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## Promoting reading skills in CLIL

## Fomento de la lectura en AICLE

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### Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been largely implemented in our educational institutions through different approaches. CLIL can encompass a wide variety of teaching resources but this new framework should constitute an innovative perspective to overcome the restraints of traditional school curricula in the teaching of foreign languages. Promoting reading skills comprehension is also considered essential in the CLIL approach (Wolff, 2005). However, despite its importance, few studies have focused their attention on the reading skills of CLIL in Spain (Pérez Cañado, 2012). The starting point of this study remarks the concept of reading as a complex process which involves different skills and strategies, also reinforced by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages as a key element in the learning process. The first part of this article presents a general framework of CLIL as a methodological approach followed by an overview of the reading skill and its main characteristics and potentiality in the classroom. The second part of the article provides guidelines regarding the strategies and types of reading activities that may help students become proficient readers.

### Keywords:

CLIL, reading skills, proposals.

### Resumen

El aprendizaje integrado de contenido y lenguas extranjeras (AICLE) ha sido ampliamente implementado en nuestras instituciones educativas a través de diferentes enfoques. AICLE puede incluir una gran variedad de recursos de enseñanza pero este nuevo marco debe implicar una perspectiva innovadora que supere las restricciones del currículum tradicional. La lectura es un proceso complejo que implica diferentes habilidades y estrategias. En el Marco Común Europeo de Referencia, está considerada como elemento clave en el proceso de aprendizaje de una lengua. Fomentar la comprensión lectora es también esencial en el enfoque AICLE (Wolff, 2005). Aunque la lectura ha sido considerada como una de las habilidades más importantes en la metodología AICLE, pocos estudios han centrado su atención en los resultados de la lectura en AICLE (Pérez Cañado, 2012). La primera parte de este artículo presenta un marco teórico general sobre la lectura en AICLE destacando sus principales características, potencial y ventajas en el aula. La segunda parte del artículo ofrece una serie de directrices para una implementación efectiva de actividades de lectura en los programas AICLE a través de diferentes ejemplos.

### Palabras clave:

AICLE, habilidades lectoras, propuestas.

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## 1. Introduction

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been largely implemented in the Spanish educational institutions through different approaches<sup>1</sup>. Spain has embraced CLIL practice and research through diverse models given the decentralization of its educational system. As Fernández Fontecha points out: “Spain is a mixture of heterogeneous language situations that lead to different ways of understanding and managing L2 education” (2009, p. 4). This particular situation of bilingual and monolingual communities has especially favoured the interdisciplinary approaches or ‘globalized teaching’ (Dafouz and Guerrini, 2009; Ruiz de Zarobe and Jimenez, 2009).

CLIL can encompass a wide variety of teaching resources but this framework should constitute an innovative perspective to overcome the restraints of traditional school curricula in the teaching of foreign languages. Early experimentations in CLIL provided interesting class implementations by questioning the actual effectiveness of the teaching-learning process and the role of the teacher as a guide. This new educational framework has turned especially useful by offering innovative resources and fostering communicative activities in culturally responsible proposals. A recent interest on self-analysis and self-evaluation has also emerged from the different experiences held in Spanish schools. The use of portfolios along with the CEFR descriptors has increased their presence in classrooms to foster autonomy in language learners. However, the nexus between CLIL and reading has been scarcely explored.

## 2. Reading in a foreign language: general considerations

There is a general agreement on the fact that reading is a necessary tool for successful second-language learning. Yet, the controversy arises on a clear distinction between first and second-language reading. For example, Alderson and Urquhart (quoted in Hellekjær, 2005, p. 61) comment the following: “we do not, and indeed find it difficult to, draw a clear distinction between first and foreign language reading- in fact, it is not clear to what extent reading in a foreign language is different from reading in a first language”. Still there are others who think that these reading processes are different (Alderson, 1984; Bernhardt, 2011; Bernhardt, 1991; Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2004).

These scholars distinguish several factors influencing the reading process in a foreign language. Firstly, the transfer between the L1 and the L2 is a factor that can enable or impel the students L2 reading comprehension. As Skogen (2013, p. 27) states, the influence of transfer is “often seen in relation to two conflicting hypothesis, regarding the question of

whether foreign language reading is a reading problem or a language problem". On the one hand, the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis emphasizes language as the key factor in reading activities, since it states that "in order to read in a second language, a level of second language linguistic ability must first be achieved" (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995, p. 17). According to this theory, the success of reading comprehension depends on the student's knowledge of the foreign language; furthermore, a lack of foreign language linguistics knowledge hinders the first language reading knowledge to transfer (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995). On the other hand, the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis implies that "reading performance in a second language is largely shared with reading ability in a first language" (Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995, p. 17). According to this hypothesis, reading skills are transferable from one language to another.

Another factor that may influence the reading comprehension in the foreign language focuses on the importance of working with vocabulary and exposing students to challenging texts in order to develop reading proficiency and increase motivation. Bråten (2007), Bernhardt (2011) or Grabe (2009) agree on the importance of vocabulary for developing L2 reading skills. Yet, when a student has to deal with unfamiliar words, he /she could face difficulties in reading and understanding a text. As Skogen (2013, p. 28) states, "recognizing words in the lower-level processing helps enable fluent reading. Stopping up at unfamiliar words, and failing to recognize them, can lead to the reader interrupting the reading process, and thus hinder fluent reading". As we can see, students should be taught learning strategies in order to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary and to develop their L2 reading. Teachers can enhance students' vocabulary knowledge by presenting new vocabulary or focusing on the importance of context to grasp general meaning (Grabe, 2009; Hellekjær, 2005).

Another important factor influencing reading process in a foreign language is reader's background knowledge. According to Bernhardt (2011), the first-language cultural and linguistic knowledge base is a major contributing factor of the reconstruction of a second-language text. This means that what readers know about a particular topic can condition how much they extract from a text. Nevertheless, Koda (2004) argues that it is difficult to determine whether those who know more read better, or whether those who read better know more.

When learning to read in a foreign language, students should be provided with different reading strategies in order to become proficient readers. Although the types of activities involving reading in the traditional foreign language classroom are similar to those in the CLIL classroom, attention is specially paid to content in the CLIL approach, which is also integrated with a language. Thus, the reading process and purpose in CLIL is different.

### 3. Reading as a key element in the CLIL approach

Promoting reading comprehension is essential in the CLIL approach (Wolff, 2005, p. 16), since it facilitates access to language and contents. In recent years, Spanish education legislation has been promoting the importance of reading activities in all educational levels through different laws and regulations. The Organic Law 2/2006 from May 3 (modified by the Organic Law 8/2013, December 9) states that reading comprehension must be treated and developed in all the educational areas and levels, since it conditions the quality of education. In the Plan aimed at promoting reading skills designed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, reading is considered an important tool for the development of a student's personality and socialising skills. In Andalusia, as described in the Instructions given on July 24, 2013, the syllabi of all school subjects must include activities to foster reading comprehension. In Primary Schools, there must be at least one teaching session (one hour) devoted to reading everyday; meanwhile in the Compulsory Secondary Educational institutions all subjects (both from linguistic and non-linguistic areas) must include activities to develop reading skills weekly. Moreover, all the public Andalusian schools must have a reading Plan aimed at the promotion of the reading skills.

The CIL document, which stands for *Curriculum Integrado de las Lenguas* (integrated language curriculum), and which is compulsory for all bilingual educational institutions, aims at fostering reading skills too. The CIL document firmly stands "by the centrality of texts, the only possible way for language to be totally meaningful, and going beyond the sentence, a language unit without social value or meaning." (Lorenzo, 2010, p. 9).

The commitment of the Spanish education legislations to promote reading skills seems clear and all public educational institutions comply with the regulations mentioned. Nevertheless, when we compare the performance of the Spanish students in reading comprehension with the ones from other countries, the results are not as good as expected. There are several studies carried out by private and official institutions which point out the low levels of reading comprehension. For example, the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) report of OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), whose purpose is to assess the competencies of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science every three years, show that Spanish students have serious problems in reading comprehension. According to PISA report, the average score of the Spanish pupils in the reading comprehension was 488 points and this is 8 points below the average of other countries. Spain occupies number 23 of the 34 OECD countries.

As for the reading comprehension in English as a foreign language, some scholars point out the difficulty of Spanish students when dealing with texts in this language (Sánchez Ruiz, 2011; García Laborda, 2012). Reading tasks have caused a lot of problems for the

students in the official exams of different institutions, such as the Official Schools of Languages or Cambridge. Trinity College London introduced a new format in ISE (Integrated Skills in English) testing last year, including reading tasks in all the levels. The organisers and examiners of this institution have warned teachers about the “added difficulty” the new test format have for the Spanish learners.

Although reading has been promoted by the Spanish Educational Legislation and it has been analysed by different experts, no magic formula to the good efficient reading has been found yet (Khaki, 2014, p. 188). In Spain, the foreign language classroom is often oriented to vocabulary and grammar acquisition (García Laborda et al, 2012), meanwhile the common reading CLIL classroom scenario is still to read and translate the text into the students’ mother tongue, without answering questions about the text. As Kaplan (2002) argues, this translation technique can have a purpose in reading, but it is nonetheless a skill outside the standard reading process. Moreover, such reading process is more language than content oriented; therefore the main objective of the CLIL approach is not fulfilled.

Although reading strategies play an important role in all learning contexts, in CLIL they decide on the students’ success or failure. A specific CLIL methodology has to take this into account, thus the promotion of reading strategies plays an important role in all methodological discussions (Wolff, 2005). In this study, we focus on main reading strategies and activities to implement in the CLIL classroom.

### 3.1. Implementing reading in CLIL: approaches, activities and websites

According to Hillocks (1987, p. 71) “reading texts connected with particular brand of knowledge provides the learner with a lot of information”. In accordance with Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989), reading texts created for a purpose other than language teaching can increase the students’ level of reading proficiency in English since they are more challenging to the students As Papaja (2013, p. 37) observes, “in a CLIL classroom reading is extremely important because it activates the CLIL learners’ world and language knowledge and helps them to remember new content information”. Hellekjær (1996) states that CLIL approach helps students train their reading skills. This is because “the students will get stuck when trying to read textbooks in their CLIL subjects if they read them the same way they read their textbook in their English subject” (Skogen, 2013, p. 32). This implies the necessity and at the same time the opportunity of providing students different reading ways and strategies.

Scholars argue on the best and most effective reading ways for students. Some specialists, such as Anderson and Pearson (1984) or Aebbersold and Field (1997), among others, favour back bottom-up methodology. In this methodology, reading takes place by matching sounds and letters and the students are taught to focus on language knowledge, vocabulary and text structure. Besides, there are other scholars (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1982) who propose top-down processing. This approach focuses on the prior knowledge of the reader. Yet, some experts (Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Kintsch, 2005) state that an interactive approach is more effective. It involves both bottom-up and top-down processing and the reader can choose which one to use depending on the given situation.

However, as Khaki (2014, p. 187) observes more recently, “approaches to the teaching of reading have focused on the importance of acquiring those strategies that help students become strategic readers”, since the process of reading comprehension is dynamic and strategic. Reading strategy use is described “as conscious and systematic reading adjusted to the text and the goal of the reading” (Skogen, 2013, p. 23). O’Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) define reading learning strategies as “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information”.

Reading strategies have been largely studied previously (MacIntyre, 1994; McDonough, 1999; Anderson, 2003; Macaro, 2006). Scholars agree on pointing out that strategic readers become more efficient, creative and flexible, thus they acquire language and content more easily. Furthermore, the teachers should not only teach the reading strategies but also practise and use them in every lesson to develop the reading skills. Different strategies have been distinguished as the most important. Brown and Palincsar (1984) introduced four main reading strategies in the reading process: summarising, questioning, predicting and clarifying. However, according to Khaki (2014, p. 188), “two of the most useful strategies are those in which the student summarizes orally what he has read about a passage or answers questions about the passage”. Nevertheless, the teacher should know and develop other strategies in order to foster strategic reading. These are: previewing a text, scanning, skimming, predicting the upcoming information, summarising, guessing the meaning of unknown words, generating questions about the text, and others (Grabe and Stoller, 2001). Iannou and Pavlos (2011, p. 91) concentrate specifically on scanning as a valuable reading technique that encourages students to focus on the information they are looking for without being distracted by unknown words. Anmarkrud and Refsahl (2010) structure the development of reading strategies at four levels:

First, the student observes and copies, then he uses strategies together with someone (a teacher or a fellow student), then the student uses strategies independently but with guidance from a teacher, before he in the end is able to use several reading strategies independently. In other words, for students to develop their reading strategy use, teachers have to focus explicitly on teaching strategies (qtd in Skogen, 2013, p. 90)

When choosing reading activities a teacher should bear in mind that the content of the reading tasks is more significant and therefore can involve students more in the CLIL classroom. So, two types of reading approach are mainly introduced in the CLIL setting: intensive and extensive reading.

On the one hand, intensive reading “is connected with a more in-depth study and analysis of a relatively limited amount of text” (Dakowska, 2005, p. 206). As Papaja mentions, intensive reading “can be very useful to the CLIL learners due to the fact that comprehension process become more active as language and content become more intensive” (2014, p. 39). Examples of these reading activities are reading for specific information, reading for general orientations, detailed understanding, reading for pleasure, among others.

On the other hand, extensive reading “serves as communicative experience providing language input in the written form” (Dakowska, 2005, p. 206). It is usually defined as reading for information and pleasure, as well as for general, overall meaning. According to Papaja, it is “a significant source of cultural and factual knowledge and incidental vocabulary acquisition” (2014, p. 37). Extensive reading has been largely explored by scholars (Bamford and Day, 1998 and 2004; Bell, 1998). It was identified as one of the easiest ways of pedagogically implementing the input-rich learning environment. Research has reported beneficial effects of extensive reading on several aspects of L2 ability; for example, reading comprehension and reading speed (Bell, 2001), vocabulary (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Horst, 2005; Pigada and Schmitt, 2006), grammar (Yang, 2001), reading and writing (Hafiz and Tudor, 1989), writing (Tsang, 1996), a collection of disparate abilities/skills (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983), and general L2 proficiency (Mason and Krashen, 1997).

The online Extensive Reading Foundation<sup>2</sup> provides teachers and reading scholars with tips, benefits and advantages of using extensive reading in the foreign language classroom and illustrates its use of a variety of activities. Bamford and Day (2004) also offer a large variety of reading activities and lesson plans with tips for the implementation of extensive reading in the language classrooms.

Let us summarise the main objectives of the implementation of extensive reading in the L2 classroom. It is used mostly:

- to increase student confidence and motivation in their English reading ability
- to increase their reading fluency and to decrease dependence on word by word comprehension
- to identify and record key points in a narrative
- to write and discuss in English their own ideas and opinions about what has been read, and their own reading progress

- to foster a clear and constant sense of personal development and success in reading English.

Accordingly, the CLIL teacher should encourage the CLIL students to do extensive reading at home, process the information and prepare some presentations in class based on their reading. When we introduce these reading activities we have to bear in mind that our objective is to expand content knowledge.

Due to the lack of existing materials aimed at the promotion of reading skills, CLIL teachers have to search for the texts on their own. The Internet provides a great variety of resources for both types of reading approaches (intensive and extensive). Here some of the useful WebPages will be commented. *Breaking News English site*<sup>3</sup> offers a large range of free downloadable lessons with texts based on stories which are currently in the news. There are seven levels (from elementary to advanced), thus these texts can be used in primary, secondary and higher education institutions. The lessons include reading activities focused on both language and contents learning and emphasise the development of different language skills (reading, listening, writing speaking, grammar and vocabulary). Another useful webpage with newspaper articles based on current news is *Newsademic site*<sup>4</sup>, which has both American and British editions. Teachers can subscribe to the page and get free sample articles every fortnight. Every article is provided with comprehension questions and a crossword. When using the texts from these webpages teachers have to create their own activities to foster further content integrated learning. For higher education CLIL students, the following sites worth mentioning: *Breaking Science News*<sup>5</sup> (it deals with astronomy, archaeology, palaeontology, health, physics, space exploration, among other related topics), *Money Talks News* and *Money Week* (they offer analysis of the financial news, with practical investment and money saving advice), among others. These pages offer articles on specific topics but they do not provide reading activities. At tertiary level, it is worth mentioning that the *University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis*<sup>6</sup> webpage provides science related activities and reading resources to improve college students' proficiency in scientific English.

## 4. Conclusions

Fostering reading is essential and very beneficial for the CLIL approach. Reading in CLIL provides students with other text types different from the ones that they are used to in their regular EFL classroom. It forces students to read in a way different from the traditional one, and forces them to use reading strategies. This is important to ensure that students are able to deal with the reading material presented in their CLIL subjects. Reading acti-



vities bring benefits to the learner “in both content learning and language learning processes” (Loranc-Paszyk, 2009, p. 47). As for language gains, processing information helps students develop overall target language competence.

Finding texts in CLIL can be challenging for the teacher. He / she has to take into account the language level, contents of the subject, word density and text difficulty. Finding literature that matches all these aspects is important so that students can benefit from having a CLIL subject, acquiring both language and content.

Acknowledging that in Spain the textbooks designed for CLIL subjects barely include reading activities, the teacher must use other sources to find texts appropriate to the particular subject and level. The Internet offers a variety of texts on particular topics (for content learning) but these must be adapted to a particular CLIL classroom, keeping in mind the students and the objectives.

Another difficulty for a successful implementation of reading in the CLIL classroom involves teacher training. The CLIL teachers have to be proficient and strategic readers. Only this way they can teach their student how to read. As Wolff (2012, p. 107) and Marsh (2013, p. 135) underscore, “CLIL teacher education, if taken seriously, constitutes a fundamental part of all teacher education, that every teacher should be educated, in fact, as a CLIL teacher.” A pan-European study “has recently diagnosed the most pressing needs of both pre- and in-service teachers, which cluster around linguistic and intercultural competence, the theoretical underpinnings of CLIL, materials and resources, student-centered methodologies, and ongoing professional development” (Pérez Cañado, 2012, p. 7). Thus, official teacher training institutions should provide teachers with support in both training courses aimed at the fostering of reading skills and strategies for CLIL teachers, as well as providing reading materials for CLIL method.

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1 See Lasagabaster, D. and Y. Ruiz de Zarobe. 2010. CLIL in Spain. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

2 Further information in <http://erfoundation.org>

3 Further information in <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/index.html>

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