

**ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:  
A comparison between a CLIL class and a regular class**

**Bachelor's thesis  
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HUMANISTINEN TIEDEKUNTA  
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ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE:  
A comparison between a CLIL-class and a regular class

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Sanomattakin on selvää, että oppilaiden kieliasteet vaikuttavat heidän suhtautumiseensa opetettavaa kieltä ja sen eri osa-alueita kohtaan. Suomalaisen oppilaiden asenteet englannin kieltä kohtaan ovat tutkimusten mukaan melko positiivisia. Suomen kouluissa on kuitenkin nykyään monia erilaisia opetusmetodeja, mutta niiden vaikutusta asenteisiin englannin kieltä kohtaan ei ole vielä tutkittu paljoakaan.

Tässä tutkimuksessa tutkittiin sitä, millaisia eroja englanninkielisessä CLIL-opetuksessa olleiden oppilaiden ja tavallisessa opetuksessa olleiden oppilaiden asenteissa englannin kieltä kohtaan oli. Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin alakoulun 6.-luokkalaisilta (N=48) lyhyen kyselylomakkeen avulla.

Tulokset osoittivat, että eroja todellakin löytyi. CLIL-opetuksessa olleiden oppilaiden asenteet englantia kohtaan olivat hieman positiivisemmat kuin tavallisessa opetuksessa olleiden.

Tutkimuksen tuloksia voidaan hyödyntää esimerkiksi kielenopetusta suunniteltaessa. Jos oppilaiden asenteet englantia kohtaan ovat tiedossa, voidaan kehittää uusia menetelmiä, jotka innostavat oppilaita entisestään opiskelemaan englantia ja parantavat heidän asenteitaan kieltä kohtaan. Tavallisen opetuksen metodeja voidaan myös parantaa ottamalla mallia CLIL-opetuksen metodeista.

Asiasanat: content and language integrated learning, language attitudes, English language

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## 1 Introduction

Everyone would probably agree that knowing more languages than only one's mother tongue is a must nowadays. This need can be answered in language teaching by many ways, one of which is the method of content and language integrated learning. One of the aims of content and language integrated learning is to encourage people's positive attitudes towards different languages.

The field of this study is language learning and teaching and I will concentrate on content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and attitudes. I will compare the attitudes students in English speaking CLIL classes and students in regular classes have towards the English language to see how these attitudes differ and or do they differ at all.

One reason for choosing this topic was that not much research has been done on it, although the results may be useful for improving English teaching in Finnish schools. A more personal reason for choosing this topic was because it greatly interests me as a former CLIL class student and a future English teacher.

In this paper I will first discuss the theoretical background for my study and then move on to my own research. After that I will look more closely at the data gathered and then I will move on to the conclusions I have come to.

## 2 Teaching content through a foreign language

This section will deal with the theoretical background of my study. This section is structured so that first I will define the terminology I will be using in this paper. Then I will talk about some general issues concerning language learning and teaching, mainly explicit and implicit learning and bilingualism because these concepts are important when trying to understand the reasoning behind content and language integrated learning. After all, content and language integrated learning aims at some degree of bilingualism. After that I will move on to content and language integrated

learning and talk about its origins and position in the Finnish educational system. Lastly I will talk about different attitudes towards languages and how these attitudes have been studied.

## **2.1 Defining terms**

Firstly, I would like to define some terms used in this paper since people can use the same terms and words a bit differently. In this paper I will be using the term content and language integrated learning and its acronym CLIL as an umbrella term to all the different methods that are used to teach content through a foreign or second language. I will be using the term in this manner because it is the most clear and widely adapted meaning for it. I will also use the term bilingualism to refer to the ability to use and/or understand two or more languages. I think that these definitions for these specific terms are the most simple and understandable and thus I chose to use them. I have adopted the usage of these terms from various sources, mainly Hartiala (2000: 27) and Brinton, Snow & Wesche (2003).

## **2.2 General issues concerning language learning and teaching**

In this part I will talk about some general issues concerning language learning and teaching. I will look more closely at explicit and implicit learning and bilingualism.

### **2.2.1 Explicit and implicit learning**

When a child learns his or her mother tongue, the learning is called implicit learning. This means that no one is actually trying to teach the child but the child just naturally acquires the language due to situations in his or her everyday life where the language is used. This is often not the case when learning a second language because then the learner is not in an environment where the language is used in everyday life and thus cannot just acquire it. This means that the target language needs to be explicitly taught at the child. This kind of learning is called explicit learning. (Järvinen 1999: 37-49.)

Järvinen (1999: 39) says that there are also other differences between explicit and implicit learning. These differences can be found in the uses of formulaic knowledge and rule-based knowledge. Formulaic knowledge means knowing certain fixed phrases such as *How are you?* which are thought of as one entity and are also used as such. Rule-based knowledge means knowing the rules a certain language has and being able to use those rules. Usually the ones who have acquired a language implicitly are better in using these different rules and fixed phrases but are not necessarily able to explain why and how certain rules and phrases are used since their knowledge of these issues is implicit. The ones who have been explicitly taught the language are usually better at explaining why and how these rules are used although they often use them worse than those who have learned the language implicitly. They also often do not have the formulaic knowledge needed to use the fixed phrases correctly and are therefore not as good at using them as those who have learned the language implicitly. This matter, however, is still under ongoing debate. (Järvinen 1999: 39).

Content and language integrated learning in a way resembles implicit learning although it has some characteristics of explicit learning as well. In content and language integrated learning the learner is in fact in an environment where people speak the target language and the language is used in meaningful situations. But then again, the learners are explicitly taught certain rules and vocabulary.

Järvinen (1999: 37) mentions that it is still under debate whether it is possible for things learned explicitly to become implicit knowledge and vice versa. According to Järvinen (1999: 37), there are two schools of thought regarding this matter: the first one says that it is possible and the second one says that it is not possible. This question is in my opinion very interesting when content and language integrated learning is concerned since in CLIL, these two are merged in a unique way.

### **2.2.2 Bilingualism**

Carder (2007: 9) states that bilingualism means the ability to use and/or understand two or more languages, no matter whether the bilingual person can only understand one word of the other language. Hartiala (2000: 49) says that there are different degrees of bilingualism: it is possible that a bilingual person only understands a language but does not speak or write it or that a bilingual person has the potential to use a language but does not use it because of the lack of confidence.

The concept of bilingualism is important for content and language integrated learning since the basis of content and language integrated learning is always in bilingualism. Content and language integrated learning also aims to some degree at bilingualism. (Hartiala 2000: 47.) Järvinen (1999: 15) and Carder (2007: 12-13) say that there is some evidence to support the claim that bilingualism is worthwhile and useful for people and helps people understand languages better.

### **2.3 Content and language integrated learning (CLIL)**

The main idea behind all content and language integrated learning is that a new language is most efficiently learned when used in meaningful situations in an environment where people also speak the target language.

There are many models for content-based language teaching (Brinton, et al. 2003: 1-24; Hartiala 2000: 36-55). These models are all very much alike although they do have slight differences in their emphasis. Here I will introduce very briefly two models: immersion education since it is the most popular model in Finland, and language for specific purposes because it is one of the best-known models.

In immersion education the target language is used as a medium for teaching school subjects or other similar things. In immersion education the learners are in an environment where the target language is used in meaningful situations. Immersion education is usually meant for younger children and therefore this method is usually used for children and adolescents. (Brinton et al. 2003: 7-9.)

In language for specific purposes the target language is also used as a medium to teach content but the content in question is more pragmatic than in immersion education and is aimed for real-life situations. This means that the content is more closely connected with the students' lives, for example through their job. A student working as a plumber might for example be taught new means to fix a leaking pipe through the target language. This model is most often used for older learners, for example university students. In this model the learners are usually quite a homogeneous group with similar needs and backgrounds. (Brinton et al. 2003: 6-7)

### **2.3.1 The origins of content and language integrated learning**

The roots of content and language integrated learning go way back. Already centuries ago wealthier families sent their sons and daughters to other countries to learn new languages and during the Middle Ages all scholars studied in Latin in order to learn the language better and because all academic texts were in Latin.

However, content and language integrated learning did not become very popular until the 1960s (Järvinen 1999: 15-17 ; Brinton et al. 2003: 1-4). Back then in Canada there was a need for Canadian children to learn both English and French and, thus, some schools started to offer education that was based on the ideas of content and language integrated learning. During the next two decades new content and language integrated learning models came to be and schools all over the world started to use these models. (Järvinen 1999; Hartiala 2000; Brinton et al. 2003.)

### **2.3.2 Content and language integrated learning in Finland**

Content and language integrated learning is a fairly new phenomenon in Finland (Hartiala 2000: 32; Järvinen 1999: 23). Hartiala (2000: 32) claims that content and language integrated learning classes started to appear in Finnish schools at the end of the 1980s when the Finnish Ministry of Education stated that content and language integrated learning models should be practiced in Finnish schools. Now there are over twenty cities in Finland where there are CLIL classes. Most of them are situated



at the southern coastal area of Finland but CLIL classrooms can be found at such places as Rovaniemi, Kuopio and Joensuu. (CLIL-network 2008.)

In Finland it is possible for a learner to be on a content and language integrated learning class for all his or her school life. There are CLIL kindergartens, preschools, comprehensive schools, sixth forms and even in university, it is possible to study different subjects using a foreign language. (CLIL-network 2008) Immersion education is the most popular content and language integrated learning model in Finland. The time used studying in a foreign language and the subjects studied vary between different schools and different levels of education. Some popular subjects to be studied in a foreign language are environmental studies and biology, physics, sports, handicrafts and mathematics. The most popular language to be used in content and language integrated learning in Finland is English, although such languages as Swedish, French, Russian and German can also be found. (CLIL-network 2008; Hartiala 2000.)

#### **2.4 Attitudes towards languages**

Hartiala (2000: 38) claims that one of the main goals in teaching people through content and language integrated learning models is to encourage their positive attitudes towards the target language and other languages. Because of this, it is important to study whether this goal is reached or not and if it is, how.

The Macmillan English Dictionary (2002) defines the word attitude as “someone's opinions or feelings about something, especially as shown in their behaviour”. All people have some attitudes towards all things, be they neutral, positive or negative. Attitudes towards languages are no different.

Attitudes towards different languages have been studied a lot for decades (Kansikas 2002). Again, there are different schools of thought which have different views on what language attitudes are, what they are constructed of and how they can be studied. Currently the most popular view on language attitudes is a combination of

the older views. This new theory suggests that attitudes towards different languages are not static but ever changing and thus there is no one certain answer to all the questions concerning them since it all varies in different circumstances. (Kansikas 2002)

In her study Kansikas (2002) claims that Finns have quite positive attitudes towards the English language. Kansikas (2002: 109-111) claims that Finns think of English as nice, easy, normal and that English is seen as a Lingua Franca. Kansikas (2002: 110) also states that the attitudes were the same towards English regardless of the grade the interviewed students had in English.

My study will approach this subject from another angle and compare the attitudes towards the English language between students from a CLIL class and a normal class.

### 3 The present study

This part of my paper will deal with my own study and how I conducted it. It will explain my research questions and motives for choosing them. I will also talk about how I collected my data.

#### 3.1 Research questions

The question I will try to answer with my research is this: is there a difference in attitudes towards the English language between students on English speaking CLIL classes and students on regular classes and, if there is, how do these attitudes differ from each other? My presumptions are that there is a difference and that the attitudes of the students on a CLIL class towards English are more positive than those of the students not on a CLIL class.

In my opinion, it is fairly obvious that the more positive attitudes students have towards the English language, the better they learn it. If the results of my study show

that the students on the CLIL class have more positive attitudes, then we can look more closely at the teaching methods and materials and other such things used and maybe adopt some of the before mentioned to normal teaching as well thus improving the teaching of English.

## **3.2 Data**

### **3.2.1 Subjects**

The subjects (N=48) of my study were all 6<sup>th</sup> grade students from a moderately sized elementary school from a moderately sized town in Eastern Finland. They all were approximately 12 years old. I chose them to be my subjects since I knew the school they came from beforehand and thus it was easier to get in contact with the teachers of the classes and get a permission from them. I chose 6<sup>th</sup> graders to be my subjects since there really has not been that much study of the attitudes of the Finnish primary schoolers towards English. They also have been studying English for at least three years so they undoubtedly already have some kind of attitudes towards it.

My subjects came from two different classes. Class A was a CLIL class and most of the students on class A had started to study English in kindergarten. Class B was a regular class and most students on class B had started to study English on the first grade. Class B was my control group.

### **3.2.2 Questionnaire**

I decided to collect the data by using a question sheet. I chose this method because I thought it would be the most efficient way to gather information from two different classes. I also thought that this format would make analysing the data easier and simpler. Another possible data gathering method would have been interviewing all the students, but I decided against it because it would have taken too much time and resources.

I used the question sheet Kansikas (2002: 119) had used in her study as my model for formulating my own questionnaire since I found it to be clear and simple. My question sheet is in Finnish because I wanted it to be understandable for all the students.

My question sheet had three parts. The first part had three background questions for the students: one about their gender, one about the age they started to study English and one about their possible backgrounds in English speaking countries.

The first part's objective was to find out some general information about the students. I thought that it was relevant for my study to know the number of boys and girls on the class, as it might have affected the results. It is also possible to analyse the data later on in some other study so that this aspect will be taken into account. Then I also thought that it was important to know when the students have started to study English and whether they have lived in some English speaking country since these factors might have affected their answers.

The second part had six questions with gaps. In this part the students were asked to complete sentences about the English language with an adjective they find the most suitable.

The purpose of this part was to find out what the students think about the different aspects of the English language. In this part there were questions about the English language as a whole entity, studying English, the way spoken English sounds, the way written English looks and also about the English vocabulary and the English grammar. Because the students were still quite young, the questions were short and simple so they would have the patience to answer them. I thought that with these questions the different aspects of the English language familiar to 6<sup>th</sup> grade students were covered decently.

The third part was the shortest part and had only two questions. The first question was about the applicability of the English language and the second question was

about the students' own English skills.

In this section, the first question was taken straight from Kansikas' questionnaire because I thought it to be a good question. By having the exact same question, I could compare my results with those of Kansikas. The second question was similar to the questions in the first part of the question sheet: its purpose was to find out what the students think of their own English skills. I decided to ask about the students' own opinion on their English skills and not their school grade because I think that the students' own opinions are more important than their grades, since this study is about attitudes.

Because I wanted to make sure that my questions would be understandable for my subjects, I tested my question sheet first by asking a 6<sup>th</sup> grader from another school and town to fill it. After this test, I noticed that some of the word choices in the questionnaire were a bit ambiguous and the 6<sup>th</sup> grader had not completely understood what I wanted to ask, so I edited the question sheet in few places by changing my wording.

## 4 Findings

In this section I will look at my findings more closely. I will first talk about the answers the CLIL class, class A gave and then move on to the answers given by the regular class, class B. After that I will compare the answers from class A to those from class B.

50 students filled in the questionnaire altogether but I could use only 48 of the question sheets, since two of them had not been filled in properly. 28 questionnaires were usable from the class A and 20 from class B.

### 4.1 CLIL class: Class A

From this class I got answers from 14 girls and 14 boys. 24 of the students on this

class had started their English studies as early as in the English kindergarten. Three of the students had started to study English on the first grade and one had started to study English on the third grade. Six of the students had lived in some English speaking country and 22 of the students had not. These findings were not surprising as it is quite common that children from language immersion kindergartens go to CLIL classes when they start school. Based on my own experiences as a student on an English speaking CLIL class, the fact that some students from this class had been living abroad in some English speaking country was also to be expected.

The table below shows how the students on class A answered the second part of the questionnaire.

Table 1. CLIL students' attitudes

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
English as an entity	27	1	-
English as a school subject	23	2	3
Spoken English	24	4	-
Written English	18	8	2
English grammar	19	4	5
English vocabulary	23	1	4

I divided their answers into three different groups: positive, neutral and negative. I did this on the basis of the adjectives they had used and the connotations the adjectives have. The positive group included adjectives such as these: *nice, easy, interesting, enjoyable, familiar*. The neutral group included adjectives such as *normal* and *understandable*. This group also included answers where both positive and negative adjectives had been used, for example answers like *nice but boring*. The negative group included adjectives such as *difficult, boring* and *weird*.

As the table above shows, the students on class A had quite a positive attitude towards the English language on the whole. When rounded up, 79.8 % of their answers were positive, 11.9 % of their answers were neutral and 8.3 % of their

answers were negative. Class A had the most negative view on English grammar: 17.8 % of the whole class described it with a negative adjective. Questions 1 and 3 which were about the English language as a whole and the way spoken English sounds got no negative answers at all. The first question got the most positive answers (96.4 %), but then again, it was the vaguest question of this section as it only asked the students to describe the English language as a whole. The question with the least positive answers was the fourth one which was about the way written English looks. It got only 18 positive answers, which is 64.3 %. The fourth question also got the most neutral answers of all the questions, 28.6 %.

In the last part of the questionnaire the students of class A answered that the English language was suited for everyone and everywhere, home environment (including themselves and their families), working and studying, the television and traveling in other countries. Their answers resembled those in Kansikas' study (2002: 75) although there were some slight differences. Kansikas does not mention home environment at all, whereas in the present study it was one of the most popular answers. This is probably because some of the students on this class had been living in an English speaking country. Some of the students also mentioned having spoken English at home since their early childhood.

Everyone on class A estimated their English skills to be at least good. Some had described their skills very good, or even excellent or perfect.

#### **4.2 Regular class: Class B**

From class B I got answers from 13 boys and seven girls. 16 of the students had started to study English on the first grade and four had started English on the third grade. None of the students had lived in an English speaking country. The fact that so many of the students had started to study English already on the first grade was slightly surprising as students on regular classes usually start to study English on the third grade. It is of course possible that the students had somehow misunderstood the question but as there were no similar problems with class A or the student who tested

the question sheet, I doubt that. One possible reason for this result might be that the students may have had short language showers on the first and second grade before the actual teaching started on the third grade.

The table below shows how the students on class B answered the second part of the questionnaire.

Table 2: Regular students' attitudes

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
English as an entity	17	2	1
English as a school subject	13	-	7
Spoken English	18	1	1
Written English	15	1	4
English grammar	10	4	6
English vocabulary	16	3	1

Again the answers were divided into three different groups the same way as with the answers of class A. The positive group included adjectives such as these: *nice, easy, useful, great, cool, OK, sensible*. The neutral group included adjectives such as *different, common, long* and *unusual*. Again the neutral group also included answers where both positive and negative adjectives had been used. The negative group included adjectives such as these: *irritating, boring, difficult, unpleasant, terrible, weird, odd, complicated*.

Class B's attitudes towards the English language on the whole were also quite positive: when all their answers were rounded up, 74.2 % were positive, 9.2 % were neutral and 16.6 % were negative. Class B had the most negative view on the English language as a school subject: 35 % of the students had described it with a negative adjective. It is also noteworthy that this question got no neutral answers, only positive or negative. The first, third and sixth questions, which were about the English language as a whole entity, the way spoken English sounds and the English vocabulary, got the least negative answers. The most positive view class B had on



spoken English: 90 % of the students described the way spoken English sounds with a positive adjective. The question that got the least positive answers was the fifth one, the one about the English grammar. It got only ten (50 %) positive answers.

In class B's opinion English was suited for studying, going abroad, the media (including the Internet, movies and music), everyone, foreign countries, Finns and speaking. Their answers were fairly similar as those reported in Kansikas' study (2002: 75).

From class B six students estimated that their English skills were average or below the average and 14 students thought that their skills in English were good or very good.

### **4.3 Comparing the results**

As shown above, both classes had quite a positive attitude towards English. The results of my study are supported by those of Kansikas (2002: 64-65). From her study it emerged that people indeed do have a fairly positive outlook on the English language. In Kansikas' study (2002: 64-65) English was ranked as the most precise, easiest and richest language, the second funniest language and the third most beautiful and correct language.

Although both classes had a fairly positive attitude on the English language on the whole, some differences could be found. When all the answers from class A and all the answers from class B were taken into account, it came clear that class A had a more positive attitude towards the English language on the whole: 79.8 % of class A's answers were positive, whereas the percentage of positive answers was only 74.2 % on class B. The difference is not that big, but it is there nonetheless. This result supports my presumption that the CLIL class would have a more positive view on the English language. I think that the difference might have been even bigger if most of the students on class B had not started to study English until the third grade. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that because the analysed data was quite

small, these results cannot necessarily be applied to larger groups.

There were also some differences in the attitudes the students had towards the different aspects of English. Class A, for example, had the most negative view on English grammar, whereas class B had the most negative view on English as a school subject.

When looking at the adjectives classes A and B had used, one can notice that there were also some differences in this field as well. Class B, for example, had more variation in the negative adjectives. Students on class A, on the other hand, had used the positive adjective *familiar* that could not be found in class B's answers at all.

I think that one reason for these slight differences in the attitudes can be found in the fact that the students on class A use English more frequently and have been studying it for a longer period of time than the students on class B. The students on class A use English every day at school since the language is not reserved only for one subject. The students on class B, on the other hand, use English at school only at their English classes (which 35 % of the students have a negative attitude towards). The students on class A have also heard English and have used English more and for a longer period of time than the students on class B which undoubtedly also affects their attitudes. It is also important to remember that all the students on class A thought that their skills in English were at least good whereas the students on class B did not have such a positive view on their own English skills. I think that the way the students see their English skills affects their attitudes towards the English language at some level. After all, it is easier to have a positive attitude towards something one sees oneself good at.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that yes, students on English speaking CLIL classes do have a more positive attitude towards the English language than students on regular classes. This is obviously a good thing because it tells us that one of the objectives of

CLIL, a positive attitude towards the target language (Hartiala 2000: 38), has been reached.

Naturally the data could have been gathered from a larger group of students to make the results even more valid than they are now. The different aspects of gender and background could also have been looked at in more detail but I think that even now, my research questions are answered adequately. This also leaves room for further studies on this topic where these aspects can also be taken into account.

From these results we can now move onwards and think of some methods to improve the attitudes of the students on regular classes have towards English. For example, the attitudes the students have towards English as a school subject could still be improved. In order to do this we can, for example, look at the methods teachers on CLIL classes use and see whether some of them can be adapted to normal classes as well.

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Appendix 1, Question sheet

## KYSELY

Hyvä X koulun oppilas,

Olen tekemässä pientä tutkimusta aiheesta asenteet englannin kieltä kohtaan ja kerään nyt aineistoa tutkielmaani varten. Siksi toivoisin, että vastaisit tällä lomakkeella oleviin kysymyksiin. Vastaa itsenäisesti ja noudata annettuja ohjeita. Vastaa suomeksi. Jotta kysely pysyisi mahdollisimman luottamuksellisena, älä kirjoita nimeäsi mihinkään.

Kiitos jo etukäteen!

Heidi Pirskanen

Ympyröi kohdista 1. - 3. sinua parhaiten kuvaava vaihtoehto.

1. Olen:

- tyttö
- poika

2. Olen aloittanut englannin opiskelun:

- englanninkielisessä leikkikoulussa
- englanninkielisessä esikoulussa
- ensimmäisellä luokalla
- kolmannella luokalla

3. Olen asunut jossain englanninkielisessä maassa.

- kyllä
- ei

Täydennä seuraavin kohtiin 1. - 6. mielestäsi parhaiten sopiva adjektiivi.

1. Englannin kieli on \_\_\_\_\_
2. Englannin kielen opiskelu on \_\_\_\_\_
3. Puhuttu englannin kieli kuulostaa \_\_\_\_\_
4. Kirjoitettu englannin kieli näyttää \_\_\_\_\_
5. Englannin kielen kielioppi on \_\_\_\_\_
6. Englannin kielen sanasto on \_\_\_\_\_

Jatka seuraavia lauseita 1.- 2. oman mielipiteesi mukaan.

1. Englannin kieli sopii hyvin \_\_\_\_\_
2. Mielestäni osaan englantia \_\_\_\_\_