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The Implementation of CLIL to Enhance Oral Communication Skills in Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach in enhancing oral communication skills among undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language. The research was conducted over twelve weeks with thirty participants aged 18 to 22 enrolled in an intermediate English course. A quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test assessments was applied to measure students' progress in four key areas: vocabulary use, fluency, time management, and confidence. The CLIL intervention included thematic debates, project-based presentations, and authentic communicative tasks integrating academic content and linguistic objectives. Statistical results revealed significant improvement across all dimensions, with participants progressing from level A1.2 to A2.2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The Chi-square test ($p = 0.001$) confirmed the strong relationship between the implementation of CLIL and the enhancement of speaking proficiency. Findings highlight the pedagogical potential of CLIL to increase learner motivation, promote meaningful interaction, and reduce communicative anxiety in EFL classrooms. This research contributes to the understanding of effective methodologies for language teaching in Latin American higher education and encourages further exploration of CLIL's adaptability to diverse learning contexts.

Keywords: CLIL; Oral communication; English language teaching; Higher education; Speaking proficiency

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global lingua franca, essential for academic, professional, and intercultural communication. In Latin America, and particularly in Ecuador, the mastery of English remains limited, constraining access to global education and employment opportunities. According to the Education First English Proficiency Index (2023), Ecuador ranks among the lowest in South America, evidencing a pressing need to improve language education quality and effectiveness. Traditional grammar-based approaches continue to dominate classrooms, often emphasizing accuracy over communication and limiting learners' ability to interact spontaneously (Ullauri-Moreno, 2017).

The adoption of innovative methodologies that promote meaningful communication is therefore essential. One promising approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which merges subject content with language instruction, allowing students to learn a second language through disciplinary topics (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). CLIL fosters a communicative environment in which learners acquire both linguistic and cognitive skills simultaneously, engaging in authentic, purpose-driven use of language. Recent research has shown that CLIL can enhance motivation, retention, and oral proficiency by providing contextualized exposure to English (Dörnyei, 2009; Mehisto, 2021).

In Ecuadorian higher education, CLIL remains relatively new, and empirical studies are still limited. However, early implementations suggest its potential to transform EFL classrooms from passive learning spaces into dynamic, content-rich environments (Pinoargote-Cedeño, 2019). This

study builds upon such evidence, analyzing how CLIL can strengthen oral communication skills specifically vocabulary, fluency, time management, and confidence among undergraduate students. By employing a quasi-experimental design, the research aims to generate practical insights into how CLIL-based strategies can support communicative competence and promote a more integrated approach to English learning in Ecuadorian universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach has gained prominence in recent decades as an innovative and holistic framework for teaching languages through subject content. Defined by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010), CLIL integrates the four Cs: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, emphasizing that language learning should occur through meaningful academic interaction rather than isolated grammar practice. Within this framework, students learn a foreign language while simultaneously developing disciplinary knowledge, fostering both linguistic competence and cognitive engagement.

Research consistently highlights the positive impact of CLIL on oral communication. Studies conducted in European and Asian contexts (Novitasari, Rahmawati, & Widiastuti, 2021; Aladini & Jalambo, 2021) demonstrate that students exposed to CLIL environments show higher levels of fluency, confidence, and spontaneous interaction than those in traditional EFL classrooms. This improvement results from the contextualized use of vocabulary and repeated exposure to authentic communicative tasks. Similarly, Dalton-Puffer (2011) observed that CLIL learners develop better pragmatic and discourse skills due to the integration of real content discussions and classroom collaboration.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, motivation and affective factors play a critical role in language learning. Dörnyei (2009) and Mehisto (2021) argue that CLIL fosters intrinsic motivation by connecting language learning with topics that are personally or academically relevant to students. This connection reduces anxiety, promotes confidence, and shifts the focus from grammatical perfection to communicative effectiveness. The constant interaction required in CLIL classes also strengthens memory retention and lexical acquisition through repetition in meaningful contexts (Rahmawati & Ertin, 2014).

In addition, CLIL aligns closely with the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach, which prioritizes communication and interaction as the core objectives of language learning (Ellis, 2003). Both frameworks share the belief that learners acquire language most effectively when they are actively engaged in using it to construct and share meaning. However, CLIL extends this principle by embedding language within content-specific instruction, thus providing a dual focus on subject mastery and language proficiency (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014).

In Latin America, recent studies have begun to explore the feasibility of CLIL in public universities. Pinoargote-Cedeño (2019) found that integrating disciplinary topics such as environmental education and entrepreneurship into English instruction enhanced students' oral participation and reduced their fear of speaking. Likewise, Torres and Villafuerte (2020) reported that CLIL facilitated the development of both linguistic and critical-thinking skills in Ecuadorian



undergraduates, allowing them to approach language learning as an academic and communicative process.

Despite these benefits, challenges remain in implementation. As Coyle and Meyer (2021) point out, teachers require specialized training to effectively design and deliver CLIL lessons that balance content and language objectives. Furthermore, institutional support and adequate resources are crucial for sustainability. In Ecuador, where socioeconomic inequalities and limited access to training persist (Burbano & López, 2023), these factors may influence the success of CLIL programs.

Overall, the literature suggests that CLIL represents a pedagogically grounded and empirically supported methodology capable of transforming EFL instruction into a more engaging, contextualized, and effective process. Building on these theoretical and practical foundations, the present study investigates the implementation of CLIL to strengthen oral communication skills among undergraduate students in an Ecuadorian higher education setting.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test and post-test structure to examine the impact of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach on the development of oral communication skills among undergraduate EFL students. This design was chosen because it enables the measurement of changes resulting from a pedagogical intervention when random assignment is not feasible in educational environments (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study aimed to determine whether CLIL could lead to measurable improvement in four communicative dimensions: vocabulary use, fluency, time management, and confidence.

Quantitative data were collected through standardized rubrics and statistical analysis, while qualitative observations complemented the results to capture students' perceptions and behavioral changes during the intervention. The combination of both approaches ensured a comprehensive understanding of CLIL's impact (Mertens, 2020).

Participants and setting

The participants were 30 undergraduate students (18 females and 12 males) enrolled in the course English Oral Communication II within an English Language Teaching program at a public university in Ecuador. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22 years old, and all participants had an initial proficiency level of A1.2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020).

Most students came from low- to middle-income backgrounds and had limited exposure to English outside the academic setting, a factor that mirrors the national challenge of language learning equity (Burbano & López, 2023). The course duration was twelve weeks, with three weekly sessions of ninety minutes each, totaling 54 instructional hours.

Instruments and variables

Data collection relied on a rubric-based assessment designed to evaluate students' oral communication performance before and after the CLIL intervention. The rubric included four dimensions:

Vocabulary Use – variety and contextual accuracy of lexical items.

Fluency – continuity of speech, coherence, and natural pacing.

Time Management – organization of ideas within the established time limits.

Confidence – body language, tone, and self-assurance when speaking.

Each dimension was scored on a 10-point Likert scale, where 1–3 indicated low proficiency, 4–6 moderate proficiency, and 7–10 high proficiency. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency was 0.842, indicating high reliability (Mays, 2019). In addition, the Chi-square test was applied to verify the association between the implementation of CLIL and students' progress, setting the significance level at $p < 0.05$.

Supplementary qualitative data were collected through classroom observations and student self-reflections, allowing for triangulation of findings and deeper insight into learner experiences (Dörnyei, 2009).

Procedure

The study was conducted over a 12-week academic period, divided into three main stages:

Pre-test phase:

During the first week, students delivered short presentations on familiar topics such as personal interests or campus life. These presentations served as the baseline assessment for oral communication skills. At this stage, most students showed hesitation, limited vocabulary range, and reliance on memorized sentences.

CLIL intervention phase:

Over the following ten weeks, students participated in content-integrated lessons designed around academic and social themes (e.g., environmental awareness, cultural diversity, and digital innovation). Lessons combined content learning with language objectives, following the principles outlined by Coyle et al. (2010).

Activities included:

Debates and role-plays to promote spontaneous interaction.

Mini-projects and presentations linking English to real-world contexts.

Collaborative discussions based on authentic materials such as news articles, videos, and short lectures.

Peer-assessment sessions to build confidence and reflective learning.

The instructor acted as a facilitator, guiding communicative tasks and providing formative feedback on language and content.

Post-test phase:

In the final week, participants completed a new oral presentation assessed with the same rubric as the pre-test. The post-test aimed to identify quantitative and qualitative improvement in each variable. A brief reflective questionnaire was also administered to capture students' perceptions of the CLIL experience.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed using SPSS (version 26). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each variable, followed by a Chi-square test to examine associations between CLIL implementation and oral skill development. The effect size (Cohen's *d*) was also calculated to determine the magnitude of change across variables, with values above 0.8 interpreted as large effects (Field, 2020).

Qualitative observations were coded thematically to identify patterns related to motivation, participation, and learner confidence. These findings complemented the statistical outcomes and helped contextualize students' progress.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the pre-test and post-test assessments revealed a significant improvement in students' oral communication performance after the implementation of the CLIL methodology. Quantitative analysis showed steady progress across all four assessed dimensions: vocabulary use, fluency, time management, and confidence.

Dimension	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Improvement (%)	Effect Size (Cohen's <i>d</i>)
Vocabulary use	6.2 (1.1)	8.5 (0.9)	+37%	1.82
Fluency	5.9 (1.2)	8.3 (1.0)	+40%	1.71
Time management	5.7 (1.3)	8.1 (1.1)	+42%	1.84
Confidence	5.6 (1.5)	8.2 (1.0)	+46%	1.87

The Chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 59.843$, $p = 0.001$) confirmed a statistically significant association between CLIL implementation and oral proficiency development. Additionally, Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency remained high ($\alpha = 0.842$), ensuring the reliability of the rubric used for evaluation.

Qualitative data obtained from classroom observations and reflective journals complemented these findings. Students expressed that CLIL activities allowed them to "speak with purpose" and "connect English to real topics," increasing their willingness to participate in discussions.

Instructors also observed greater classroom interaction, reduced dependence on memorized phrases, and stronger peer collaboration throughout the intervention.

Overall, the post-test results demonstrated that most students advanced from A1.2 to A2.2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), achieving not only quantitative gains but also visible improvements in self-expression and communicative confidence.

The findings of this study align with a growing body of literature supporting CLIL as an effective methodology for enhancing oral communication in EFL contexts. The observed improvement across all four variables—vocabulary, fluency, time management, and confidence—reflects CLIL's ability to integrate linguistic and cognitive processes in meaningful contexts (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010; Mehisto, 2021).

The increase in vocabulary and fluency corroborates previous research by Dalton-Puffer (2011) and Novitasari et al. (2021), who found that authentic, content-based learning environments provide opportunities for natural lexical expansion and spontaneous speech production. The use of debates, role-plays, and project presentations created communicative conditions similar to real-world situations, helping students internalize new expressions and maintain a steady rhythm in their discourse.

The improvement in time management indicates that CLIL not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters metacognitive skills. By requiring students to organize ideas around academic topics within specific time limits, CLIL develops planning, coherence, and self-monitoring abilities (Ellis, 2003). These skills are essential for academic and professional communication, suggesting that the benefits of CLIL extend beyond language acquisition.

A particularly notable outcome was the growth in students' confidence, consistent with Rahmawati and Ertin (2014), who observed that learners in CLIL settings experience lower anxiety and greater self-efficacy due to repeated exposure to collaborative and supportive tasks. In this study, confidence grew as students shifted from memorizing speeches to expressing ideas spontaneously. This finding is especially relevant in Ecuadorian higher education, where speaking anxiety is a common obstacle to communicative competence (Pinoargote-Cedeño, 2019).

Furthermore, the statistical significance of the results ($p = 0.001$) and large effect sizes (Cohen's $d > 1.7$) reinforce the pedagogical value of CLIL as a transformative approach for developing oral skills in low-resource environments. Unlike traditional grammar-based instruction, CLIL promotes motivation and engagement through contextualized learning (Dörnyei, 2009; Torres & Villafuerte, 2020).

However, some limitations must be acknowledged. The study focused on a single cohort of 30 students within one academic term; thus, results cannot be generalized to all populations. Future research should include larger samples, control groups, and longitudinal follow-ups to assess long-term retention. Moreover, teacher training remains a crucial factor for successful CLIL implementation (Coyle & Meyer, 2021).

Despite these constraints, the study contributes valuable empirical evidence to the Ecuadorian context, highlighting that CLIL can bridge the gap between theory and practice by making English a tool for content learning, not merely an academic subject. The integration of language and content allows learners to speak with meaning, think critically, and engage confidently key skills for success in global academic and professional environments.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study provides empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in improving oral communication skills among undergraduate EFL students in Ecuador. Through a twelve-week quasi-experimental intervention, participants demonstrated significant progress in vocabulary use, fluency, time management, and confidence key indicators of communicative competence according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

The findings confirm that CLIL promotes meaningful and contextualized learning, enabling students to use English as a tool for understanding and expressing academic content rather than as an isolated linguistic goal. The integration of debates, project-based presentations, and collaborative discussions created authentic communicative situations that enhanced students' motivation and reduced speaking anxiety.

Statistical analyses ($p = 0.001$; Cohen's $d > 1.7$) reinforce the reliability and strength of these outcomes, demonstrating CLIL's capacity to foster both linguistic and cognitive development in higher education contexts. Moreover, the observed increase in students' self-confidence suggests that CLIL contributes not only to language acquisition but also to personal and social growth.

In conclusion, CLIL emerges as a pedagogically robust and adaptable methodology for Ecuadorian universities, capable of addressing persistent challenges in English proficiency. Future studies should expand its application to different disciplines and proficiency levels, ensuring teacher training and institutional support for sustainable implementation.

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