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LSP, CLIL & EMI: MAJOR OR MINOR?

Abstract: What are the core similarities between the teaching programmes known in academia as Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English Medium Instruction (EMI)? What distinguishes one from the other – the prevalence of the foreign language or the content taught? To what extent do they enhance future professionals' mastery of the body of knowledge and skills crucial for their career paths? What space and status are these programmes given in academic curricula – that of majors or minors, core subjects or electives? Is academia where it all ends, or does it only then begin?

In the era of rapid changes and global migrations, what are universities doing to foster multilingualism among individuals, professionals and communities? This is one of the major concerns of the international Circle U. academic family and other European alliances supporting student and staff mobility. We shall attempt to answer these questions on different approaches to using foreign languages for developing and honing students' skills, and promoting multilingualism in our multicultural academic communities and professional circles.

Keywords: LSP, CLIL, EMI, plurilingualism, academia, professionals.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The offered study aims to shed light on contemporary trends of internationalisation and globalisation and their impact on teaching in foreign languages at higher education institutions. Over the past few years, universities offering courses through English, or content and language integration courses, have sprung up across Europe. The increase in the mobility of students and teachers, dating back to 1987, when the Erasmus project began to be implemented, and the accelerated development of new educational technologies, had a decisive influence on the fact that learning through foreign languages has become a key linguistic topic of teaching and research. An additional language or languages, in fact, multilingualism, has come to be seen as a good means to give world citizens the different lenses needed to capture, understand and create our global reality (Skutnab-Kangas 1995; García 2009). Therefore, the main objectives of the European Language Policy point to common endeavour for EU citizens to become multilingual individuals in a community of high levels of linguistic diversity with as many as 24 official languages:

The European Union actively encourages its citizens to learn other European languages, both for reasons of professional and personal mobility within its single market, and as a force for cross-cultural contacts and mutual understanding.[...] The ability to understand and communicate in more than one language is seen as a desirable life-skill for all European citizens, enabling them in particular to take advantage of the freedom to work or study in another EU Member State (EU Business 2008, 1).

The main objective of the European Higher Education Area, created as part of the Bologna process, was to encourage the internationalisation of higher education (HE). World university rankings in recent years, emphasising quality teaching in addition to research, have highlighted examples of effective practice, thereby raising awareness of quality issues (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENKA) and stimulating competition between institutions and countries, especially in the context of the globalised labour market by means of teaching and learning through many languages.

A solid command of the language of tuition is necessary for students, academics and administrative staff to benefit from an international exchange programme. However, “[a]s the lack of language skills remains one of the main barriers to the participation in European education, training and youth mobility opportunities”, one of the specific objectives of Erasmus+ is “to promote language learning and linguistic diversity”.¹ An effective way to promote such diversity is by enabling learners to gain skills necessary for international communication

1 <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/resources-and-tools/online-language-support>
[Accessed 10/01/2025].

and professional cooperation through courses taught in foreign languages. Providing more space in academic curricula for LSP, CLIL and EMI courses can be an important means to that end.

2. LSP – LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) courses are “those in which the methodology, the content, the objectives, the materials, the teaching, and the assessment practices all stem from specific, target languages uses based on an identified set of specialized needs” (Trace et al. 2015, 2). LSP courses, therefore, offer a variety of languages and a variety of specific purposes such as French for tourism, Spanish for medicine, German for engineering, English for law, etc. (Trace et al. 2015, 2). Such courses emerged after the Second World War to meet the need for specialised communication in various professional fields. However, they gained prominence in 1970s in the context of a paradigm shift towards learner-centred teaching as well as in the context of globalisation. Institutions such as the Council of Europe, the British Council or the United Nations contributed to the promotion of language learning. In Europe, the Council of Europe influenced developments in needs analysis and curriculum design (See: Starfield 2012 for the historical development of LSP). In the field of research, three main branches emerged: language for academic purposes, language for science and technology, and language for occupational (or vocational) purposes with a predominance of research on English (See: Johns, 2013 for the history of ESP research).

In the context of social change and economic development, LSP instruction was seen as more efficient. It was often opposed to or defined in contrast to general language instruction or language for general purposes. For Trace et al. (2015, 1), general language instruction evolves around “three main components (a) the acquisition of the knowledge of language skills for general communication use; (b) exposing learners to other cultures and ideas; and (c) fostering an appreciation of difference in cultures and ways of thinking”.² As these objectives remained rather broad, they did not necessarily address the needs of learners outside the classroom, especially when these learners had specific or immediate language needs. In this context, LSP courses provided an alternative or a complement to general language courses in higher education. Specific purposes added value to general language courses, which were sometimes renamed or regarded as language for no obvious or no apparent purpose (Trace et al. 2015). Over the years, LSP courses have replaced Language for General Purposes courses in some institutions while in others they continue to coexist, sometimes with the recent addition of CLIL or EMI courses.

In describing English for Specific Purposes, Strevens (1988, 1-2) identified four absolute characteristics that are often used in the literature to define LSP in

2 Trace et al.'s definition draws inspiration from the work of J. M. Norris (2006) on the subject of foreign language education in the United States.

general (rather than just English), and they include a form of teaching “designed to meet specified needs of the learners; related in content (i.e., in its themes and topics) to particular disciplines, occupations, and activities; centred on the language appropriate to those activities, in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc. and analysis of this discourse; and differentiated to General [Language]”.³

Despite this simple and straightforward definition, LSP instruction has raised issues, some of which are still unresolved today. These questions include: Are LSP courses so different from other types of language courses? What needs must be considered when designing LSP courses? How specific should LSP courses be? How can both language and content be taught? At what level and in what context should LSP courses be introduced? Do LSP courses favour global languages or local languages? How do LSP courses address culture? For a good overview of some of these topics, see: Trace et al. (2015, 6-13) and Starfield (2012, 3-5).

We will focus on two relevant aspects: the risk of reducing language teaching to English-only, and the link between language and content teaching in LSP courses typically provided by language teachers.

Needs analysis is rightly seen as one of the strengths of LSP courses. While Strevens’ definition focuses on the needs of the learners, we have already emphasised that the context in which the courses are developed should also be taken into account. This includes the community, the language programme or curriculum, the university or any other higher education institution and other stakeholders. A new context has emerged with the Erasmus+ programme of European Universities alliances, of which Circle U. is a part. In such a context, the risk of having English-only courses or programmes is real, but many alliances are trying to define language policies that promote or rethink plurilingualism and interculturality. While LSP courses have helped to professionalise and/or rationalise language teaching in higher education, they have also often been relegated to the status of minor courses, limiting their impact, or often developed for the sole purpose of teaching English. Thinking beyond the academic sphere, in order to help professionalise a country’s workforce, LSP courses should be given the status of major subjects.

How can we build alliances of European Universities and at the same time seize the opportunity to diversify our offer and integrate the reality of EU multilingualism? Many alliances are seizing this opportunity with creativity and pragmatism.⁴ UNITA, for example, has developed intercomprehension programmes, while EUTOPIA’s focus is on Connected Learning Communities (Circle U. 2023, 5-6). Circle U. is seeking to develop a fluid language policy that promotes self-awareness and reflection (for example, on what it means to reduce

3 «General English» in the original text as Strevens focuses on English for Specific Purposes.

4 See Circle U. Conference on 10 October 2023 «European universities as actors in multilingualism». <https://u-paris.fr/conference-circle-u-les-universites-europeennes-actrices-du-multilinguisme-en-replay/> [Accessed 06/03/2025]

language learning to English learning) and toolkits to embrace multilingualism and encourage plurilingualism. Its language policy is a work in progress. It is expected to be ready and available by Autumn 2025. Meanwhile, other projects are in the pipeline: the creation of communities of practice⁵ for language teachers through the Language Teachers' Nexus⁶ to foster collaboration and innovative practices in language teaching, and the development of a tandem learning platform (CU.connect) to support students' language learning and mobility.⁷

The second brief point of focus has to do with LSP courses insofar as they provide language and content teaching in a context where most language teachers tend to be trained in the humanities. How specific can their teaching be in terms of content? In certain cases, the optimal solution is to collaborate closely with colleagues who possess expertise in the relevant discipline when designing an LSP course syllabus (See: the tradition of "consultations with subject-specialist informants" in Johns 2013, 20). In the 1990s and 2000s, genre and corpus studies helped language teachers become autonomous. But in some higher education institutions, recent efforts have tended to offer EMI courses rather than language courses, as if language learning were a natural accompaniment to content-based courses, and thus taken for granted. When an LSP teacher (i.e. a language expert) is replaced by a content teacher (i.e. a non-linguist), the question is to what extent it will be beneficial for learners in terms of their language proficiency.

In conclusion, LSP courses have developed in contrast to general language teaching. However, some researchers (Trace et al. 2015, 4) see this as a continuum or a linear process rather than an opposition, because ultimately the development of a foreign language curriculum should always include six basic elements identified by Brown (1995, 20): needs analysis, goals and objectives, testing, materials selection and development, teaching, and programme evaluation. Are CLIL and EMI courses part of this continuum? The discussion is open.

3. CLIL – CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING

CLIL is a linguistic and educational approach that, like a generic umbrella, encompasses a large number of educational opportunities, contexts, strategies or scaffolds and goals. The diversity, flexibility and authenticity that are inherent in CLIL exclude the prescriptiveness of this method, i.e. make the key principles of teaching significantly different from other practices.

5 See Circle U. Open Conversation on 31 January 2025: *The Power of Teacher Collaboration with Professor Marjan Asgari*. <https://www.circle-u.eu/events/2025/open-conversation-power-of-teacher-collaboration.html> [Accessed 06/03/2025]

6 See Circle U. Language Teacher's Nexus. <https://www.circle-u.eu/news/2025/mobilizing-language-learners-and-teachers.html> [Accessed 06/03/2025]

7 This agenda is being implemented by the Circle U. platform CU.mil (Multilingualism, Interculturality and Language Lab). For more information, see <https://www.circle-u.eu/about/platforms/mil/> [Accessed 06/03/2025]

Interest in the CLIL method has been more pronounced than its greatest advocates expected (Maljers et al. 2007, 7), although it represents a marked contrast to the previous teaching tradition or a complete conceptual reorientation to the established language practice (Shohamy 2006). CLIL aims to (a) respect a multilingual teaching philosophy, (b) consider language, content, communication, context and cognition as an inseparable unified entity, (c) create a natural learning environment, (d) provide tasks that promote cognitive engagement and creativity, (e) enable collaborative knowledge construction, (f) promote dialogic interaction, and (g) develop awareness of self and others. However, it should be noted that the CLIL approach is an evolving educational approach, and its practice is not without problems and controversies (Bruton 2011, 2015; Dalton-Puffer 2011; Dalton-Puffer & Smit 2013).

Theorists and language experts, who participated and collaborated in the workshops organised by the Council of Europe and the European Commission, emphasised the importance of the diversity of CLIL approaches within: a) the development of numerous competencies (academic, conversational or communicative, cognitive, cultural and intercultural), (b) active and adequate application of language competences in relation to real life speech events or situations, and (c) opportunities to achieve sustainable learning outcomes and independent language development (Coile 2002; Marsh 2002; Ruiz de Zarobe & Jiménez Catalán 2013). It should be pointed out that, although interest in integrated learning in Europe has resulted in increased enthusiasm and active improvement of learning methods through CLIL, the definition and interpretation of the CLIL concept by its users and those who advocate it indicate that its characteristics are explained in different ways and that there are many modalities. This makes Marsh point out that “The applications of CLIL are different depending on the educational level, environment and particular approach” (Marsh 2008, 233). Similarly, Coyle (2000, vii) writes: “There are no set formulas and models for CLIL” and “we know that there is no one model that fits all CLIL contexts or any approach to integrating content and language teaching” (Coyle et al. 2007, 49).

CLIL is an approach within which content and a foreign language are taught in the target language and therefore the first “L” in the CLIL acronym represents any second language. However, in light of the prestigious position of English today, the supremacy it has as a language of CLIL is more than obvious (Lim & Low 2009). In practice and in theory, therefore, the most common pattern for integrating foreign language with content is through English, resulting in acronymic presentation as CEIL, which is rarely, if ever, used. The initiative of integrated language and content teaching was intended to develop a foreign or additional language in the first place. Despite that, experts like Cummins claim that “the first language must not be abandoned before it is fully developed” (Cummins 2000, 25).

Considering the four pillars of the CLIL method, below are the basic principles reduced to features that concern both teachers and students:

Content

Integration that is rigorous, authentic, and sustained is much more difficult than most of its advocates imagine. Constructing a rich, complex, cumulative integrated teaching that simultaneously helps students master an academic discipline and apply it in a coherently defined domain demands time, expertise, and resources (Hoachlander 1999, 2-3).

Cognition

When one languages, one uses language, among other purposes, to focus attention, solve problems and create affect. What is crucial to understand here is that language is not merely a means of communicating what is in one person's head to another person. Rather, language serves to construct the very idea that one is hoping to convey. It is a means by which one comes to know what one does not know (Swain & Lapkin 2013, 105).

Communication

To begin with, we are in a position to understand that almost all of what we customarily call "knowledge" is language. What is history other than words? Or astronomy? If you do not know the meanings of history words or astronomy words, you do not know history or astronomy. This means, of course, that every teacher is a language teacher. We mean that astronomy teachers quite literally, have little else to teach but a way of talking and therefore seeing the world. The new English, the new maths, the new social studies represent new languages. And a new language inevitably means new possibilities of perception (Postman & Weingartner 1971, 125).

Culture

Culture can be compared to an iceberg – only 10% of the whole is visible above the surface of the water, while the captain of the ship is most concerned about the 90% that is hidden below the surface. As with iceberg, the most significant and potentially the most dangerous part of the culture is invisible, that is the subjective part that continuously works on an unconscious level to shape our perceptions and our response to these perceptions. It is this aspect of culture that leads to the greatest misunderstandings (Cushner et al. 1996, 50).

The inextricable threads of content and cognition, culture and communication are mutually intertwined in the use of a language. Provided with well-balanced courses which integrate foreign language mastery with core curriculum content (being taught by either, or both experts), learners stand good chances of developing into competent communicators of professional matters in international encounters.

4. EMI – ENGLISH MEDIUM INSTRUCTION

EMI is a relatively new and still evolving form of education, which is why its definitions vary in reference literature. Basically, according to Smit (2023, 499) and the authors she quotes, 'EMI refers to the use of the English language to teach academic subjects, other than English itself' (Dafouz and Gray 2022, 1), 'in settings where English is a foreign or second language to at least some of the learners and/or teachers' (Pecorari and Malmström 2018, 503). What it shares with CLIL is the use of an L2 as the language of instruction. On the other hand, in CLIL contexts, the L2 does not solely imply the use of English, as it does in EMI. As a research area, EMI also lacks more empirical proofs from classrooms worldwide that would help define it as elaborately as CLIL (Macaro 2022, 154). What makes a crucial difference between the two approaches is that in EMI the focus is not on the language itself, but rather on the subject content. However, it does not (or should not) make the language aspect of the course negligible. On the contrary, as it does shift the balance between language and content, many questions remain to be discussed, some of which will be tackled below.

While secondary education in Europe has given a lot of space to CLIL, tertiary level institutions mainly opt for EMI courses, particularly at masters and doctoral level (Macaro 2022, 51, 68). Macaro and other authors (Davison 2006; Tange 2010; Dearden 2014; Do & Le 2017, Griffiths 2023, etc.) point to a number of issues relevant for conducting EMI programmes. Guided by them, we can consider the effectiveness of EMI programmes through the following key questions: Where? Who? What? and How?

- a) Where does EMI take place? Is it an EFL or an ESL context for the students, i.e., what language do they hear out of the classroom, their L1 or L2? If it is an ESL setting, what variety of English are they exposed to in and out of the classroom? If it is an EFL setting, what is the quality of the English language they are taught in?
- b) Who are the learners? Are they a mixed group of international students in tertiary education or are most/all of them home students sharing the same native language? Who are the teachers? Do they speak the same L1 as their students or are they native speakers of English? Who exactly are the students taught by – a content teacher or a language expert, or maybe both in partnership?
- c) What is being taught in English – one subject, several courses or a whole curriculum? What level of studies is EMI applied at? What language are the materials prepared in? What is in the focus of assessment – content only, or the language as well? What level of English are the participants supposed to be at to join an EMI programme? What are the learners' expectations regarding their English proficiency at the end of the course?

- d) How is classroom management conducted – in students' L1 or L2? How is assessment conducted – fully based on L2 or with feedback in L1 too? How are teachers prepared for conducting an EMI course? How much cooperation is there between content and language experts? How much space is EMI given in the curriculum of the specific institution? How much space is it given in the national curriculum? How (if at all) is tertiary-level EMI tuition connected with the secondary-level CLIL tuition?

Different experiences have been reported through systematic reviews (Fenton-Smith et al. 2017; Griffiths 2023) from different parts of the world. They prove that the pedagogy behind the answers to the above questions largely determines the impact that an EMI programme has on the learners. While it would be too voluminous to try and cover all of those aspects here, we shall rather focus on the impact that language policies can have within academia and education systems. Essentially, whether we are talking about LSP, CLIL or EMI courses, what matters is that they support future professionals' mastery of the necessary body of knowledge, and enhance their skills crucial for intercultural relations. With reference to the above-mentioned needs analysis, students of the nine universities in the Circle U. alliance have recently expressed wishes to learn more languages and to have more LSP courses in their university curricula (Janković et al. 2023, 20-21).

Orientation towards plurilingualism and multiculturalism has become a feature of many educational policies. Therefore, a matter of particular importance is the status of language-oriented programmes in national and academic curricula. The space and status that LSP, CLIL and EMI courses are given in tertiary education deserve attention. Completing a study programme in another language as one's major or minor will not lead to the same outcomes. Similarly, if courses crucial for students' future vocation and intercultural cooperation are given the status of core compulsory subjects, they will have a greater impact on the outcomes of all students' learning than elective courses which only some will opt for. The choices they make may also sometimes be guided by practical rather than by substantial academic reasons. Therefore, the policies that HE institutions and ministries formulate should provide the best guidance in building one's personality and professional identity, as those professionals will be, and already are, carriers of many social decisions.⁸ Bearing in mind the European Language Policy, as well as multiculturalism as the new image of the world, we need to ask ourselves: Is academia where it all ends, or does it only then begin?

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/feb/06/serbias-students-showing-world-democratic-hope>

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While balance between language and content obviously shifts in favour of content on the LSP-CLIL-EMI continuum, it is still language itself that truly makes communication possible. That is why languages deserve a prominent place in academic curricula. In terms of LSP, CLIL or EMI as pedagogical forms relevant for decision-making on language policy in higher education, we believe that it should be done keeping in mind linguistic pragmatism, which should include, among other things, the linguistic needs of students along with the potentialisation of those with talents and motivation as the most important parameters. Put differently, if we turn the issue into a potential that seeks out possible solutions in the classroom, we may consider the specific language method proponents to be completely correct when claiming that the “social microcosm in the classroom and learning practices determine the success and failure of the entire society, regardless of official policy” (Coyle et al. 2010, 7).

Substantial advantages of language-driven pedagogy should outweigh its potential shortcomings and transcend the boundaries of any official framework. If supported by formal education systems, such pedagogy can additionally light the way of the carriers of democratic changes and multicultural exchanges within academic circles and broader communities.

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JEZIK STRUKE (LSP), CLIL i EMI: GLAVNI ILI IZBORNI PREDMETI?

Rezime

Koje su osnovne sličnosti između nastavnih programa poznatih u akademskim krugovima kao jezik struke (LSP), integrirano učenje predmetnih sadržaja i stranog jezika (CLIL) i nastava na engleskom jeziku (EMI)? Po čemu se ovi pristupi međusobno razlikuju – da li po zastupljenosti stranog jezika ili sadržaja koji se predaje? U kojoj meri oni doprinose sticanju znanja i veština ključnih za buduće profesionalno delovanje studenata? Kakav status ovi programi imaju u akademskim kurikulumima – kao glavni ili sporedni predmeti, kao obavezni ili izborni kursevi? Da li se na akademiji sve završava ili nakon nje tek sve počinje?

U eri sve bržih promena i globalnih migracija, šta univerziteti preduzimaju kako bi podstakli višejezičnost među pojedincima, stručnjacima i u društvenim zajednicama? Ovo je jedno od ključnih pitanja kojima se bavi međunarodna akademska zajednica Circle U. i druge evropske alijanse koje podržavaju mobilnost studenata i nastavnog osoblja. Pokušaćemo da odgovorimo na ova pitanja razmatrajući različite pristupe primeni stranih jezika u cilju razvoja studentskih kompetencija, kao i promocije višejezičnosti u našim multikulturnim akademskim zajednicama i stručnim krugovima.

Ključne reči: jezik struke (LSP), CLIL, EMI, višejezičnost, akademska zajednica, stručnjaci.