

Strategies That Can Support the Development of English Language Output Within CLIL
Units of Inquiry in an Early Years Classroom in China

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Introduction

The term Content and Language Integrated Learning (hereon referred to as CLIL) was first coined only in the 1990s, by David Marsh working for the European Commission (Marsh, 1994). It has expanded in its use and with its pedagogy developed only within the last 20 years, with further foundational researchers including Do Coyle and Philip Hood. As an educational concept, it is hence still in its relatively early days. It is still very much in its early stages of growth.

Nonetheless, it already has been adopted around the world. As we will see, positive results have been observed in different contexts and it has received appraisal from both students and teachers for its impact on second language development. However, methods for how it can be best implemented still need to become more widespread. Practicing teachers of the strategy in different contexts state that they feel unprepared for it. It would seem educator attitudes and beliefs could be very important for its effectiveness.

The purpose of this work is first to review a range of literature on some background of CLIL and its current practice around the world. I will then reflect on some of my own experiences as an early years CLIL educator in China and relate these to the findings from the literature. Following this, I will first identify further research that may need to be done in the future. Second, I will state strategies that can be used to develop English language output within CLIL units of inquiry for early years in China.

I choose China, with students being native Chinese speakers developing English as a second language. This is because it is the context in which I teach and in which I will be able to do follow-up action research. Nonetheless, the literature chosen is from different countries. The ideas suggested will likely also be relevant to different settings and contexts. Similarly, while I

focus on early years, the research studied is from multiple age groups, and many of the ideas and concepts will also be relevant at primary school, high school and university level. Much of the research and practice of CLIL is with English as the language being learnt. Ideas may carry over the case of it being a second language, but research would be needed here. My own current teaching context is IB. However, I focus on CLIL programs more generally.

As I review the literature, all sources which investigate the current situation with regards to the implementation of CLIL are from 2020 or later, although occasionally the research they describe may have begun earlier. Only peer-reviewed articles were selected, and those which mention CLIL specifically in the title. This is to ensure it is relevant, reliable and up to date. Only references related to background and supporting ideas and theory will be from a time before 2020.

Literature Review

Background to CLIL

CLIL was first proposed by David Marsh in Europe in the 1990s, after which it began to be considered within European language policy and research began to take place. Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) for example, described its features in detail. The key idea however is that learning of a second or additional language is incorporated into academic content teaching. The two will be taught together, with the second or additional language being used within the content delivery and with opportunities to explicitly develop both included.

It is similar to bilingual education, as described by Baker and Wright (2017), in that both develop a second language as part of the overall teaching of students. In bilingual education however, content development and language development may be separated. There will be a greater proportion of times across the overall instruction, in which the focus is solely on language. The two languages - often mother tongue and second language - are both developed and across the total instruction, there may be a close to 50/50 balance of each. When content is being taught, the focus is likely on the content. It could be taught in either language, and especially during earlier stages of language development, may be in the mother tongue. In CLIL however, the content is taught as far as possible using the target language. The focus is on both together, so they can support each other. Lessons may have goals for both, and across the whole education program, there may then be a much higher proportional use of the second language.

Although David Marsh didn't explicitly state any theory that his ideas were based on (Marsh, 1994), they do have links to previous thinking in education. One is with communicative language teaching (Hymes, 1972), which states that language is learned most effectively by being used meaningfully. This is the focus of CLIL, the language being used to receive

information, discuss and express ideas about real content being studied. This in itself is linked to the input hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which states that comprehensible input is effective for language acquisition. It is also linked to the complementing output hypothesis (Swain, 1985), which states that language production is also important because it helps learners internalize rules and language use through practice, and to notice gaps in their knowledge. Learning and interaction in CLIL will require both input and output.

CLIL is also linked to constructivist learning as outlined by Piaget (1970). This emphasizes that we learn best not as passive receivers of knowledge, but by actively developing it. Focusing on the content and diversity of learning activities that will come with this, allows both language and subject development to happen in this way. Similarly, CLIL connects to sociocultural theory, as described by Vygotsky (1978). This posits that learning takes place through social communication and teamwork. Marsh put forward the inclusion of content focused interaction, group and collaboration activities, which use these.

An important concept of CLIL, developed by Do Coyle in the 1990s, outlined in Coyle et al. (2010) is that of the 4Cs. This describes four areas of knowledge and skill that should be incorporated into CLIL teaching and learning. The first is Content, focused on the subject - students should learn the content of an academic subject, such as math or science. The second is Communication, focused on the skills of the new language - students should develop skills, again, to use the language naturally and for real-world purposes. The third is Cognition, related to thinking skills - students should have the opportunity to develop critical and creative thinking, as well as metacognition and problem solving. The fourth and final is Community or Culture, related to intercultural understanding - students should have the opportunity to develop global awareness, respect for and ability to communicate with those from different cultures, and to

develop multicultural identity. Again, Coyle, Hood and Marsh do not directly state any previous theory that this develops from. However the communication aspect links back to communicative language teaching theory (1972). The cognition aspect links back to constructivist learning, described by Piaget (1970). As students construct their own knowledge through exploring problem solving, and application, cognitive skills are developed. Finally, the culture element links to the importance of intercultural awareness in education, put forward elsewhere in thinking and research, for example in Byram (1997).

The framework therefore balances content and language development, with that of 21st century skills and preparation for adult life in the increasingly multicultural world. It gives a foundation for CLIL. We should remember that content is a very broad term. It doesn't only include the most rigorous academic subjects, such as science and maths, but can also include social studies topics for example. In the case of early years, this might more often be the case. The 4Cs and hence CLIL are not age specific by definition. They provide a theory that can be used across ages and languages. We focus our attention now however on English and English output development within CLIL, which is the topic of this work.

Connection of CLIL to Language Teaching Theory

We have already stated that CLIL is in line with communicative language teaching. It is worth noting that it connects more broadly to modern ideas and thinking. Krashen (1982), still accepted and used, and a pioneer book in language learning, suggests that the most effective input involves that which as well as being comprehensible, is of interest and meaningful to the student, natural, and not grammatically sequenced. This is much more likely to be achieved when learning the language through exploration of subjects and real world content. There is potential for content to be very meaningful and of interest, although it may often be the

responsibility of the teacher to ensure an engaging presentation and connect it to students' lives, backgrounds and interests, to ensure that it is so for each of them . The idea of grammar and language as a complex dynamical system (Beckner et al., 2009) is relevant also. CLIL will provide an opportunity for much exposure to the language, as well as opportunities to practice speaking and discussion, allowing a student's language to develop naturally.

With regards to vocabulary development, Wei (2021) discusses how important vocabulary is for both academic success and language development. There are many different groups of words that need to be explored, as well as examples of different word parts. These include, for example, groups of prefixes and suffixes the understanding of which can provide a deeper understanding of the language and support all skills. Second or additional language learners have less opportunity for vocabulary exposure in their everyday lives. CLIL could provide contexts for being exposed to more words. This could include general academic words and even more common words that they do not otherwise encounter, as well as the subject-specific words.

It is widely accepted that integrating the language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing supports students with the abilities to switch between them , using language in the way that we might do in real-world contexts, and strengthening all of them. Project-based learning, as described in Thomas (2020) and task-based learning, as described in Willis and Willis (2023) both allow much opportunity for this. The two are also relevant to the Content and Culture sections of the 4Cs. With the focus on 21st century skills, project-based and task-based activities are very important in content and transdisciplinary classes. The content could provide a more engaging and meaningful context to use project-based learning and task-based learning to develop the language.

We are hence already beginning to see, from theory of language teaching and learning, some strategies that will be supportive in CLIL. Comprehensible input will be vital, with scaffolded supports, including slower and graded use of language, more visuals and strategic first language support. There will need to be much opportunity for practical and group work, allowing language to be practiced and developed naturally. Teachers will need to ensure content is meaningful, engaging and interesting to students. Finally, there will likely need to be explicit language practice and teaching included, for example, for vocabulary or grammatical structures.

Global Use, Support and Success of CLIL

Turning our attention now to research on the practical application of CLIL, it is seen that it is widely supported by educators in different countries and contexts. Smajla (2021) for example, found from interviews with twelve early service teachers in the early primary years in Slovenia that they acknowledge it as benefitting students. Lagou and Zorbas (2020) which looked at the results of interviews with and observations of primary school teachers in Greece, found teachers describing that CLIL has positive impacts on confidence and motivation in language use, which relates back to Krashen's theory. They also stated the importance of intercultural communication within language skills, which CLIL can promote.

Studies have also found that CLIL can have a positive impact at all age groups. Kim and Huh (2025) drew observations and conclusions from the implementation of a CLIL program for early years students in South Korea, focusing on discussing and exploring relevant everyday topics, and on supporting students with character development. They observed an increase in English language comprehension and output, as well as character development including increased sharing and helping of another. Students would have open discussions with each other and the teacher, look at and use resources, for example which they talked about countries,

accessing prior funds of knowledge and thinking. They would engage in hands-on and cooperative activities. These are all supportive of the development of young children. While only over a short time, of 16 sessions, and only using a small sample of eight students, this does show the impact such a program might have more broadly. Another study in early years, this time in Spain was Segura, Roquet, and Barón (2021). It found again only over a relatively short time period within one school year, although without a statistically significant result, that CLIL had a noteworthy impact on students' vocabulary acquisition.

Looking at higher age groups, Huang (2020) found that for primary school students in Taiwan, vocabulary production by students increased when CLIL was used in science teaching. Moore, Vonkova, and Altinkalp (2022) found that early secondary school students in the Czech Republic, who engaged in full CLIL or received some form of English input in their content classes, used English far more in their free time and recreational activities. Yufriзал (2021) found that higher education students in Indonesia, who received project-based CLIL as part of their course saw their writing and oral ability improve significantly and also said themselves that they had enjoyed the approach and felt they could gain and practice many social skills. This relates back to the theory of skills integration and its benefits within project-based learning.

Yaguara, Villalobos and Otálora (2021) which followed Grade 8 students in Columbia having CLIL implemented during virtual classes at the time of COVID-19, found increases in oral production and listening skills, as well as critical thinking and cultural awareness. This relates back to the 4Cs. Students reported themselves that classes were engaging and helped their English. Ruiz Hidalgo and Ortega-Sánchez (2023), a systematic study of 19 other articles, found many reported strengths, including motivation for English learning, lack of anxiety, increased cooperation and teamwork, and positive results seen across different curriculum subjects.

CLIL then, as well as lining up with theory of language teaching and learning, is supported by many teachers and students. Although more research will be needed, its impacts are being shown in different contexts. However, difficulties do exist.

Challenges in Implementation

Teachers in different contexts have found CLIL challenging to implement. Smajla (2021) for example, found that while the teachers interviewed believed in the benefits of CLIL, they encountered difficulties in practice, and indeed after one year, many had switched away from using it in its full capacity. Instead, they preferred a softer version. Key reasons were lack of experience or knowledge of how to teach in this way, as well as lack of necessary support from schools. Nguyen et al. (2025) found in interviews with teachers in Vietnam that teachers here found challenges. These included difficulties supporting students to bring in their funds of knowledge and difficulties with the language development aspect, overrelying on mother tongue, and unstrategic translanguaging. Ghaemi (2021), which explored interview results with 160 trainee primary school teachers in Kazakhstan found that new teachers felt they were not ready to teach using CLIL in Kazakhstan's trilingual education system and that more training is beneficial.

Level of training and experience is undoubtedly a factor. However, more experienced teachers have also found challenges. Lagou and Zorbas (2020), whose study involved teachers of varying experience up to over twenty years, found that teachers they interviewed in Greece expressed a lack of confidence and support as well as a desire for training. In any case, it should be desired that teachers of any level of experience, including newly trained teachers, are ready to implement CLIL.

It has been suggested that CLIL may be especially difficult for both younger ages and students of a lower English level. Teachers in Slovenia interviewed in the Smajla (2021) study claimed that CLIL might be difficult for lower level learners and an ability to understand the language was important. The Ghaemi (2021) study found that for the interviewed teachers in Kazakhstan, going up the grades, teachers seemed more ready, with preparedness for early years being particularly challenging. In Ruiz Hidalgo and Ortega-Sánchez (2023), the systematic study of 19 other relevant studies found that it had been claimed that CLIL is more difficult for students with less competence in English.

It is important to note however that much of the underlying theory of modern and high quality language teaching already discussed, which can come into CLIL, apply also to such learners. For the case of young learners in particular, very little research still exists. We have already seen in the Kim and Huh (2025) study, a context in which it has been shown to be effective in the early years. The aforementioned Segura et al. (2021), looking at the impact of CLIL on two subsequent age levels, found no significant difference between them.

For both early years and lower level learners, it may not be that CLIL is inappropriate. Instead it has potential, but its implementation may be more challenging, which is why training and exploration of a range of techniques that can be used is so important.

The Need for Professional Development

It would seem then that even experienced teachers and new teachers who have completed rigorous teacher training alike, feel unprepared. Much work may need to be done to introduce training and support on a number of levels.

A promising fact however, is that where this is occurring, it is proving to have benefits. Taylor (2022) describes a workshop on CLIL for teachers CLIL and English as medium of

instruction teachers in Thailand, comprising local Thai teachers, and both native and non-native English teachers from other countries. Notable increases were shown in self-assessed level of knowledge and resultant confidence, even after only one day of training. Charunsri & Saejaekha (2023) found that many university level teachers, also in Thailand, point to the effectiveness of training programs.

It has been shown in cases that teacher identity is also important. Teachers need to develop themselves as both content and language teachers, not as only one of the two. This will enable them to instruct with the correct focuses. Bárcena (2022), looking at two experienced teachers entering CLIL, found that the one who was more open-minded towards seeing herself now as a CLIL teacher specifically and adapting her practices was able to see a smooth and fulfilling transition. Helping teachers find their identity could need to be one focus of training programs. With regards to training, the more open-minded teacher involved herself in lots of it.

Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025), who also studied teachers in the Indonesian primary school, found that although teachers had felt prepared for CLIL, they again found challenges. Key difficulties were with regards to classroom management, content knowledge or language knowledge. The teachers here had over five years of experience. It is understandable however that such areas might cause challenges. Teachers from a language teaching background may have difficulties with regard to subject content knowledge, and conversely subject teachers with language knowledge, especially if the target language is not their own first language. Support could be needed for either the subject or language knowledge, or the pedagogical knowledge and techniques. CLIL is dynamic and has many facets, which require strong and specific classroom management for effective implementation. Even more experienced teachers may need support here. All three areas could also be required areas of training.

How CLIL is Successfully Being Put into Practice

A promising fact is that along with acknowledging the merits of CLIL, and attending training, educators are being observed to have interest in learning more from one another. In Rani and Inamdar (2022), the writers were undertaking observations in Spain, with the interest of using what they had learned to make an impact in their own context.

We can hence add to our strategies for effective implementation of CLIL, beginning at the level of the teachers themselves, the existence of training and support systems. Support at all levels, and especially the school, will be vital. Hu (2023) acknowledges these and notes that collaboration between teachers, especially with language specialists is important. Finally, teaching should be focused on the individual needs of different students. We finish our review of literature by exploring strategies used in contexts where CLIL is being implemented rigorously, or with effect.

In doing this, we first see that such strategies and practice align with what we inferred above from a consideration of the theory. They focus on student centered learning, practical activities, explicit and appropriate language activities and teaching, positivity and growth mindset. These match a combination of sound modern language and content teaching.

In the study by Bárcena (2022), the teacher who had embraced CLIL in her identity, ensured resources were used creatively and adapted for student needs. This included adapting preexisting materials and also making her own. She emphasized the importance of will and active involvement by students and worked to nurture these. This included a focus on group work for communication and collaboration opportunities. She also made time for specific focus on the language. This was through language songs and videos, as well as explicitly teaching vocabulary expressions. She provided specific feedback on language use. She focused on

positive feedback and positive reinforcement with her students, also having lots of open discussions and eliciting answers.

The teachers observed in Spain, as described in Rani and Inamdar (2022) applied a similar approach. They too, used techniques specifically for language development. This included total physical response, gamification, songs and language stories, use of sentence chunks and flashcards. This was paired with meaningful opportunities to practice language in a real-world context through paired and group activities, reflective work, and lots of hands-on activities for a student centered environment. There was an emphasis on clear and specific learning objectives, which covered a range of skills, including both the content and language.

In the same study, there was a slightly bigger focus on the content and developing language through acquisition at the primary school level, with more time and focus on specific language exercises of different types and teaching of some language at the secondary school level. This likely reflects language priorities at the different levels. The key point however, is that language development was incorporated naturally, but specifically and purposefully at all stages, appropriate to the age and language level of students.

Yaguara et al. (2021) found in their research of the Grade 8 students in virtual classes in Columbia, that purposeful and real-life content and discussions were balanced with a big vocabulary focus and language games. Notably, games integrated all four language skills.

Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025) observed in their study in Indonesia, again the highlighting and teaching of vocabulary. Teachers similarly highlighted in interview, the importance of vocabulary drills and of simplifying language. This relates back to the importance of comprehensible input, and t of fun and meaningful learning activities that engage all students.

Another trend that emerges in the literature is the use of the students' first language as a support where necessary. Teachers in the Rani and Inamdar (2022) study, used it strategically as a resource.

In Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025), the primary school teachers in Indonesia gradually progressed to increased use of English over Bahasa Indonesian as students grew older and more competent in their language skills. This started with a balance of around 50/50, and a bigger focus on everyday language in English in Grade 1. This is a notable model for increasing use of English over time as students grow in competence and become ready. This means development of content knowledge and skill development is not affected, and there are not too many barriers when students are at an earlier stage of learning English.

Related is the concept of translanguaging. Described in García (2009), this is the idea of allowing students to access and use their entire linguistic repertoire, not only one language when communicating. It is a natural way bilinguals and multilinguals communicate and allows students to express themselves more freely and to their full capacity. It can be an important pedagogical method when used appropriately and strategically, so long as time is still allowed for specific focus on the target language. Setyaningrum, Setiawan, and Anam (2022) discuss how it was used strategically during more open discussion and content focused times of the class during virtual sessions at the time of COVID-19 in a primary school context in Indonesia. This supported in reducing cognitive load and allowing students to participate to their fullest.

Returning to the challenges and concerns that exist regarding use of CLIL for lower level students, we see that many of the techniques that are emerging can be adapted for such students, as they are in the ESL context. Songs, language games, videos and stories can be selected that are to the correct level. Vocabulary, chunks and sentence frames can also be appropriate to the

level. At any stage of language development, appropriate comprehensible input and support can be provided. Mother tongue use and translanguaging can be used strategically. The Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025) study provided an example of how transition into the new language could happen gradually, progressively and naturally. At earlier levels, the focus with the target language could be on comprehensible input and ESL type activities related to the subject content. There can be a transition towards using English for deeper discussion and exploration as students grow in competence. To support teachers to implement such methods effectively, again training will be necessary.

A note on language, the idea of CLIL is that content and language are developed together. Each should support the other. It doesn't mean that the content needs to be taught entirely in the target language. It doesn't mean that alternative languages can't be incorporated strategically to ultimately support understanding and the development of both the content and the new language. In addition, there is the importance of additive bilingualism. Even as students become more competent to use the target language at all times, the students' mother tongues should also be allowed to develop. As academic and topic specific language is met, students should have the opportunity to also learn and use it in their mother tongue (Lin, 2020).

Technology is another incorporation that has been made into classes. In Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025), teachers were found to claim that because many students, even from a very young age, are very competent and familiar with technology, it can be used purposefully. Martínez, Fernández, and Zabala (2022), a study involving 13-14 year olds in Argentina, found that encouraging students to create sentences on Google Photos, and then send and respond to audio messages on WhatsApp as part of homework assignments, provided opportunity for increased English language practice within CLIL. Creating videos, audios or writing to practice

English on topics related to academic content, is a practice that could be adapted and used across different media platforms and for different ages. Belda-Medina (2025) a study of 162 students in Spain, aged 12 - 14, found that those who received instruction using augmented reality (AR) showed stronger understanding and retention of English vocabulary during CLIL study on Ancient Egypt. AR, virtual reality (VR) and other forms of AI undoubtedly provide exciting opportunities for increased use.

How CLIL is Being Used in the Early Years

Many of the strategies we have seen could be adapted for early years. To finish however, we note that research specific for the age group does exist however. Mortimore (2023), Sop and Bişkin (2021), and Kim and Huh (2025) all emphasize the importance of a focus on social, emotional and character development. This is in line with educational focuses during the early years, where the development of such skills takes priority over content itself. Content can be explored with a focus on it.

Mortimore (2023) identified four areas that should be considered for implementation of CLIL in early years bilingual education. The first is the incorporation of play-based learning. This can provide a natural and authentic opportunity for exploring content, being exposed to and practicing language. The second is the incorporation of activities included in CLIL at all age levels, including learning centres, project-based learning, and cooperation and collaboration activities. These, too, can provide a dynamic language environment. Third is the inclusion of lots of movement and psychomotor activities. Finally, there should be a supportive and nurturing teaching and learning environment with clear expectations. We see that these final two, also, match the developmental needs of young children.

We have already seen that Kim and Huh (2025) used these ideas to effect in South Korea, observing development in both language skills and strengths of character, including sharing and supporting one another. This was through age-appropriate discussions and hands on work.

Sop and Bişkin (2021) looks at interviews with 25 early childhood teachers in Turkey, regarding character strengths they observe in children and believe to be important and how they nurture character strengths. Strengths including love, love of learning, curiosity and creativity stood out the most; however teachers noted that they worked to plan and implement activities supporting development of a range of positive characteristics. They also noted the importance of collaborating with parents, keeping parents well informed of activities at school. This can allow them to work together with parents to support the students.

Discussion

We have seen then that much of the practice and strategy being used within CLIL lines up with recognised practice from language teaching more broadly. This includes use of comprehensible input. There should also be language supports for both meaning and form. Examples of these will depend on the age and level, but may include videos, songs, visuals and sentence frames. Content should be engaging and meaningful. There should be a focus on positive relationships, open discussion and much group and partner work to practice collaboration. There should be an environment to be exposed to and practice the language naturally and free from anxiety.

Project-based learning and task-based learning may be particularly effective. However they should be balanced with some focus on explicit teaching of language including words and sentences, and specific correction.

Technologies such as AR may work to enhance the learning experience supporting understanding and memory for the language as well as the content. First language and translanguaging can be used strategically as supports where necessary. In early years, there should be a focus on activities that practice and develop social and emotional skills.

CLIL is now recognized, accepted and highly regarded around the world and has seen successes. Nonetheless, challenges still exist. In particular, increased training and preparation is likely required for teachers. This is especially the case for implementation in more challenging contexts, such as with lower level students. Research undoubtedly needs to continue into strategies that can be used to implement CLIL, as well as into its effectiveness. This includes in different contexts, for example different ages and in different countries, with different first languages of the students.

A relevant point is that my own experience matches what I have found in the research. I work in a bilingual preschool, ages two to six in Wuxi City, Jiangsu Province, China.

My school strives to implement CLIL in the form of an IB program delivered as far as possible in English and incorporating English language development. A number of units of inquiry are explored over the four years at the school, including animals, plants, communities, light and shadow, life cycles and culture. Each class group has both English speaking Chinese teachers, and a foreign native English speaker working together as a homeroom teacher team.

Both Chinese teachers and foreign teachers at the school have previously stated that they don't feel they have enough knowledge or experience to effectively implement an inquiry based program in English. Teachers have also stated that they feel it is particularly impractical for the younger ages, due to both the age and lack of English of the experience. Only in the final one to two years, once the students are older and have greater English competence may it be realistic.

A tendency we have found in the past is that in planning and leading classes, foreign teachers were geared towards a pure ESL style, sometimes with very little relation to the unit of inquiry. Chinese teachers found it more convenient to use the first language of Mandarin Chinese, which they share with the students, to lead inquiry. Many teachers previously pointed to a lack of clear expectations for their role.

However, many steps have been taken to support teachers and students over the previous two years. These have brought about observed changes.

As per the Indonesian primary schools described in Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025), we have made the effort to gradually increase the volume of English. When my students were at the beginning of their Nursery year - aged three to four - core inquiry was done by my Chinese co-teachers largely in Chinese. I focused largely on ESL style teaching, including vocabulary and

sentence structures, focusing primarily on the language with help from songs, books and stories. However I focused this on the topic being explored in the UOI. Over the last two years, this has progressed to English now being used to lead and facilitate group work. We have found throughout the process, students are able to engage with and access the content, with their English progressing naturally.

One year ago, the school introduced an ESL course. This is part of our daily schedule and separate from our IB unit of inquiry. It focuses on developing the English language specifically, using songs, stories, poems and chants, to both learn and acquire vocabulary and sentence structures, and practice natural intonation and pronunciation. This has shown results, with students across the school being observed to use sentence patterns they have learnt authentically, during unit of inquiry time, as well as free time, with both teachers and classmates. This is similar to practices which have been observed elsewhere. Kurniawati and Atmojo (2025) observed in their study in their study in Indonesia, teachers incorporating a variety of types of supporting English programs.

Another implemented strategy is that of Open Mic events. Each month, students give an English performance or speech. Sometimes this is related to the unit of inquiry, for example introducing a piece of project work. Sometimes there is an alternative theme, for example, introducing a hobby, singing a song or telling a story. Students choose what they would like to talk about or perform, with support from teachers as necessary. This helps make it student centered, and intrinsically motivated, reducing anxiety. The formats differ, taking either the form of a stage performance, or a recorded video. Impacts of this have also been observed, notably in terms of students' confidence to use English. Over the 2024-2025 school year, the majority of students in my grade level, aged four to five at the time, were observed to progress, from either

performing as part of a group or saying only three to four sentences in an individual performance, to saying over 10 sentences with little preparation in the final Open Mic of the school year. Students have also been observed to interact in English with all teachers and even other students around the school more often and with increased confidence.

The school has begun to implement workshops and personalized teacher support where possible, on how to implement the IB program in English. There has also been training for the Chinese teachers in English language teaching. With this and the support and sharing that has been shown between teachers, teachers have begun to give feedback that they are feeling more confident. Just as will training, experience and practice will continue to support all of us.

In the context of my own class, even as students' language has increased to the level that English can be used to lead the inquiry, I have continued to incorporate use of English learning and support activities. This has, as per the research, included use of songs and stories, with a focus on language. I have also made specific time to focus on both meaning and form of vocabulary words through visuals and action for meaning and word and sentence drills for form. I have observed benefits of this with students beginning to use a broader vocabulary, including technical terms, authentically in everyday activities.. "Transparent", "translucent" and "opaque" are three examples from the last semester.

As a teaching team across the school, we have discussed and implemented strategies to ensure inclusion of each of content, skills and language. What we have found most effective is to allow for specific time for each in our planning. One example is dedicating a small section of a class to focus specifically on language, with the rest of the time used for inquiry and exploration to develop skills and content awareness. Another is splitting skills across classes. One day, there may be a focus on the exploration, teaching or discovery learning of the content. The next day,

there may be a specific focus on the language. On the third day, there will be group and collaboration project activities. In the case of the first and third days, language practice would still be incorporated naturally through exposure and opportunity to practice during activities. This links back to the observations in Rani and Inamdar (2022) about the importance of setting clear and specific learning objectives. Learning objectives and planning of time allow consideration to be made of all areas of development. This supports students and ensures time is managed effectively.

At points throughout the units of inquiry I have begun to set homework that involves the making of English videos. One example was introducing a hobby during a unit on health. Another was introducing signs of their choice during a unit on signs and symbols. This relates back to the findings of Martínez, Fernández, and Zabala (2022) about using WhatsApp to make audio messages. Creating videos and audios out of school allow opportunities to practice English in a structured format. The work was also received well by parents and families. Again, as Sop and Bişkin (2021) found, engaging with families regarding school activities and sharing resources and methods for practice at home can provide additional supports to students.

With regards to social and emotional learning and character development, we allow space for play-based learning, with meaningful support by teachers as necessary, as well as for group work and collaboration. Over the last year I have also begun implementing specific teaching of language and sentence structures that can be used relating to social and emotional skills.. As we have had discussions on growth mindset, we have taught sentences here, including “I can’t do it yet.” and “I will keep practicing. I will be able to do it soon.” Over the last year, we have introduced our students to self-reflection, including within the context of the inquiry units. Students have begun to set their own targets for what they would like to achieve or learn. Finally,

we have begun positive peer feedback and review. In all cases, we provided students with model sentences they could use when expressing their thoughts, ideas and decisions. These were in addition to polite everyday language for sharing, playing together and resolving conflicts that we had previously introduced. Over time, we have begun to observe students use the introduced sentences independently in play-based scenarios with their friends, and even to initiate self-reflection sessions themselves.

While I am humbled to have had these opportunities to develop over the previous two years, there is still much I need to learn with regards to CLIL and its effective implementation. I look forward to using what I have learnt and reflected on through this work in the future. I am also excited to carry out further action research to test strategies related to what we have seen.

Conclusion

To finish, I summarize the key points we have seen from the research and my own experience to answer the question that makes the title of this work. While research continues, possible strategies that can support the development of English language output within CLIL units of inquiry for early years students in China are as follows.

- As educational leaders and communities, begin at the level of teachers themselves. Appropriate support and training should be provided where necessary. As teachers, we should continually reflect and take responsibility for our own learning and development. If we are transitioning into CLIL, we should reflect on our own identity and be open-minded to embrace ourselves as content, language and skills teachers. This will support us to put our heart into the practice for the good of our students.
- Focus on high quantities of comprehensible input at all times, but also incorporate specific focus on language development. This can be through explicit teaching of vocabulary and language structures related to the content, as well as of functional language for everyday use in social and learning situations. Songs, stories, games, TPR, pictures and acting and miming can all be supports here. Be clear and detailed with planning and with the setting of learning objectives to purposefully allow time for this specific language development.
- Balance this with time for group and pair activities for collaboration, hands-on learning, project-based learning and task-based learning, critical thinking activities, opportunities for creative work, and specific to the early years, play-based learning and movement activities. There should be an environment of love and positivity. These allow students to be exposed to and practice language naturally. They also ensure a student-centered environment with

students able to be themselves without fear or anxiety. This will in turn ensure the frame of mind for language acquisition and learning.

- Specific in the early years, allow much time for development of social, emotional and character-based skills. These can be learned and practiced through play, collaboration activities and natural interaction. However, many skills, including sharing, conflict resolution, supporting and helping each other, self-reflection, goal setting and peer feedback can also be taught explicitly. In doing so, language structures that can be used can be explicitly taught.
- Technologies, including AR and VR can be incorporated meaningfully to be exposed to language in a memorable way, as well as to practice it.
- Specific ESL classes, or supporting English activities, separate to the main CLIL, can be incorporated to complement it.
- Ensuring that it is based on student's own interests, for example the introduction of their own work or a passion, and so remains intrinsically motivated and with anxiety reduced, creating specific opportunities for students to use English for a presentation or structured context. This could include creating a video or a performance in front of others. It can help build confidence.
- Providing resources and a context for practicing English related to the unit at home. This could include creating videos or audio recordings.
- Collaborating with caregivers where possible, for example through the sharing of information and resources, so that further practice and support can be provided at home.
- Use of the students first language and translanguaging strategically and as supports when necessary. When students are in the early stages of learning English, there can be a bigger

focus on use of the first language from a content perspective to make the content accessible.

The English focus can be on developing everyday and functional language. There can then be a gradual progression to increased use of English over time. Even when students do reach a higher level of English, the importance of additive bilingualism should be remembered and students should be allowed to be introduced to and explore new technical and content language in both languages.

Looking at our last point, it is important to note that in most contexts and where possible, for most effective teaching practice, especially when students are at a low level, it is important for a speaker of the students first language to be involved in the CLIL teaching. Native English teachers, even if they do not speak the first language of students, can still have a vital role to play. They will bring much, even at the earliest level, in terms of providing comprehensible input exposure and natural interaction as a native speaker, as well as likely skill in English language teaching. However, collaboration with a teacher who speaks the students' first language will be necessary. This could be in the form of co-teachers or a lead teacher and teaching assistant for example.

Considering all points, practice should be kept student centered and adapted to the individual context and student needs. Other than where explicitly stated, the points are not necessarily specific to early years or for the context of Chinese learners. They could be considered and adapted for different ages and in different contexts if thought applicable.

Research will need to continue in all contexts, including for all ages, different countries and different first languages of students. As teachers, we should continue to look at the research, but focus on our own specific situation and practice, reflecting and seeing what is working and what isn't.

Going into the future, I intend to continue to explore opportunities for action research relating to all possible strategies I suggest above. With technology continuing to change and evolve in the AI era, the use of technology in CLIL, including for language development and output, will be a particular area of interest.

Going forwards, big focuses are likely needed internationally to develop training and support opportunities for teachers in CLIL. There are a range of categories of training. These include training for all on general strategies and pedagogies for CLIL. Teachers from a language teaching background may need training in content knowledge and content teaching specifically. Teachers from a content teaching background will likely need support in language teaching, especially if the target language is not their own native language. Both types of teacher may need support with the planning and the classroom management required for the dynamic activities of CLIL.

Training could come at all levels. On the highest levels, perhaps it could become an increased focus in general or specific teaching degrees and teacher training programs. With the increasingly globalized world and increased number of second language learners in countries and contexts internationally, who are all having to learn content and language together, pedagogies from CLIL are becoming important for more and more teachers so as to enable them to support such students. This is making it more and more necessary as a big part of initial teacher training. The teaching skills learnt from such training could be applied more broadly, and even support teachers not directly involved in CLIL.

Beyond this, universities and organizations could provide smaller trainings and workshops, with the internet now making these very accessible. Training could then also be provided at the regional, local and school levels. With regards to schools, it is important that they

provide support and accommodation for the time, flexibility and resources, as well as training that may be required in order for CLIL to be implemented effectively.

Finally, as teachers and schools learn together, there can be openness for sharing of experiences, resources and ideas. The internet and media sources make sharing fast and convenient. It can go beyond simply within one school, to teachers and schools around the world helping one another.

It needs to be stressed again however, that while training is hugely important, so too is open-mindedness, passion, determination and belief by us as teachers. We should never cease to reflect on our own context and learn through our own experience. CLIL is still relatively new. While challenges exist, these represent opportunities for growth as individuals and as an educational community. It could be an exciting time with promise for the future.

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