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CLIL in use: perceptions and experiences of English teachers in public schools

CLIL en uso: percepciones y experiencias de los profesores de inglés de colegios públicos

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the perceptions and experiences that English teachers who work in public institutions in the province of El Oro about the CLIL methodology, from its knowledge to its application. We worked with a descriptive type of research. It was determined that CLIL is not widely known or used among English teachers in the province of El Oro, despite being included in the National English Curriculum, which could be due to the lack of adequate training. Participating teachers who reported applying CLIL in the classroom recognized the innovative nature of the methodology. Therefore, they recommend CLIL as the most appropriate methodology for teaching English, although considering adaptations that could improve it, both in the materials used and in the use of additional resources, especially technological tools.

Descriptors: Teaching methods; educational games; teaching materials. (UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza las percepciones y experiencias que tienen los docentes de inglés que laboran en instituciones públicas de la provincia de El Oro sobre la metodología AICLE, desde su conocimiento hasta su aplicación. Se trabajó con un tipo de investigación descriptiva. Se determinó que CLIL no es ampliamente conocido o utilizado entre los profesores de inglés en la provincia de El Oro, a pesar de estar incluido en el Currículo Nacional de inglés, lo que podría deberse a la falta de capacitación adecuada. Los docentes participantes que reportaron aplicar AICLE en el aula reconocieron el carácter innovador de la metodología. Por ello, recomiendan CLIL como la metodología más adecuada para la enseñanza del inglés, aunque considerando adaptaciones que puedan mejorarla, tanto en los materiales utilizados como en el uso de recursos adicionales, especialmente herramientas tecnológicas.

Descriptores: Método de enseñanza; juego educativo; material didáctico. (Tesoro UNESCO).

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INTRODUCTION

English is unquestionably the language par excellence for global communication, international trading, technology, tourism, and of course for interpersonal communication. English remains the first choice for teaching a foreign language in most of the schools, high schools, and universities around the world. The teaching of a foreign language is focused on developing the skills of that language. Thus, it is important to apply the correct methods or strategies to get the best results in the acquisition of that language. In the teaching of English as a second or as a foreign language, changes are also being evidenced from the curriculum, in which other methodologies different from the traditional ones have been implemented, leaving aside the role of rote learning against new strategies.

Among the different methods that exist, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has shown to be the one that currently remains the best option to improve learning that has not been achieved with traditional education (Dalton-Puffer, 2011).

In this research, we consider the main conceptual elements that makeup CLIL, we break down the methodology, its components, and the teaching task involved. We reviewed the work of researchers who have applied this pedagogical model in different countries and educational levels.

As a core part, we conducted a survey with several English teachers who belong to public high schools in the province of El Oro, in Ecuador, to ask them about CLIL, their level of knowledge about it, and its application in the classroom as well as their perceptions and experiences.

The purpose of our study focused on two aspects. First, to determine what are the perceptions of public high schools English teachers about the use of CLIL, and secondly, what kind of experiences public high schools English teachers have had using CLIL.

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Conceptual Framework

CLIL (Content and Foreign Language Integrated Learning) is a term created by (Marsh & Maljers, 1994), referring to a methodology very similar to linguistic immersion and content-based instruction, but with distinctive elements. It was in Europe that the term was coined and CLIL is today the most widely used methodology in the world for bilingual education (Porrás Loyola, 2013).

CLIL is an approach to learning content through an additional language (foreign or second), through which both the subject and the language are taught, not in parallel, but in an integrated way. The most important thing was to create a general term that uses language as a medium of instruction in various ways. Also, feedback takes relevant importance in a CLIL program (Coyle et al. 2010).

The term CLIL describes a trend of applied linguistics that advocates that in the educational framework there is greater success in learning a foreign language through common subjects, such as History or Science, than through functional curricula that are treated in an isolated way and as independent subjects, “CLIL is an approach that, aside from focusing on language teaching, highlights the teaching of curricular content subjects” (Argudo et al. 2018, p. 68).

According to (Mehisto et al. 2008), five important core features of CLIL can be listed: multiple focuses, safe and enriching learning environment, authenticity, active learning, and scaffolding. Furthermore, CLIL-based teaching, in accordance with (Coyle, 2005), is structured around four axes (4Cs): Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture.

The lifeblood of CLIL is content, around which successful thematic learning and the development of skills and understanding of the new language revolve. Communication is the means by which all learning flows. It is based on the idea that the language is used to learn, and the new language is better learned at the same time. The learning or cognition process is at the base and must seek the development of higher-order thinking skills. It is not about imparting concepts or theories, but about involving the students so

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that they build their own learning environment and overcome it permanently. Finally, culture is mainstreamed in the search for the integration of languages and knowledge, in a multicultural and multilingual society, which shows respect and appreciation for what is different (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010).

According to Marsh (2012), CLIL offers opportunities for students to use a different language in a more natural way, so that they soon forget they are learning a language and focus only in the learning of the subject. In addition (Anderson et al. 2015), supported that the main advantages of CLIL include positive changes in students' attitudes towards learning a new language.

Another advantage of CLIL is that it helps to develop higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking and the relationship of new concepts and ideas with previous knowledge, all of which are necessary for self-learning and deep knowledge (Dalton-Puffer, 2011). Therefore, it is said that this methodology will be well applied if it leaves long-term marks on students and allows them to solve problems in different contexts (Porrás Loyola, 2013).

The CLIL methodology, in the opinion of CLIL Open Online Learning project (2021), offers several benefits. These include the development of communication skills and openness towards intercultural interests and attitudes, improvement in the learning and use of English, the opportunity to learn subject content from different perspectives, among others.

The CLIL method is usually adapted in many ways, from the point of view of the educator and the institution, so that a total immersion can be carried out, adapting the entire curriculum to the second language. However, a partial immersion can also be done, considering only some didactic units. This usually depends on the institutional policies and objectives brought into the classroom (Attard-Montalto et al. 2016).

The skills that students develop the most are reading and listening comprehension, which is why they achieve greater linguistic fluency (Marsh, 2012). As valuable as this

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approach is, so must be the role of the teacher who applies CLIL. This professional must perform different roles from those that he or she would typically perform under a traditional teaching modality (Conan, 2013) and (Verjano, 2017) specify eight roles: 1. Planner, capable of integrating not only the content of the subjects but also the skills and learning objectives in each module to promote the foreign language. 2. User of the language, both in a regular way and in a specialized and academic way, to answer all the concerns of their students in the classroom. 3. Promoter of the additional language through the elaboration of materials that the students can understand and then also produce. 4. Protector of the subject, in such a way that it encourages the learning of the second language correctly through appropriate mechanisms. 5. Materials designer, identifying needs, adapting, and integrating materials that facilitate the development of skills in students. 6. Member of a team, which provides elements that improve collaborative work between teachers of different subjects and includes elements of the curriculum of each one. 7. Evaluator of the entire training process, regarding objectives and actions, as well as reflection on the elements used during the academic program. 8. Methodological innovator, who visualizes all the changes that are necessary to improve the adaptation of CLIL in the classroom environment, modifying resources and strategies.

When starting with CLIL-based teaching, teachers can feel vulnerable. Likewise, students are often reluctant to change the way they learn unless they have the opportunity to adapt gradually. In fact, one of the most difficult challenges for CLIL teachers is to ensure that their students are autonomous and insert themselves voluntarily and decisively in learning under this new modality (Attard Montalto et al., 2016).

The fears and doubts of the teachers are present with questions. "How am I going to help my students if I don't know anything about their subjects?" Without any doubt, it is not easy because language teachers regularly use textbooks focused on a topic, under

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the premises of grammar rules and vocabulary. However, it is not so difficult, as long as it is understood that the English teacher does not only teach content from other subjects, but uses that content as a means to improve the learning of the foreign language (Attard Montalto, et al., 2016). In this light, it is necessary for the English teacher to work closely with the teachers of the other subjects to achieve the dual objective conceptualized by CLIL methodology (CLIL Open Online Learning project, 2021).

Literature Review

(Yavuz et al. 2020) conducted a case study in Turkey. They reviewed the CLIL perceptions and needs of practicing English teachers. The analysis of reflective essays and semi-structured interviews was carried out, reaching the conclusion that although teachers are aware of the contribution that CLIL can provide in the classroom, they confront challenges during its application, especially in terms of training on CLIL, the approach, and the necessary conditions in the institutions, as well as the skills and abilities they must have to apply it effectively.

In a comparative study of primary and secondary teacher perceptions in institutions of Castilla y León, Spain, (Durán-Martínez, 2018) showed that all participants agree in recognizing the virtues of CLIL to improve the teaching-learning of English, but primary teachers are more concerned about the suitable implementation of the work methodology and those of secondary school, on the other hand, to the adequate teaching of contents in the English language. Both groups, however, consider that teacher training should be improved, preferring international internships to achieve better preparation.

(Pavón-Vázquez et al. 2015) presented a study applied to students with a low level of English (A1 - A1.2) in a specialized center in the teaching of foreign languages in Córdoba, Spain, to verify the perception of teachers (and students) in the application of activities with CLIL. The result showed that there is greater interaction and motivation in

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the classroom, in addition to a more relaxed environment when the specific methodology of task-based learning is applied. Additionally, the teachers perceived that the students wanted to participate more in oral activities than in written ones, which was surprising because it is usually the other way around.

In a study presented by (Loor-Zambrano et al. 2019) to learn about the use of methodologies for teaching English in two Ecuadorian institutions, the authors reported that CLIL appears among the preferred methodologies along with the communicative approach and the audiolingual method.

Conversely (Calderón-Dávila, 2019) presented the results of his research in a secondary institution in Cayambe, Ecuador where he identified that most teachers do not know the CLIL method precisely or extensively and that "75% of teachers do not make use of the integration of curricular content to teach in the English language" (p. 73).

Additionally, Molina Guevara and Narváez Rea (2019) determined that the performance of English teachers in an institution in Quito is not optimal due to -among other issues- an overload of activities typical of the teaching role and that professional training for applying CLIL is inadequate and inappropriate. These findings are confirmed by the work carried out in Cañar, in southern Ecuador by (Ortega-Auquilla & Minchala-Buri, 2019), which show that the level of English spoken by teachers is at a basic-intermediate level, despite the fact that a good percentage have university studies in teaching English. Another important finding of their study was that translation and teaching focused on grammar and centered on the teacher are regularly used, which is contrary to the principles that the Ecuadorian curriculum proposes for the teaching of the foreign language. In addition, there is an erroneous interpretation of the implementation of CLIL due to the fact that the themes or topics of other subjects are not taken into account, but the book is used as an instrument and guide for the activities, assuming -erroneously- that in this way CLIL is being incorporated into the teaching of English in the classroom.

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The need for English teachers to be trained to improve their professional performance and propose improvements in their particular classroom contexts, particularly in regards to the implementation of CLIL is unquestionable. Loo-Zambrano et al. (2019) mentioned that training is at the discretion of each teacher and that they have to pursue training in ways not to interfere with the regular daily work. Finally Porras-Loyola (2013) considers that "for now, there is still a great training gap and especially of trainers who can provide the necessary training for CLIL teachers" (p. 47).

METHOD

This is a mixed-method study that used an online survey to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The mixed approach includes data collection of both types and proceeds to the analysis of integrated results in order to better understand the observed phenomenon.

Participants' recruitment

A non-probabilistic sampling was applied. The choice of the participants in the sample was not made by any probabilistic formula, but based on reasons related to the type of research, which required directing the survey to English teachers in the province of El Oro (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza Torres, 2018).

In addition, the sample was structured through the snowball mechanism since there was no database of public English teachers who work in the province. Through contacts of nearby teachers, it was possible to obtain the emails of other teachers and, through these, some others. We collected the email addresses of 39 contacts, but only 30 responded the survey.

The sample reached 30 teachers (19 women and 11 men) from different levels of Education: Superior Basic (9) and Baccalaureate (20) from the cantons Machala, Piñas,

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Zaruma, Pasaje, Santa Rosa, Arenillas, and El Guabo, both from the urban and rural sectors with an age range between 30 and 50 plus years old.

Data collection instruments: Survey

The measuring instrument was a structured digital survey prepared in Microsoft Forms with 20 questions (Q), two of them were opened-ended questions and four used scales of assessment. The survey's content was organized in three sections: general Information (questions 1 to 8), overview of CLIL (questions 9 to11), perceptions about CLIL in the daily teaching process (questions 12 to14) and experiences about CLIL in the daily teaching process (questions15 to 20). The survey has a break point in question 9, where it was asked if the English teachers knew CLIL or not. Only those who answered yes to that question went on to answer the next ones, so the total number of responses was reduced to only 19 for the next two questions and 16 for the remaining ones. This instrument was sent to the English teachers by email because online surveys are easier and faster to apply, and they generate a higher response rate than face-to-face or telephone surveys. In addition, having a population that regularly uses the internet, this is the most suitable means and the most effective mechanism to collect data quickly and practically (McDougald, 2015).

Data analysis

The answers were collected directly in the Microsoft Forms application and downloaded as an Excel spreadsheet for detailed analysis since the aforementioned tool only allowed a superficial analysis. The closed questions went through quantitative analysis. In the case of open questions, a content analysis was conducted looking for common patterns and themes, and terms among the participants' responses.

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RESULTS

From the first section of the survey, General Information (questions 1 to 8) these are the results:

Regarding age (Q1), 15 (50%) are between 40-49 years old; eight (26.67%) are in the range between 30-39 years old and seven (23.33%) are 50 years old or more. According to gender (Q2), 19 participants are women (63.33%) and 11 are men (36.67%). In terms of the professional degree (Q3), 21 teachers (70%) have an undergraduate degree while 9 (30%) have a graduate one. Of the degrees obtained (Q4), 26 teachers (86.67%) have a degree in the English teaching area while 4 (13.33%) have a degree in a different field. Regarding teaching experience (Q5), 6 teachers (20%) have between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience; 12 teachers (40%) have between 11 and 15 years of teaching experience; 5 (16.67%), between 16 and 20 years; and 7 (23.33%) have an experience of 21 years or more. Regarding the level where they work (Q6), 21 participants (70%) teach in Baccalaureate and 9 (30%) in Superior Basic.

The participants of the study work in several cantons of El Oro province. Most of the participating teachers, 16 (53.33%), work in Machala, four in Pasaje (13.33%), four in Zaruma (13.33%), three in Arenillas (10%) and one in El Guabo, Santa Rosa and Piñas, respectively which represents the 3.33% of the participants (Figure 1).

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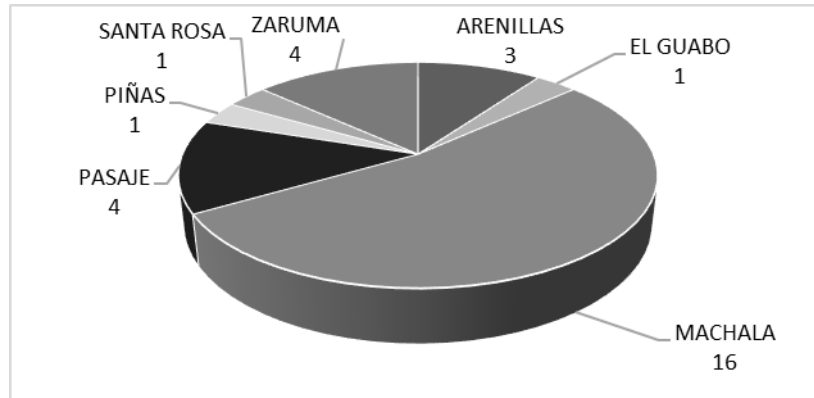


Figure 1. In what canton do you work?

Finally, question eight shows that 24 teachers (80%) carry out their work in central urban areas, 3 (10%) do so in peripheral urban areas and 3 more (10%) in the rural sector (Figure 2).

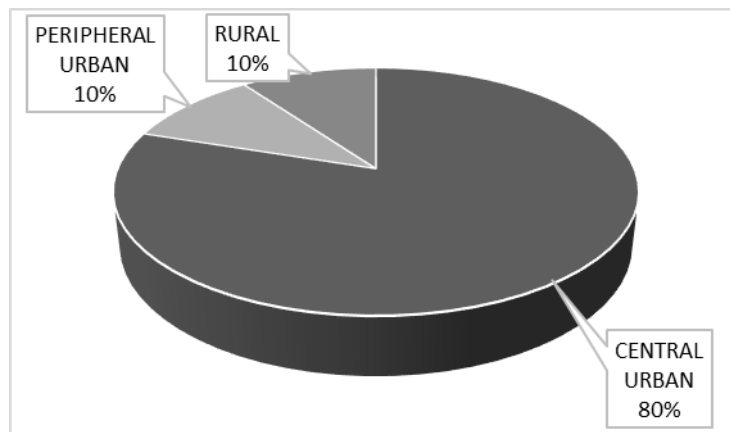


Figure 2. Where is the institution where you work located?

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As mentioned before, the second section of the survey (questions 9 to 11) was about an overview of CLIL. The first question of this section (Q9) was about the knowledge of the participants about the CLIL approach; surprisingly only 19 (63%) of the 30 respondents said that knew the CLIL methodology despite the fact that it is included in the Curriculum for English education that governs public education in Ecuador (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador, 2019) (Figure 3).

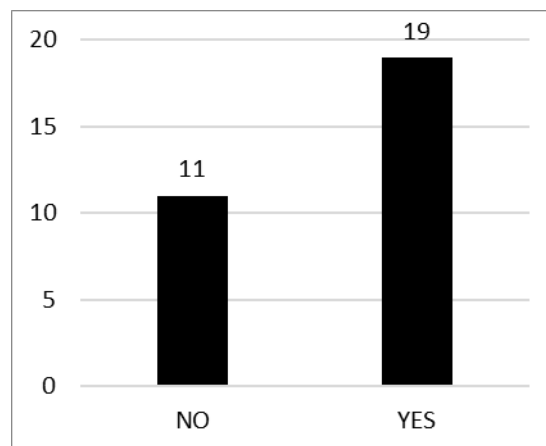


Figure 3. Do you know CLIL?

Among the teachers surveyed who knew the CLIL methodology, 16 (84%) said they apply it in their classes while 3 (16%) do not use it in their practice (Q10). In this instance, we only took the opinions of 19 teachers, who indicated in the previous question that they knew the CLIL approach, since it wasn't correct to raise it for those who did not know it (Figure 4).

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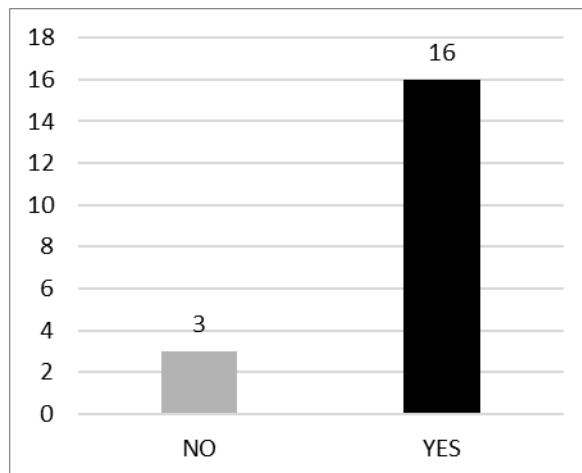


Figure 4. Do you apply CLIL in your classes?

In question 11 we asked the level of importance of each CLIL component. The teachers answered that Communication has the highest level of importance with an average grade of 4.25 over 5. It is followed by Content, with 4; Cognition with 3.88 and the least important was Culture with 3.75 (Figure 5).

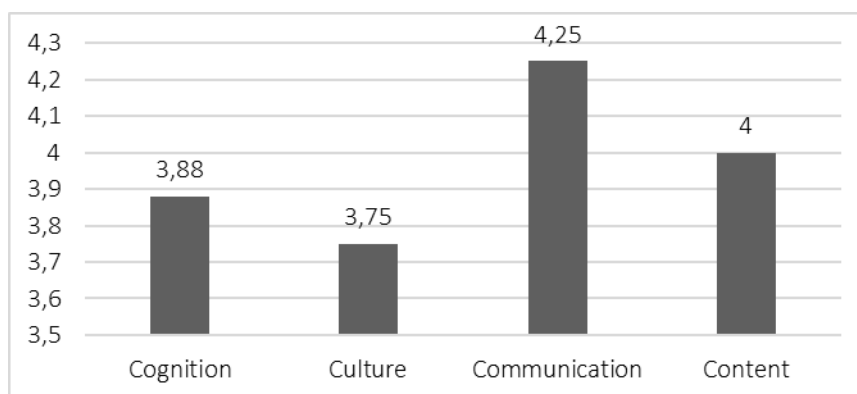


Figure 5. Level of importance of each component of CLIL (1 is lowest and 5 is highest).

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The third section of the survey, perceptions of CLIL in the daily teaching process (questions 12 to 14) also presents interesting results. We must point out that for this question and the following ones, only the answers of the 16 teachers who said they applied CLIL in the classrooms were considered.

In question 12, 15 (93.15 %) English teachers consider CLIL as an innovative method, one sees it as ordinary (6.25%) and none believe that it is outdated (Figure 6).

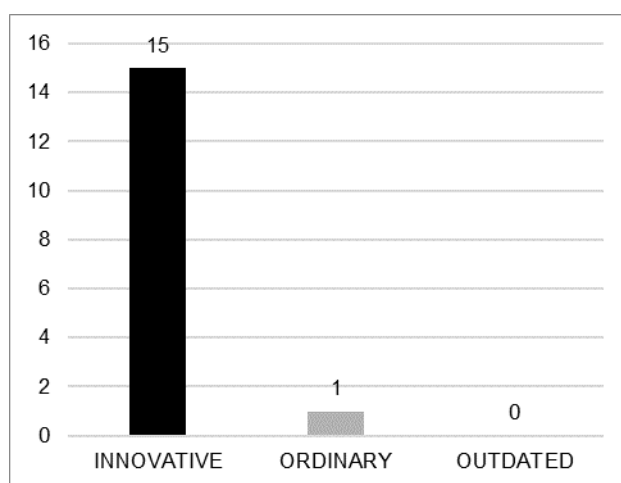


Figure 6. Perception of CLIL in the daily teaching process.

In regards to the usefulness of the methodology (Q13), seven teachers (43.75%) have found it very useful to use CLIL in the classroom; six (37.50%) believe that it has been useful to them, and three (18.75%) believe that using it as a teaching method has been somewhat useful to them (Figure 7).

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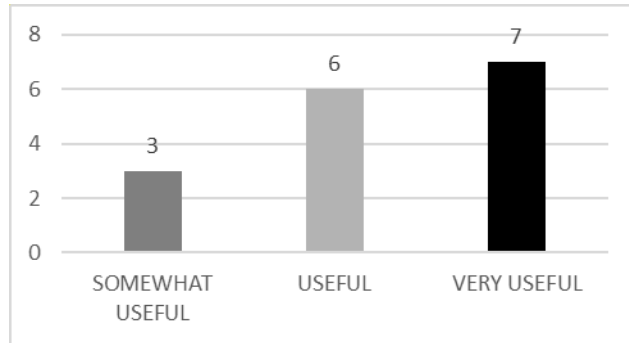


Figure 7. Usefulness of CLIL in the classroom.

The application of CLIL generates greater interest in students when taking classes (Q14). This is said by 15 of the 16 teachers consulted (93.75%). Only one teacher (6.25%) indicated that his students do not show greater interest in comparison to a non-CLIL English class (Figure 8).

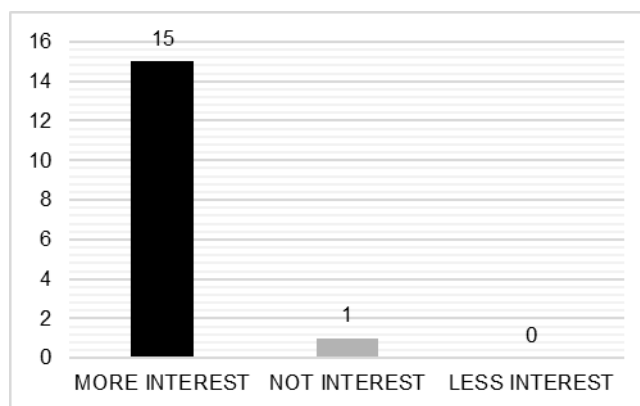


Figure 8. Interest in the students (CLIL vs non-CLIL).

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And for the final section, CLIL experiences in the daily didactic process (questions 15 to 20), the results were as follows:

We asked the English teachers if they had received or not training in CLIL during all their years of experience (Q15) and 10 (62.50%) answered no, while 6 (37.50%) said yes (Figure 9).

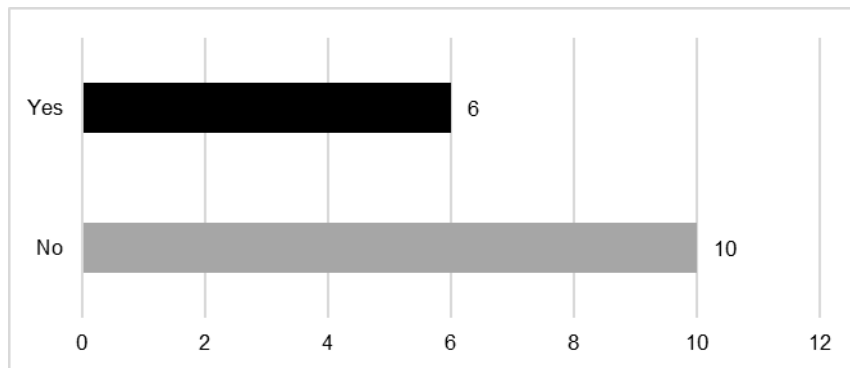


Figure 9. Have had CLIL training.

Teachers were asked whether they considered CLIL an advanced teaching approach or not (Q15). Fourteen participants (87,50%) answered affirmatively and only two (12,50%) answered negatively (Figure 10).

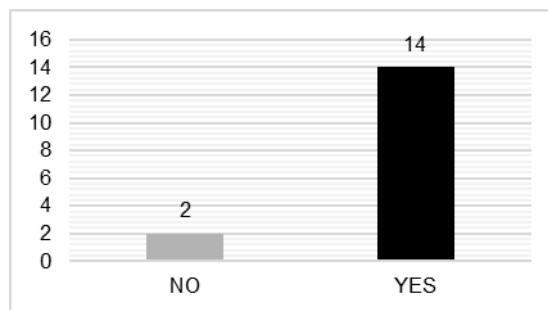


Figure 10. CLIL is an advanced teaching approach.

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As it has been mentioned in this paper, CLIL is the teaching of contents of different subjects by means of a foreign language (in this case English). In this sense, in question 16, the public teachers who participated in our work and affirmed to apply this method in their classes mentioned that they prefer to use CLIL to teach contents of Language and Literature (26.67%), Sciences (23.33%), and Social Studies (23.33%). To a lesser extent, they do so with Mathematics (13.33%) and other subjects (13.33%) (Figure 11).

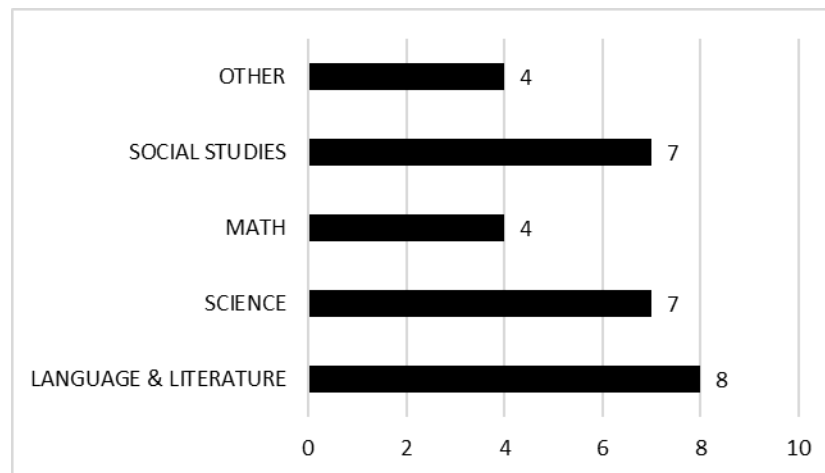


Figure 11. Subjects preferred to teach with CLIL.

When interacting with their students in the classroom (Q18), six (37.50%) of the English teachers perceived that interaction is very satisfactory; eight (50%) satisfactory, and two (12.50%) less satisfactory. (Figure 12).

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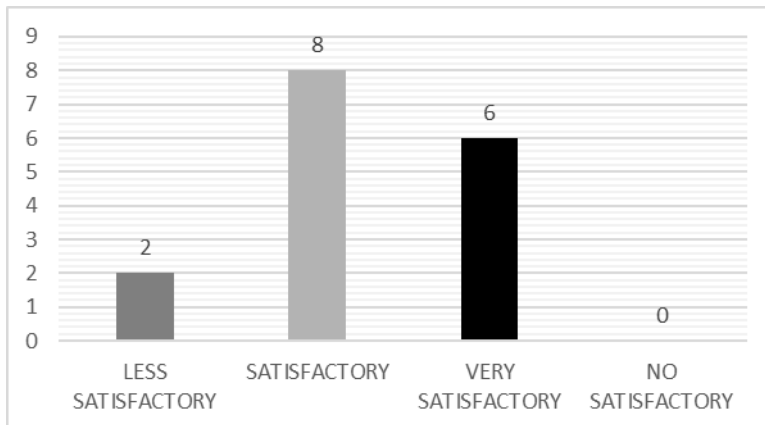


Figure 12. Your experience applying CLIL in the classrooms.

The first open question of the survey (Q19) sought to know the opinion of the respondents about the National Curriculum of English teaching and the ways in which CLIL could be better applied. The words that appear the most in the responses of our participants are shown in Figure 13. Teachers perceptions of the national curriculum and CLIL. With these words, we structured a sentence that summarizes the main idea derived from the answers obtained: The English National Curriculum is designed to allow the student to work with contents and topics of reality and develop new and different skills with the use of CLIL.

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Figure 13. Teachers perceptions of the national curriculum and CLIL.

Question 20, contained two elements to analyze: First, what is the most appropriate methodology to achieve better learning in English? and, second, the justification and explanation of the answer.

CLIL was the most voted methodology above other options with seven (include percentage) teachers in favor. One of them (6.25%) chose the immersion method, two (12.50%) the Communicative Approach, one (6.25%) Biography-Based Instruction and one (6.25%) the Grammar Translation Method. Four teachers (25%) did not specify a methodology, but pointed out that it should be one that uses active methodologies, interactive teaching resources (ICT) such as video games and songs, and that is adapted to the learning levels and knowledge of the learners (Figure 14).

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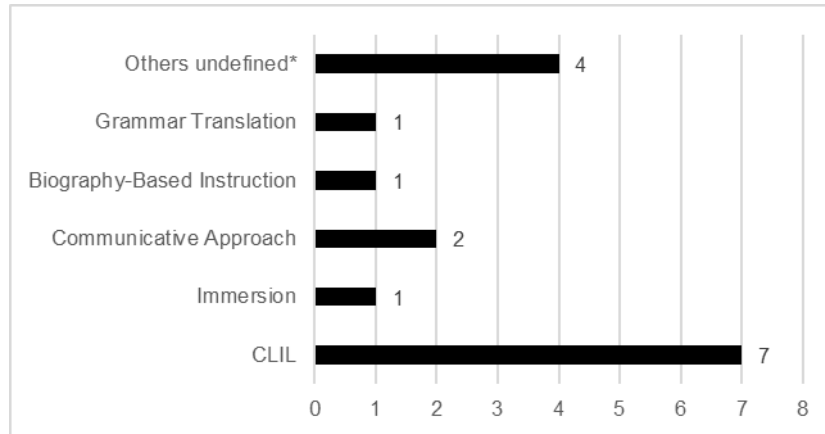


Figure 14. The best methodology for English teaching.

*Note: The “Other undefined” item groups approaches, activities, and resources that any methodology should use.

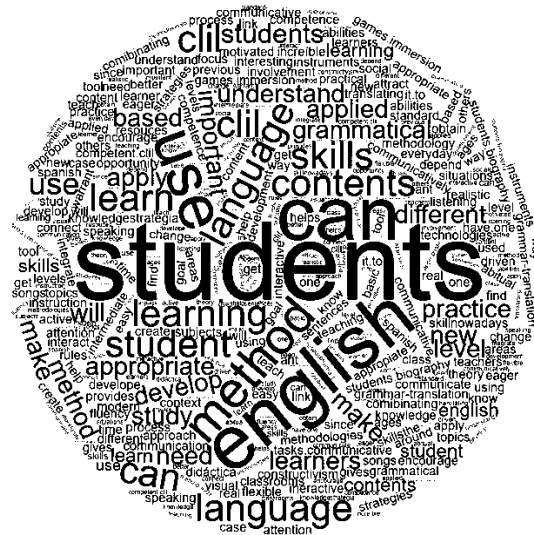


Figure 15. The best method for teaching English, and why.

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Following the same mechanics as for the previous question, we generated a cloud of words to show the most recurrent terms among the answers given by our respondents to the why section of question 20.

In Figure 15, the most repeated terms can be seen. As a way to summarize the participants' responses, we proposed this idea: Students can use the CLIL method to learn the English language with content and skills.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Barely more than half of the English teachers in public institutions in the province of El Oro know about the CLIL methodology, and not all of them apply it in their classes which could be due to the low level of preparation of teachers. Even though most of them have an undergraduate degree in teaching English, there are teachers who do not have an undergraduate or graduate degree in the field.

The study shows that the preparation around CLIL of English teachers in the public institutions in the province of El Oro is inadequate despite the fact that the curriculum establishes it as a methodology for teaching English in the country. This seems to be a coincidental situation in other places where this methodology has recently been implemented as shown in the work of (Yavuz et al. 2020).

A point to highlight and that is linked to these results is the lack of teacher in the use of this methodology. Slightly more than half acknowledge having received some type of training on CLIL by the Ministry of Education, which coincides with those who know CLIL indicated in the first paragraph of this section.

Teachers who apply CLIL in their classes have perceived that students show more interest in working under this modality. These teachers consider that the approach is innovative and useful to achieve better learning as (McDougald, 2015) also presents in a similar work. In fact, English teachers show a high level of satisfaction (between satisfactory and very satisfactory) using CLIL in their teaching sessions.

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Teachers use CLIL with different subjects; however, it is notable, there is a slight inclination to leave aside the contents of Mathematics, compared to those that are covered in Language and Literature, Social Studies and Natural Sciences.

The CLIL approach, according to the participants, could be the best option for teaching the English language, allowing learning, reflecting, and evaluating the contents of subjects from different angles. This finding agrees with what was proposed by (Calderón-Dávila, 2019) in his study and consolidates the proposal of the Ministry of Education by including CLIL in the National Curriculum. However, it would be convenient to include additional didactic elements such as better adapted materials, collaborative work strategies, ICT tools, etc. to facilitate an even greater learning dynamic, in addition to being precise, as it is recommended by (McDougald, 2015).

Limitations and recommendations

The completion of this study presented some difficulties associated with the limited access to participants and the lack of collaboration from more teachers to answer the survey. For these reasons, the generalization of results may not be appropriate as it is not a significant sample. The time available to carry out all the necessary procedures was also a limitation.

The first and undisputed recommendation is for the Ministry of Education, which unfortunately has not strengthened the training of English teachers in the knowledge and correct use of the CLIL approach. Since training is not exclusive to the Ministry, we also address the recommendation to educational institutions since they all have pedagogical departments that must address teachers' training needs in all areas, including EFL (English as a Foreign Language). Teachers, who due to professional convictions, should also look for self-training spaces that improve their learning and subsequent application of CLIL.

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Finally, we suggest carrying out a more exhaustive and complete study with more English teachers of the public education of the province of El Oro to validate the results obtained in our study by observing classes or conducting in-depth interviews.

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