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Author(s): Roiha, Anssi

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Investigating former pupils' experiences and perceptions of CLIL in Finland: a retrospective analysis

Anssi Roiha 

Department of Language and Communication Studies, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

ABSTRACT

The educational approach known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), in which content is taught partly through a foreign language, has gained great popularity in Europe in the past few decades. In Finland, CLIL has been in use since 1991 and, despite some fluctuations in its popularity, has gained a relatively stable place in the Finnish education system. CLIL has been extensively studied, but previous CLIL research has mostly focused on pupils currently enrolled in CLIL. This study takes a novel perspective by investigating CLIL retrospectively, through the eyes of former pupils. The data used are in-depth interviews with 24 former pupils who attended a CLIL class in Finland in the 1990s. The interviews were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that the participants had overwhelmingly positive memories of their CLIL programme. They felt strongly that CLIL had positively affected their English language proficiency, particularly their vocabulary and speaking skills. Most believed that CLIL had not adversely affected their content learning. Despite the overall satisfaction, a few participants suggested ways to develop CLIL, which are also discussed. The results of this case study broaden our understanding of CLIL and have implications for language education policy.

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Introduction

Along with one's socioeconomic and family background, education and school experiences have been shown to be significant in shaping one's life course and determining how one finds one's place in society (e.g. Dominicé, 2000; Kauppila, 2002; Vanttaja, 2000). Above all, negative school experiences and poor attainment often predict challenges in later life (e.g. Kuronen, 2010). It is therefore important to investigate different educational practices and their effect on pupils' identities and attitudes towards schooling. The educational context of the present study is Content and Language Integrated Learning (hereafter CLIL). In this article, CLIL is defined as an educational approach that encompasses various models in which content is partly taught through a foreign language (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). CLIL can be seen as partly stemming from and being influenced by the Canadian immersion programme that was developed in the 1960s (Cummins & Swain, 1986). Consequently, there has been an on-going debate about the similarities and differences between CLIL and immersion (e.g. Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2010; Somers & Surmont, 2012). This article does not delve very deeply into that discussion but takes the position that within a myriad of CLIL variations, some may have more similarities with immersion

while others are rather different from it. Both immersion and CLIL nevertheless share the same theoretical underpinning, the view that language is best acquired through authentic communication, and thus aim to provide pupils with both comprehensible input (Krashen, 1986) and comprehensible output (Swain, 1985).

CLIL has mushroomed in Europe during the past few decades (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Eurydice, 2006). In Finland, CLIL started in 1991, following some changes to the relevant legislation. Despite some fluctuation over the years, CLIL has gained a stable position as one of the educational approaches used in the Finnish education system (e.g. Lehti, Järvinen, & Suomela-Salmi, 2006; Nikula & Marsh, 1996; Peltoniemi, Skinnari, Mård-Miettinen, & Sjöberg, 2018). In Europe generally, the approach has been taken up as one way to increase plurilingualism and tackle the challenges of migration and globalization (Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008). Previously, the majority of CLIL studies have revolved around learning outcomes and have been conducted from etic perspectives (e.g. Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Pérez-Cañado, 2012). Recently, emic perspectives in CLIL studies have become more common as pupils' perceptions have also started to be of interest to researchers (e.g. Coyle, 2013; Pladevall-Ballester, 2015). However, most studies have been quantitative and focused on pupils

currently enrolled in CLIL programmes. The aim of the present study is to provide a novel perspective by drawing attention to former pupils' experiences of CLIL in order to broaden our understanding of this multifaceted approach to learning.

The results presented here are part of a larger research project that examines CLIL through the eyes of former pupils. Specifically, in this article, 24 former Finnish pupils, who attended an English-medium CLIL programme for nine years in the 1990s, retrospectively reflect on their CLIL experiences. This article relies solely on the participants' subjective perceptions and no measurements, for instance, on their language proficiency were conducted. The specific research questions for this study are:

- (1) *How do the participants reflect on CLIL as an experience?*
- (2) *How do they perceive the effect of CLIL on*
 - a. *their target language learning?*
 - b. *their content learning?*

Literature review

This section presents previous CLIL research relevant to the scope of this article. First of all, there is a brief summary of the most important research on the effect of CLIL on target language and content learning. Secondly, CLIL studies focusing on pupils' perceptions, which have become more mainstream, are reviewed. Following the conceptualization of CLIL presented in the introduction, this article focuses on studies conducted in CLIL contexts, leaving purely immersion studies aside. However, the fact that immersion has been shown to be beneficial to pupils' target language skills without any detriment to content learning (e.g. Lazaruk, 2007) gives some support to the claims for CLIL programmes as well.

Learning outcomes in CLIL

A number of studies have shown that CLIL has a very positive effect on pupils' target language learning. In several studies, CLIL pupils have even outperformed their non-CLIL peers in all the measured skills. For instance, in Lasagabaster's (2008) study, CLIL pupils ($n = 113$) demonstrated higher achievement in grammar, listening, speaking and writing than their non-CLIL peers ($n = 28$). In Lorenzo, Casal, and Moore's (2010) study, CLIL pupils ($n = 754$) performed better in reading, listening, writing and speaking than the control pupils ($n = 448$), while in Ruiz de Zarobe's (2008) study, CLIL pupils ($n = 107$) outperformed their peers ($n = 54$) in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, fluency and content. Again, Admiraal, Westhoff, and de Bot (2006) found that CLIL pupils ($n = 548$) demonstrated higher proficiencies in oral production and reading comprehension than their

non-CLIL peers ($n = 721$) but the effect of CLIL on receptive word knowledge was neutral. In Finland, Järvinen (1999) found that CLIL pupils' ($n = 90$) foreign language learning was significantly faster than that of their non-CLIL peers ($n = 47$).

Compared to studies on language learning, those on content learning have been less conclusive. For instance, Surmont, Struys, Van Den Noort, and Van De Craen (2016) examined the effect of French-medium CLIL on pupils' learning of mathematics and found that CLIL pupils ($n = 35$) outperformed their non-CLIL peers ($n = 72$) already after three months. The pre-test showed that there were no a priori differences between the two groups. In Finland, Seikkula-Leino (2007) and Jäppinen (2005) examined CLIL in relation to content learning. On average, in both studies, CLIL had a neutral effect on pupils' learning. However, in Seikkula-Leino's (2007) study, which measured the learning of mathematics and mother tongue (i.e. Finnish), overachieving was much more common for non-CLIL pupils ($n = 101$) than for CLIL pupils ($n = 217$), which suggests that in CLIL classes pupils learn according to their abilities but not above that. Jäppinen (2005) looked at pupils' cognitive development in science and mathematics and found that in some cases the CLIL pupils' ($n = 335$) cognitive development was even faster than the non-CLIL pupils' ($n = 334$). Admiraal et al. (2006) also measured content learning and found that CLIL had a neutral effect on the pupils' history and geography learning. However, the data for that were very limited, yielding only tentative results. Additionally, in Dallinger et al.'s (2016) study in Germany, which took a priori differences into account, CLIL was found to have a neutral effect on pupils' history learning even though the CLIL pupils ($n = 703$) had received 50 per cent more history lessons than their non-CLIL peers ($n = 1103$). This study also investigated language learning outcomes and found that CLIL had a positive effect only on listening comprehension, but not on overall English proficiency, a finding that challenged some previous studies on target language acquisition.

Among studies which have indicated that CLIL would be detrimental to content learning is one conducted by Fernández-Sanjurjo, Fernández-Costales, and Arias Blanco (2017), which investigated the science learning of primary pupils ($n = 709$) in Spain. Approximately half of the pupils were English-medium CLIL pupils and the rest were their monolingual peers. The findings showed that pupils studying in their L1 performed slightly better than the CLIL pupils, although the difference was not very substantial. Additionally, pupils' social and economic status had an effect on their performance: pupils with a more privileged background outperformed those with lower socioeconomic status.

In conclusion, the studies presented here suggest that CLIL is, generally, a useful approach for enhancing pupils' foreign language proficiency. However,

there is more disagreement about which areas of language skills CLIL enhances the most. This may partly be explained by the fact that CLIL is implemented in various ways, so some programmes may emphasize oral production while others focus more on writing and reading. Moreover, it seems that CLIL may not advance pupils' content learning more than monolingual teaching does, even though it has been claimed that bilingual education has a positive effect on pupils' cognitive development (e.g. Jäppinen, 2005; Lazaruk, 2007). On the other hand, CLIL does not typically seem to be detrimental to content learning. Similar conclusions were reached by Graham, Choi, Davoodi, Razmeh, and Dixon (2018) in their recent review. While the studies reviewed demonstrated mixed results on the effectiveness of CLIL on language and content outcomes, the authors concluded that overall CLIL seems to have either a neutral or a slightly positive effect on pupils' attainment in terms of both language and content. However, it is important to bear in mind that CLIL is dependent on many contextual variables. Thus, one must be cautious about making too strong generalizations on the basis of existing CLIL studies. Additionally, it is worth noting that some of the quantitative studies presented here have been somewhat small-scale (e.g. Järvinen, 1999; Lasagabaster, 2008). Previous CLIL research has also been questioned and criticized, for instance, for its different definitions of CLIL, for the lack of pre-tests with CLIL and control pupils, as well as for its neglect of socioeconomic background and pupil selection (e.g. Bruton, 2011; Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter, 2014; Küppers & Trautmann, 2013). For instance, Rumlich (2016) found that CLIL pupils do not necessarily gain much from CLIL when a priori differences are taken into account. Thus, more research is still needed to establish the effects of CLIL on pupils' learning outcomes.

Pupils' perceptions

Earlier CLIL studies have only looked at the experiences and opinions of pupils currently taking part in CLIL. Further, most studies have focused on secondary pupils, neglecting young learners' perceptions, although some researchers have examined primary pupils' perceptions, for instance Massler (2012) ($n = 176$), Pladevall-Ballester (2015) ($n = 197$) and Ramos (2007) ($n = 61$). In all of these studies, the majority of pupils reported that they enjoyed CLIL and regarded it as beneficial to them: the pupils in Massler's (2012) study would have preferred to receive even more English-medium instruction, Pladevall-Ballester (2015) found that most pupils considered CLIL to be both improving their English skills and facilitating their content learning, and most

pupils in Ramos' (2007) study felt that CLIL would help them get a better job in the future and provide them with the tools to communicate with others. Despite the overall satisfaction, all the studies included a number of pupils who were less satisfied with CLIL. For instance, Massler (2012) found that 10 per cent of pupils did not want to have CLIL in other subjects, and 22 per cent had experienced difficulties in content learning in CLIL lessons. Similarly, in Pladevall-Ballester's (2015) study, some pupils felt that the language in CLIL lessons was too challenging: more than a third of the pupils reported experiencing difficulties in comprehension, and almost a half reported difficulties in oral production in their CLIL classes. Ramos (2007) found that more than a third of the pupils were unsure whether learning in two languages would help them perform better at school, and almost half of them were unsure whether it would enhance their cognitive skills.

Secondary pupils' perceptions have been examined, for instance, by Coyle (2013) ($n = 670$) and Hunt (2011) ($n = 283$) in the UK. Overall, the pupils regarded CLIL as a highly positive experience. In Coyle's (2013) study, 85 per cent of the pupils reported that they hoped CLIL would continue at their school. Many of them considered CLIL beneficial from the point of view of their language proficiency and thought that in particular CLIL developed their speaking and communication skills. In Hunt's (2011) study, approximately two-thirds of the pupils reported enjoying the CLIL lessons and nearly two-thirds claimed that they looked forward to learning through a foreign language in the future. Additionally, many pupils compared CLIL to mainstream classes, declaring that it was 'different' and 'better'. As with the studies on primary pupils' perceptions, Coyle (2013) and Hunt (2011) also encountered critical voices. That is, Coyle (2013) found that 15 per cent of pupils regarded CLIL as too difficult, boring or useless. The more critical pupils felt that CLIL lessons included too much teacher talk, translation and writing, or that the topic was already familiar to them. Hunt (2011) found that 7 per cent of pupils did not enjoy CLIL and 12 per cent did not want to continue CLIL in the future.

In a very recent study, Somers and Llinares (2018) looked at Spanish secondary CLIL pupils' ($n = 157$) motivation towards the target language as well as content learning in high- and low-intensity CLIL programmes. The results showed that, in general, pupils in both groups seemed to enjoy CLIL and perceived it as useful for their future. However, the pupils in the high-intensity group were more motivated and regarded CLIL as benefiting their future studies and professional careers more than the pupils in the low-intensity groups. Despite the overall satisfaction with CLIL, only about half of pupils reported

being at ease in CLIL lessons. The pupils' answers to open questions revealed that anxiety among the pupils in the high-intensity group mostly related to the demanding content. In contrast, anxiety among the pupils in the low-intensity group was related to what they saw as both the demanding content and their own perceived low level of proficiency in the target CLIL language.

In Finland, pupils' ($n = 209$) attitudes towards CLIL have been examined, for instance, by Pihko (2010). The results of her mixed methods study show that the general attitude of most secondary pupils towards CLIL was very positive. A clear majority considered CLIL easy and only 6 per cent reported it as difficult. However, one fifth of the participants disagreed with the statement that studying through a foreign language is pleasant and 15 per cent would have preferred to study all the subjects in their L1. In Pihko's (2010) study, those pupils who reported negative attitudes to CLIL in the survey were also interviewed. Many of them considered that their own language skills were insufficient to cope with CLIL, and some school subjects, such as history, mathematics, physics and chemistry, were specifically mentioned as difficult subjects to study in a foreign language. Pupils would also have liked more guidance and support in their learning as well as more opportunities to use the language in practice.

To conclude, the majority of pupils themselves appear to enjoy CLIL and regard it as a positive and useful educational approach. The studies reported here, however, show that most CLIL classes also include learners who do not see the benefits of CLIL and struggle with the approach. This is vital information also for practitioners. However, previous studies on language learning, content learning and

pupils' perceptions of CLIL have focused exclusively on participants who are currently enrolled in CLIL. Thus, there seems to be an important research gap, an absence of studies using retrospective reflections on CLIL, which the present study aims to fill.

Methodology

The CLIL context and the participants

This study explores the insights of pupils from one former CLIL class in Finland. The primary purpose of this research was to describe and understand the participants' experience of CLIL, and it therefore gives voice to pupils themselves constructing their narratives and memories of their CLIL times. Altogether, 29 pupils (including the researcher) studied in the class at some stage. They were all contacted via Facebook and 24 agreed to take part in the research. All the participants signed a letter of consent which outlined the aim of the research and how the data would be used. Additionally, it was made clear to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. To preserve their anonymity, the participants were given pseudonyms (see Table 1). Most of the participants attended English-medium CLIL for nine years during their compulsory schooling (years 1–9, pupils' age 7–15), starting in 1992. Unlike the majority of CLIL programmes in Europe, the target programme did not require applicants to take a pre-test. However, preference was given to pupils who had some prior experience of English, and this was the case for 5 pupils in the class. The number of applicants outnumbered the places in the target year, so the remaining places had to be filled by drawing lots. In primary

Table 1. The participants in the study and the interview details.

| Pseudonym | Time spent in the CLIL class | Date of the interview | Duration of the interview | Venue of the interview |
|-----------|--|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Anna | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 8.9.2016 | 58:04 | Researcher's home |
| Annika | 1 st Year–6 th Year (6 years) | 19.9.2016 | 41:37 | Researcher's home |
| Arttu | 7 th Year–9 th Year (3 years) | 1.10.2016 | 39:18 | Hotel lobby |
| Eemeli | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 11.9.2016 | 45:44 | Researcher's home |
| Emmi | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 17.9.2016 | 40:22 | University library |
| Hanna | Pre-school–6 th Year (7 years) | 15.11.2016 | 30:17 | Researcher's home |
| Jere | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 24.1.2017 | 38:35 | Via Skype |
| Jonne | 1 st Year–9 th Year (9 years) | 30.9.2016 | 45:55 | Participant's home |
| Juho | 1 st Year–9 th Year (9 years) | 1.10.2016 | 69:03 | Participant's home |
| Jukka | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 6.9.2016 | 34:54 | Researcher's home |
| Kaapo | 1 st Year–6 th Year (6 years) | 26.1.2017 | 36:10 | Via Skype |
| Kalle | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 1.10.2016 | 37:15 | Participant's home |
| Kimmo | 1 st Year–9 th Year (9 years) | 10.12.2016 | 63:18 | Participant's home |
| Lotta | Pre-school–4 th Year (5 years) | 21.11.2016 | 34:07 | Researcher's home |
| Maria | 1 st Year–6 th Year (6 years) | 2.10.2016 | 61:08 | Hotel lobby |
| Marko | 1 st –4 th Year, 6 th –9 th Year (8 years) | 3.12.2016 | 78:31 | Researcher's home |
| Niko | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 19.1.2017 | 39:30 | Via Skype |
| Olli | 1 st Year–9 th Year (9 years) | 4.9.2016 | 38:24 | Researcher's home |
| Pasi | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 25.8.2016 | 39:18 | Researcher's home |
| Riikka | 7 th Year–9 th Year (3 years) | 5.11.2016 | 45:24 | Researcher's home |
| Roni | 1 st Year–9 th Year (9 years) | 22.12.2016 | 41:22 | Participant's home |
| Samu | 3 rd Year–9 th Year (7 years) | 12.11.2016 | 62:14 | Participant's home |
| Sanna | 2 nd Year–7 th Year (6 years) | 16.1.2017 | 79:56 | Via Skype |
| Tuukka | Pre-school–9 th Year (10 years) | 13.10.2016 | 63:02 | Researcher's home |

school, CLIL was implemented in most subjects and approximately a quarter of the overall teaching was conducted in English. In secondary school, the amount of CLIL decreased and it was less systematic than at primary level. The declared goal of the CLIL programme was to make pupils confident and competent language users and to provide them with the skills needed to function in an increasingly international society.

At the time of the interviews, the participants were 30–31 years old. After the CLIL comprehensive school, 19 of them had completed upper secondary school, two had graduated from vocational school and three had obtained a dual diploma (i.e. from both). 12 participants had a master's degree or equivalent, seven had a Bachelor's degree or equivalent (three of them were currently finishing their Master's studies) and four had a vocational degree. In addition, two participants were currently completing their doctoral degrees. Four participants had completed their studies entirely in English and eleven participants' degrees had included some English-medium courses. The main working language of three participants was English, ten used English at work regularly, and nine used it sporadically. After their CLIL schooling, seven participants had lived abroad and four of them were still currently doing so. Each participant's post-CLIL education and English use is outlined in more detail in [Appendix 1](#).

Data collection and analysis

The data of this study are 24 in-depth interviews with the participants. The interviews were very open in nature as the emphasis was on the participants' personal perceptions and experiences. The researcher had personal experience as a pupil in the target class, and the resulting experience and position may have influenced the analysis and interpretations. The earlier relationship between the author and the participants also added a unique character to the interviews. Garton and Copland (2010) labelled these types of interviews *acquaintance interviews*, and they suggest that due to the shared experience, they may offer access to resources that are not always available in traditional interview settings, although acquaintance interviews are not necessarily a more valid method of data collection than other interview types. The broad interview themes were sent to the participants in advance so that they could retrieve aspects of their CLIL classes before the interviews, especially as the participants were looking back on memories and experiences from more than 20 years before. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, by the author, between August 2016 and January 2017. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 min to 78 min, the average being 48 min (see [Table 1](#) for more details). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author. The data were analysed following theory-oriented content analysis

methods. That is, the relevant umbrella concepts (i.e. perceptions, language learning, content learning) and previous studies related to them were acknowledged but the analysis still relied extensively on the data (e.g. Tuomi & Sarajarvi, 2009).

Results

The results of the study will be presented according to the research questions. First, the participants' general attitudes towards CLIL will be discussed. Then the following part will examine the perceived effects of CLIL on the participants' target language and content learning. The results section contains quotations from the interviews, which have been translated into English by the author.

CLIL as an experience

The participants were generally very satisfied with their CLIL experience. Their satisfaction was clear, as all the participants said that they would choose to take part in similar CLIL again and that they would also like their own children to have that experience. Many participants emphasized how CLIL had motivated them and made learning more interesting:

I think it was also quite interesting to do things in English.. that it's anyway more varied then.. and it probably says quite a bit about the teaching that you don't remember that we've gone through things in English because it was quite natural already early on. (Olli)

I think it was divided so that sometimes we had Finnish-medium lessons and sometimes we had more in English then.. but maybe they're also getting a bit mixed up in my head so that I don't really recall in which language a certain lesson was taught.. so maybe already very early on English didn't feel like anything so disruptive. (Eemeli)

The fact that the participants did not always notice whether the language of instruction was Finnish or English exemplifies how taken-for-granted and natural CLIL was for them as an approach. Both Olli and Eemeli referred to the starting age of CLIL and regarded it as a significant factor in their having a positive attitude towards English. This should for its part encourage schools to introduce CLIL more widely already at primary level: the target CLIL programme started in Year 1 (when the pupils were 7 years old). In addition, many of the participants had already had some less serious English-medium teaching in pre-school (see [Table 1](#)).

Most participants expressed the view that using English had always been effortless and that CLIL had contributed to their highly positive English language self-concept (see also Roiha & Mäntylä, *in press*). Thus, the main objective of the programme (i.e. making pupils confident language users) seemed to have been

fulfilled. Issues of privilege and superiority were also frequently raised in the interviews. That is, many of the interviewees had already started to realize the advantages CLIL brought to their lives while they were still at school. Anna, for instance, said:

Well I do feel that I had this kind of class identity that we were a bit better than the others. (Anna)

Like Anna, a few other participants also referred to their class identity and associated it with CLIL. They felt that this identity, which intersected with a sense of privilege, was partly constructed by the teachers and even by the parents. The participants made explicit references to the novelty of the CLIL approach and to the fact that it was open to only a very limited number of pupils. This, as well as the fact that the participants were chosen from among many applicants, seemed to have prompted a sense of uniqueness, and this had lasted throughout their time at school. For instance, Marko talked about the pupils in the CLIL class as follows:

Were the pupils after all selected for our class? It felt as if there were a lot of educated and academic parents and everything.. and then nearly everyone performed well at school.. so that it was maybe a special class in some way. (Marko)

The participants' remarks partly reflect the time of their schooling: that is, in the early 1990s CLIL was something new and was generally regarded as more exotic than it is now. It is therefore arguable that the feedback and social comparisons had a prominent role in forming their sense of privilege, which in turn reinforced their positive attitude towards the CLIL programme. CLIL has been quite widely criticized for being elitist, for instance, because of the pupil selection and the implementation of CLIL in areas with families of high socioeconomic status (Cenoz et al., 2014). Contrary to Marko's surmise, the target CLIL programme was in fact open to everyone, and the pupils were not subjected to a pre-test. It was, however, partly selective, as priority was given to pupils who already had some experience of English before school began. The remaining pupils were chosen randomly. Additionally, the area of the school was relatively high in terms of socioeconomic status. The CLIL group was therefore not representative of an average class in Finland at the time.

The interviewees' overwhelming satisfaction with CLIL is illustrated by the fact that few of them could come up with any negative remarks about their CLIL experience:

I can't honestly think of anything [negative].. I tried to come up with some negative aspects but I honestly couldn't come up with anything. (Arttu)

A few of the participants did, however, express some negative memories and experiences. For instance, there was some criticism of CLIL in secondary school:

some people felt that CLIL was poorly implemented there and should have been more systematic and more goal-oriented:

I mostly remember that we had very little of it [CLIL classes].. and that it was quite poorly integrated.. and somehow it felt like it didn't really work.. like the idea of it. (Riikka)

One explanation for some participants' negative recollections might be that the nature of the CLIL programme changed quite considerably when the group entered secondary school: the amount of CLIL decreased and many participants felt that some teachers were not very committed to the CLIL programme. The contrast between primary and secondary CLIL was an issue that arose in many interviews.

Although, overall, the target class performed relatively well at school, there were a few participants who said that at times they had felt overwhelmed by CLIL and that their language skills were not good enough to follow the English-medium instruction. Studying certain subjects (e.g. mathematics and chemistry) partly in a foreign language was said to pose an extra challenge and to cause occasional difficulties in their learning, which echoes Pihko's (2010) research. The most critical voice was Hanna's:

Maybe I just didn't keep up with the others.. well enough.. I think I would've just needed like more personal support.. maybe I even sometimes thought to myself that I wish I wasn't in this class. (Hanna)

In general, Hanna's English use after CLIL had been very limited and her English language self-concept seemed to be fairly negative. It is worth remarking that even those participants who experienced difficulties later on in their education assessed CLIL as a positive and beneficial experience and would still choose to go through the same sort of schooling. A few of them speculated that without CLIL they might have experienced more severe foreign language learning difficulties and greater language anxiety. For instance, despite her negative remarks, Hanna remained positive about being selected for the CLIL class:

I don't think that I'd know how to speak even this much English if I'd only started it later.. I think it's been useful that I was there and hung in there with the others. (Hanna)

Most participants were satisfied with the amount of CLIL, which was approximately 25 per cent of the overall teaching. They justified their satisfaction on various grounds. Some looked at the issue in relation to their language proficiency and considered that there was enough CLIL to give them a good command of English. Others evaluated the amount from the perspective of content learning and believed that more CLIL instruction might have led to difficulties in mastering the different school subjects. For instance, the following quotation from Juho's

interview, in which he juxtaposes different educational models, exemplifies how, on the one hand, he appreciated CLIL but, on the other, how he considered that some matters have to be learned in one's L1:

Yes I would [put my children in CLIL].. and I think exactly this is good that.. that if the options were to send them to this kind of class, a totally Finnish-medium class or a totally English-medium class in Finland.. then I would rather put them in this kind of class than in a totally English-medium class because.. because anyway there are a lot of things like this that you have to learn in Finnish. (Juho)

A few participants agreed with the amount of CLIL they received because it did not have a stigmatizing effect; that is, they felt that it was enough to achieve the general aim of the CLIL programme (i.e. of making pupils confident and competent language users) but that more English-medium teaching might have been viewed negatively by their non-CLIL peers. Only four participants mentioned wanting to have even more CLIL. This was mostly in secondary school where, as has already been mentioned, the amount of CLIL decreased considerably.

In conclusion, CLIL seems to have made the participants' schooling enjoyable, which has been identified in previous research on pupils currently enrolled in CLIL (e.g. Massler, 2012; Pladevall-Ballester, 2015). Enjoying school was not typical in Finland at that time, as the 1990s was in general a period of major cuts to school budgets, which was mirrored in pupils' dissatisfaction with school (e.g. Linnakylä, 1993; Nikkanen, 1999). However, it is important to bear in mind that, whatever the participants felt as they looked back, other factors besides CLIL may have affected their school satisfaction. Nevertheless, the participants' perception was that, at least to some extent, especially CLIL had increased their school satisfaction.

Perceptions of the effect of CLIL

Overall, the participants believed that CLIL had enhanced their language proficiency. The most recurrent theme was the positive English language self-concept that CLIL had formed (see also Roiha & Mäntylä, *in press*). That is, the majority of the participants declared that they were confident language users who had not experienced any language anxiety, and they emphasized the role of CLIL in this. Again, the participants emphasized that the early start in CLIL had had an impact on their English proficiency, which speaks for the implementation of CLIL at an early, primary level:

Exactly those, pronunciation and how easy it is to follow spoken language, so I believe the younger you study or in general hear or use the language a little, the easier it is to acquire it. (Emmi)

The participants underlined how natural a language English had become to them as a result of CLIL. Most

of them considered that their English competence was generally much better than average. Some even evaluated their English proficiency as being almost nativelike:

All the grammatical structures and so on are as obvious as in speaking Finnish so I don't need to think about them at all. (Olli)

Just like in Finnish.. like you'd be discussing in Finnish.. you're able to express yourself the same way in English. (Jukka)

It is worth noting that English had not had a very prominent role in the lives of some of the participants who perceived themselves as highly competent English users. For instance, Olli had not used English very much after CLIL, and Jukka's studies had included only a few English courses (see [Appendix 1](#)).

In addition to overall English proficiency, the participants regarded CLIL as specifically benefiting certain language skills. Three-quarters of the participants thought that CLIL had mostly developed their vocabulary and speaking skills:

I think that many words became familiar.. even if they didn't go into your productive vocabulary they've still been like hold on I've heard that somewhere before.. and the context of the word has become in some ways familiar. (Kimmo)

Well you could say the terminology in geography or biology.. of course you acquired a much richer vocabulary. (Sanna)

Probably at least speaking.. pronunciation and using the language in everyday situations.. and how you pronounce a word properly. (Maria)

In line with the participants' perceptions, many studies from different CLIL contexts have similarly shown that CLIL pupils are often ahead of their peers in vocabulary and oral production (e.g. Admiraal et al., 2006; Lasagabaster, 2008; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008). However, arguably, which specific language skills CLIL enhances depends in part on how CLIL is implemented in practice, which varies a great deal within Europe (e.g. Eurydice, 2006). It can be inferred that in the CLIL context examined in this study, a great deal of emphasis was placed on oral output as well as input (see e.g. Krashen, 1986; Swain, 1985). Listening comprehension was mentioned by one fifth of the participants whereas grammar, reading and writing were referred to only occasionally.

Two-thirds of the participants in the present study perceived that CLIL had had a neutral effect on their content learning. Many related this outcome to how natural CLIL was, and considered that the language of instruction did not play a role in the learning process:

I'd say more or less zero [=neutral effect].. that I don't.. when the problem of grammar went away so quickly then it was just a different way of teaching the same thing.. either you learned it or you didn't.. I'd say it would've had the same impact even if it had been in Finnish. (Jonne)

Due to the early start of CLIL, the participants had acquired English implicitly, which helped them learn the content regardless of the language of instruction. This offers further support for the implementation of CLIL already in the first years of primary school.

About one fifth of the participants hypothesized that CLIL might even have advanced their content learning:

I've thought of it more like this that we have in fact somehow learned something extra or more precisely because things have come sort of through two channels both a bit in Finnish and in English.. so they've formed some sort of synthesis in the head quite early on. (Maria)

Well.. perhaps I would see it that going through things in English sort of taught us much more than if they had been covered in Finnish.. because at least I had to work to learn them so maybe then they stuck in your head better. (Hanna)

Maria's and Hanna's views echo Coyle (2013) and Hunt (2011), who found that secondary pupils considered that CLIL lessons called for greater concentration which, in turn, led to better learning. Interestingly, even though a few participants in the present study considered that CLIL meant an extra workload, they still reported enjoying it and considered it motivating. This is in line with previous research which has shown that if pupils generally regard the teaching as motivating, they are more willing to face challenging learning situations (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009).

In contrast, only three participants raised some concerns regarding their content learning. Anna and Emmi remembered experiencing minor difficulties in chemistry in secondary school. However, both of them emphasized that overall, CLIL did not have a significant impact on their content learning. Annika was the only one who reported some difficulties in learning the content in CLIL already at primary level:

Maybe in some mathematics or that kind of subject I maybe felt that it was a bit too much because it was challenging anyway.. then when you also had to learn it in a foreign language it maybe increased the level [of difficulty] then. (Annika)

Despite the criticism, Annika expressed her opinion somewhat discreetly. This may also be due to the fact that she did not want to put too much emphasis on her difficulties when speaking to another former CLIL pupil, which raises questions as to whether other participants may have been

minimizing their possible difficulties because of being interviewed by a former CLIL peer. To overcome social desirability bias, the participants were specifically encouraged to give their genuine opinions about CLIL. Furthermore, their perceptions were investigated by means of direct and indirect questions. For instance, the question of negative issues about CLIL was addressed explicitly as its own theme as well as at various stages in the interview in relation to the participants' accounts.

Discussion and conclusion

Thus far, only a minority of studies has looked at pupils' perceptions of CLIL, and those studies that have been conducted have been quantitative and have mostly focused on secondary pupils. Moreover, the participants have all been pupils currently enrolled in CLIL programmes (e.g. Coyle, 2013; Pihko, 2010). The present study examines the issue qualitatively and explores the subject with former pupils who are reflecting on their CLIL experiences retrospectively. The aim was to broaden understanding of CLIL and offer a new way of approaching it. The research setting meant that the participants were able to reflect on their experiences in the long-term. By this time they also possessed both the skills and the vocabulary to critically examine their CLIL practices, which young learners may lack.

In general, the participants recollected their past CLIL experiences in an overtly positive light. For the participants, CLIL had provided enjoyable and satisfying school experiences, and had made their school-days more interesting. This echoes previous CLIL research (e.g. Pihko, 2010; Pladevall-Ballester, 2015). The fact that they had begun to learn in CLIL already at an early age seemed to be of importance to the participants. Many of them said that CLIL was a very natural teaching approach and it made no difference to them whether the language of instruction was Finnish or English. While this is a small-scale qualitative study and thus not generalizable, this result nevertheless encourages the implementation of early CLIL.

Some of the interviewees even reflected on issues of privilege. Many of them said that they realized when they were still very young that CLIL would be useful in their future path in life. Additionally, many felt that comparing themselves to others (mostly to their non-CLIL peers) and the positive recognition from their surroundings had in part affected their sense of superiority as language users. However, when interpreting this result, it is important to acknowledge the time when they were at school: in the 1990s, bilingual education was rarer and generally seen as more special than it would be nowadays, which arguably had an effect on the participants' self-

concept (see also Roiha & Mäntylä, *in press*). The sense of privilege may have also partly overlapped with the participants' socioeconomic background, which was relatively high. In general, even though CLIL has expanded in many countries, it is still often implemented in areas of high socioeconomic status (Cenoz et al., 2014), which can mark it as elitist. One way to tackle this issue would be to make CLIL more accessible to a wide range of learners.

The participants were unanimous about the positive effect of CLIL on their overall English proficiency. Some small variation existed as regards the areas of language competence. Most participants emphasized the strong English language self-concept that CLIL had shaped in them: the participants felt confident as language users and they trusted their language skills, which is a valuable result, and one of the desired outcomes of any language education. As for specific language areas, it was generally considered that CLIL had mostly affected their vocabulary and speaking skills, followed by listening comprehension. This is in line with previous studies which have shown that pupils generally consider CLIL to have a positive effect on their language skills (e.g. Coyle, 2013; Ramos, 2007). This has been further demonstrated in research (e.g. Lasagabaster, 2008; Lorenzo et al., 2010; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2008).

In general, CLIL did not seem to affect the participants' learning of different subjects. The most common view was that CLIL had a neutral impact on content learning. Some participants considered that CLIL even benefited their content learning, and only a few participants reported occasional difficulties in some subjects. Similarly, in Massler (2012) and Pladevall-Ballester (2015), some pupils felt that CLIL helped them learn content better, although the research conducted on the topic seems generally to support the perception that CLIL does not have a substantial effect on pupils' content learning (e.g. Dallinger et al., 2016; Seikkula-Leino, 2007). However, the research results should be interpreted with caution as there can be significant differences between different CLIL programmes, for instance, as regards the amount of CLIL, the subjects taught and teaching practices (Eurydice, 2006). Besides, it is important to bear in mind that some pupils may experience difficulties in their schooling regardless of the language of instruction. In the present study, however, most participants reported that the language of instruction had not affected their learning process.

In the data there was very little criticism of CLIL. However, in line with previous research (e.g. Coyle, 2013; Pihko, 2010), a few participants expressed negative memories of their CLIL courses. It is worth noting that none of the participants had informed

the teachers of their difficulties, which serves as a valuable reminder to all CLIL practitioners not to take pupils' comfort for granted. Similarly, Pladevall-Ballester (2015) found that all the teachers reported that their pupils could follow CLIL lessons easily but more than a third of the pupils said that they had had difficulties in comprehension. This further highlights how crucial it is to give a voice to pupils themselves, as it can uncover new perspectives that have not been previously considered. Besides, even though learners who struggle in CLIL often seem to be a small minority within the CLIL groups, the issue of learning difficulties in CLIL is a very important but under-researched theme which should be given more attention in future research and CLIL practice. The fact that the learners who experienced difficulties in CLIL still perceived it as beneficial and seemed to enjoy it has implications about the potential of also providing CLIL to a more diverse range of pupils. In general, CLIL classes are often viewed as rather homogenous groups of learners, partly due to the pupil selection. However, it seems that some diversity will always exist, regardless of the relative homogeneity. For instance, in the present study, on the one hand, there were a few pupils who felt that they would have liked to receive more learning support in CLIL while, on the other hand, there were a few others who had been living and attending school abroad before joining the CLIL class, had excellent language skills, and could have benefited from more challenging language instruction. This exemplifies the value of and need for qualitative case studies conducted from an emic perspective.

An important finding of this present study is that even a fairly moderate amount of CLIL (i.e. a quarter of the overall teaching) seemed to really motivate pupils and have a positive effect on their language learning. Another incentive for the implementation of such small-scale CLIL programmes is that they may be more feasible in practice, as they do not require as many resources as very extensive CLIL programmes. Nowadays language teaching approaches resembling CLIL are receiving more consideration in many European countries, where there seems to be a trend for early language learning. Although early language teaching is not equivalent to CLIL, it nevertheless often has similar features, such as functionality and the use of language more as a tool than a target. From this angle, the present study offers encouraging results: its findings as regards making pupils confident language users and at the same time making their schooling more enjoyable supports the adoption of CLIL practices also in mainstream language education. With a recent PISA study revealing that, on average, more than half of pupils experience school-related anxiety (OECD, 2017), the issue of school satisfaction is a very topical one.

While this study focused on investigating participants' current views, which were socially constructed in the interview process, it is important when interpreting the results to bear in mind the research setting and the time frame. For instance, both the conceptualization of CLIL and CLIL practices have evolved since these participants attended school. This means that to avoid anachronism, the results and their implications need to be placed in their historical context. Moreover, as Grin (as cited in Coyle, 2007) has claimed, there are more than 200 different models of CLIL. Therefore, the results from any CLIL study are always context-specific to some extent. Consequently, the results of the present study must also be situated in this particular CLIL context. Moreover, the participants were retrospectively recalling their CLIL experiences, which took place more than 20 years ago. The participants' later life trajectories and life course may have influenced their memories and the way they reflected on their past CLIL times (see e.g. McAdams, 2008). Miller, Cardinal, and Glick (1997) argued that retrospective reflections may lead to oversimplifications or lapses of memory. It is perfectly plausible that the participants in this study analyzed their past CLIL experiences partly from the viewpoint of their current life situation, thus being guilty of anachronism; that is, their post-CLIL life trajectories and language-using situations may well have shaped their perceptions of the effect of CLIL on their language proficiency. As the descriptions of the participants presented in the methodology section and Appendix 1 reveal, most of them had continued to use English to some extent. Although English had been an integral part of their post-CLIL lives, many of them nevertheless perceived CLIL as being responsible for forming the foundation of their strong English skills.

This study did not examine the actual language competence of the participants but relied solely on their perceptions. Regardless of its limitations, this study has broadened the scope of CLIL research by examining CLIL from an emic perspective and giving a voice to the pupils themselves with the novel twist of using former pupils as the participants. In the future, it would be useful to collect more data on former pupils' experiences of CLIL in Finland in order to get a more comprehensive view of the topic. It would also be interesting to conduct a broader investigation of the effect of CLIL on pupils' school satisfaction across countries.

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ORCID

Anssi Roiha  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1640-1514>

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Appendix 1. Participants' post-CLIL studies and English use

| | |
|--------|---|
| Anna | - English-medium Master's degree abroad - had lived and studied abroad for eight years using English |
| Annika | - Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences (only a few English courses) - had used English occasionally at work and in her free time |
| Arttu | - was currently completing a Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work |
| Eemeli | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work |
| Emmi | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work |
| Hanna | - dual diploma from upper secondary and vocational school (only a few English courses) - had used English occasionally at work |
| Jere | - Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences (only a few English courses) - had been on a work placement abroad for 6 months using English - had used English occasionally at work |
| Jonne | - vocational degree (only a few English courses) - had used English occasionally at work and in his free time |
| Juho | - English-medium Master's degree in Finland - had used English frequently at work |
| Jukka | - vocational degree (only a few English courses) - had used English frequently at work and in his free time |
| Kaapo | - matriculation examination certificate - had lived and worked abroad for several years using English |
| Kalle | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work |
| Kimmo | - Master's degree abroad (first two years English-medium) - had used English occasionally at work |
| Lotta | - Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences (only a few English courses) - had used English occasionally in her free time |
| Maria | - was currently completing a Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English occasionally at work and in her free time |
| Marko | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work |
| Niko | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had lived and worked abroad using English |
| Olli | - Bachelor's degree (only a few English courses) - had used English occasionally at work and in his free time |
| Pasi | - Master's degree (English-medium courses and exchange year abroad) - had lived and worked abroad for four years using English |
| Riikka | - English-medium Master's degree in Finland - had used English occasionally at work |
| Roni | - was currently completing a Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English frequently at work and occasionally in his free time |
| Samu | - had studied in a university of applied sciences (only a few English courses) - had used English frequently at work and occasionally in his free time |
| Sanna | - English-medium Master's degree abroad - had studied and lived abroad several years using English |
| Tuukka | - Master's degree (English-medium courses) - had used English occasionally at work and in his free time |