effect functions on three different pragmatic levels of discourse: the deictic level, the referential level, and the epistemic level. On the deictic level, the use and the formality of language are less complex, and discourse is not attached to a given social hierarchy. Personal and social deixis, and power relations are reorganized which contributes to lower learners' anxiety when producing the target language. The referential level discusses the learner's ability to engage in alternative experiential environments such as role plays; their use of language is not affected by anxiety, and has a strong impact on spoken production. On the epistemic level, the mask effect takes place because the expectation from the individual as a 'proficient speaker' is reduced and his/her identity as 'learner' is recognized.

Gassner and Maillat (2006), in the study described previously in this paper, discussed that learners felt comfortable using the target language and made valuable oral contributions during the class activity (role-play). They labelled this reaction from students the mask effect; "in other words a pragmatically induced discursive pattern characterised by referential and modal blocking, whereby the linguistic activity becomes a purely language-internal phenomenon which ceases to refer and to imply epistemic grounding" (p.19).

The model proposed by Maillat (2010) can have promising and positive effects on the overall performance of students in CLIL classrooms and other language learning programmes regardless if they include the learning of content as a complement to language learning or as the main objective of the programme. The main purpose of the mask effect as a cognitive process is to highlight and focus on the relevant aspects of the task, being the target language or the content, leaving aside secondary ones (the content or the language).

For instance, in a CLIL class which is content driven (more focus is given to content), language becomes the means and students are less stressed about how they use it as the relevant aspect is the content, resulting in more active and natural oral production. In language-focused classes, communicative strategies could apply the mask effect model. Strategies such as information gaps, jigsaw activities, onion rings, and pyramidal activities, among others, focus on communicating a message and not being one hundred percent accurate on the language use which could lower students' level of anxiety, and help them increase and improve their spoken production.

### **Existing Research**

Most of the existing research in CLIL has concentrated on language features and skills; i.e., vocabulary, morphology, syntax, writing, among others. There is a reduced number of research studies within the field of interlanguage pragmatics in CLIL contexts. These studies have examined classroom discourse, negotiation of meaning, conversation analysis, the use of directives, written discourse, and turn taking. For instance, Dalton-Puffer (2005) explored the use of directives in a CLIL context as a dimension of interpersonal discourse management. She wanted to identify what levels of directness could be observed in the performance of directives, especially with reference to the use of discourse modification; to know whether any patterns regarding the goal of directives (information, action) could be recognized; and to what extent

the requests were influenced by personal style and L1 discourse culture. Content lessons from history, music, tourism management, business studies, and accounting, which were taught by six different teachers, were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Results demonstrated that participants incorporated indirectness as well as variability in their language when producing directives. The speech act of requesting also showed a difference in terms of the classroom's purpose and register. Interactive styles of the L1 culture (participants' beliefs, values, and expectations) influenced the realization of classroom directives. The researcher concludes that CLIL classrooms convey only some social messages relevant to function as a competent speaker. She suggests that it would be interesting to explore if CLIL students are able to transfer the interactional linguistic knowledge from their classroom to other contexts. Furthermore, based on the results of her study, she considers that a more specific understanding of what constitutes an authentic situation is needed to value the effects that a CLIL programme could provide to the learning process.

### Conclusion and Future Research

It is evident that CLIL programmes began and became popular in the European context, and that today they are spread all over Europe, however, there has also been a growing interest in Latin America in implementing them. Some CLIL programmes have been established since 2005 mainly in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, and more recently in Bolivia and Ecuador. Due to its recent implementation, studies on CLIL in these countries have only described classroom practices, the initial results of programme evaluation processes, and the development of materials. The Latin American countries where CLIL has been implemented are determined to improve their educational systems, particularly at the higher level, by among other things, adopting English as the means for instruction. For instance, the Ecuadorian and Chilean governments are interested in encouraging students to pursue graduate degrees in the best universities of the world, which are in English speaking countries, and in strengthening their research centres. Thus, an important area of expansion for CLIL research is the Latin American context where not only the feasibility for implementing this approach could be examined, but also, and more importantly, how the target language is acquired and the pragmatic competence developed.

It seems that CLIL classrooms are environments that foster the development of pragmatic competence because they provide large amounts of meaningful input and countless opportunities for learners to produce language. Language development functions as a pragmatic inhibitor that allows learners to concentrate on cognitive resources on the communicative task without experiencing anxiety. CLIL educational environments offer natural occurring language which is a rich source for studying pragmatic competence. Classroom discourse and the complexities involved in it could be examined to have a better understanding on how pragmatic competence could be fostered and developed in CLIL classrooms.

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