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“The thing... is kinda complicated”: What and how do you assess in CLIL?

“Every teacher is a language teacher” has almost become a mantra in educational systems throughout the world. However, what does it mean in practice? If language learning and teaching is a part of any classroom, how do you teach and assess both content and language simultaneously? This question inspired a collaboration of teachers and researchers from all around the world which we reflect on in this paper.

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Why is assessment in CLIL complicated?

With the advent of educational approaches such as content-based instruction (CBI) in the US context (e.g., Met, 1999) or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in Europe in the 1990s (e.g., Marsh, 2002), by now content and language should have become the single focus of education, as Ball, Kelly, and Clegg (2015) argued.

The reality is, however, more diverse and has to do with the terms CBI and CLIL referring to a multitude of approaches which combine the teaching of content and language. Considering CLIL being the educational approach known in Europe and Finland, we will use CLIL to discuss content and language integrated learning hereinafter.

This hardly helps to alleviate the challenge of various interpretations of ‘togetherness’ of content and language. On one hand, there are classrooms where subject-based aims take prevalence, and subjects are taught in an additional language. On the other hand, there are approaches where the subject serves as a background to fulfil the goal of language acquisition. One outcome of this is that those teachers who identify themselves as content teachers voice their concerns for lack of language expertise. Likewise, those having a language teacher identity acknowledge their lack of expertise in the content matter.

Integration in CLIL: teaching, learning, and assessment

It is against this background that we embarked on our journey bringing together CLIL and assessment researchers, teachers, and educators from around the world to work towards the common goal of expanding our understanding of assessment in CLIL (deBoer & Leontjev, 2020).

We collectively recognised that rather than conceptualising content-focus–language-focus on a continuum, we could draw from another relatively recent international collaboration, Nikula et al. (2016), who suggested the emphasis should be on kinds of content and language pedagogies – explicit/visible and implicit/invisible – and the four different ways these are intersected in CLIL classrooms. We also drew upon Davison and Leung's (2009) classroom-based assessment cycle, consisting of planning assessment, collecting information about learning, interpreting it, providing feedback to learners, and, if needed, making adjustments to the subsequent teaching, learning, and assessment in cycles.

This opened the discussion about assessment in CLIL in relation to classroom teaching and learning and how it unfolds (rather than as separate assessment activities). Next, we introduce what assessment can look like in the four ways that content and language intersect in various CLIL classrooms.

In classrooms where content and language pedagogies are visible, syllabi have clear descriptions of what and how the subject-specific content (e.g., geography) and language are to be acquired. Learning of content and language happens in stages, each stage described with regard to its content and language goals. The goal of assessment is to determine whether learners are ready to move to the following stage as well as to provide teachers with the information helping them guide their learners to that stage. Shaw (2020) discusses how a scale of descriptors developed for history lessons based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CoE, 2018) can be used in a lesson's assessment activity. The scale included such descriptors as "Can recognise a complex historical source text in order to focus on the points of most historic relevance to target audience." (Shaw, 2020, p. 49). The lesson's topic was the opposition to the USSR's control in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The goal was to assess whether learners understood complex historical texts and summarised them using appropriate terminology. Shaw (2020) illustrated how the scale created opportunities for both seeing how much learning had taken place and developing learner abilities, including their ability to mediate complex historical knowledge to others.

In CLIL classrooms where the language is acquired as a "side effect" (Leung & Morton, 2016, p. 240) through attaining content-specific goals, the goal of assessment is to elicit learners' content knowledge. When interviewed, CLIL teachers focusing on content oftentimes say that they do not teach or assess language (Leontjev, Jakonen, & Skinnari, 2020). Yet, the reality of the classroom is that teachers still focus on language in various ways, e.g., supporting learners' understanding by explaining complex concepts in everyday language. That is, in these classrooms teachers do assess

language, albeit implicitly and unsystematically, developing their understanding of where their learners' difficulties stem from and how they can help learners overcome these difficulties (Leontjev, Jakonen, & Skinnari, 2020; Wewer, 2014).

Then, there are classrooms which are not tied to a specific discipline, i.e., classrooms where there is more focus on the language. The teachers' goal is to socialise learners into the academic discourse, which can happen in two general ways. The first can be conceptualised as focusing on form(s), modelling academic language for learners. The second can be described as academic language emerging through learners' interaction with peers and the teacher. Teachers build on learners' contributions as they guide their learners. While the focus of assessment is on the language in both cases, in the first case, learners are typically assessed through tests and quizzes and in the second case, assessment oftentimes emerges as a part of interaction. Basse and Peña (2020) explore how this assessment-in-interaction happens, tracing how a teacher, through interacting with their learners, developed their understanding of the word 'fracture', which one of the learners used together with the word 'bones'. The teacher's reaction was: "If you say bones can fracture and then you can write 'break' here". The teacher added that the learners could use either of the words depending on how well they remembered it (p. 199).

The final approach to integration of content and language is where language and content do not follow a prescribed path. Learners discover content and language in dialogic interaction with the teacher and among themselves. Assessment opportunities emerge in interaction, as the teacher builds on learners' contributions to guide the development of their content and language knowledge. Learner performance is not individual, but co-constructed with others. Leontjev, Jakonen, and Skinnari (2020) trace how this co-construction happens as the teacher leads a learner's understanding of the purpose of having triple-glazed windows in the house. The teacher guides the learner to stating this purpose as 'using less heat' as opposed to 'keeping out the cold'. Not only is 'heat' the appropriate scientific term; it also marks a change in learners' understanding of the purpose of insulation – saving energy. DeBoer (2020), in turn, discusses how learner-learner asynchronous online interaction in a forum can become a basis for the teacher's guidance of learners' development. Throughout their interaction, the learners built on their expertise in mathematics, chemistry, and biology, which the teacher did not possess. The whole history of learners' interaction was available on the forum, which created opportunities for the teacher to help the learners further develop both the use of academic language and the conceptual understanding of an environmental issue.

Transcending the boundaries

It is tempting to think about these different ways content and language can be integrated as neat boxes. Consequently, one may think of kinds of assessment typical in these classrooms: tests and quizzes having both linguistic and content criteria in one classroom, or dialogic and emergent assessment as a part of interaction in another. We think, however, that this underuses Leung and

Morton's (2016) conceptualisation of integration. Informed by the view of classroom assessment as connected cycles (Davison & Leung, 2009), we suggest all four kinds of integration are possible in any CLIL classroom. Different kinds of assessments elicit particular information about learners, and teachers can act upon the information in different ways. For example, the teacher can use a rubric to gain information about what learners can and cannot do with their content and language knowledge and use this information in dialogic interaction with learners, simultaneously gaining deeper insights into sources for learners' struggles and guiding their development.

It should also be kept in mind that content and language mediate one another. Teachers can use learners' strengths in a language to develop their conceptual knowledge and build on the learners' conceptual understanding to develop their academic language. These 'pieces of the puzzle' come together as the teacher gains more insights into learners' abilities, assessment becoming an interface between teaching and learning. The outcome is that content and language develop together and inseparably from one another.

We acknowledge that there are no one-size-fits-all solutions to the types of classrooms that have been outlined above. We also fully acknowledge the struggles CLIL teachers may have in focusing on and building on language or content when they feel they lack expertise in doing so.

One source of confidence in merging content and language assessment into one can be CLIL teachers' collaboration with language or content teachers respectively. Likewise, collaboration among CLIL teachers, which is gaining prominence both in Finland (Suvikyky r.y.) and Japan (J-CLIL), is a resource for inspiration to implement and develop new ideas in teaching and assessing in CLIL classrooms. We think that collaborations between teachers and researchers are essential to driving developments in teaching and assessment in CLIL classrooms. Furthermore, we think that teachers in these collaborations should not be subjects of research but instead should actively and creatively connect their expertise in teaching CLIL with expertise from researchers. This way, practice ceases being an application of theory. Instead, theory and practice 'work together' towards a common goal. Through this, we can further the research opportunities, share experiences, and contribute to the growing understanding of ourselves as educators and researchers.

At the end of the day, we do things differently in the classroom. Developing classroom teaching, learning, and assessment practices can be a personal journey, but it does not have to be a lonely one.

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This article draws on discussions and examples coming from an edited volume we both had a pleasure working on as the two editors alongside with a number of researchers, teachers, and assessment specialists throughout the world. For more information, see

<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-3-030-54128-6>

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