CLIL and Intercultural Communicative Competence: Foundations and Approaches towards a Fusion

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Abstract
One of the core developments of globalisation lies in the increased cooperation and communication across cultures. With this, the integrated competencies in foreign languages and intercultural communication are considered to be keys to successfully engaging and participating in modern life and society. The field of foreign language education is seen as a fundamental building block in fostering intercultural communicative competence (ICC). The dual focussed nature of CLIL-classrooms, i.e. the merging of a foreign language with content subject matter, seems to provide an ideal environment to initiate intercultural learning: content is never culturally neutral.

Analysing, (re)constructing, comparing, contrasting and relativising one’s own cultural perspective and foreign cultural perspectives are essential elements in the development of intercultural competence. The ability to then shift and mediate between these cultural perspectives is a core objective in the intercultural learning process. Within rich CLIL environments a multitude of impulses may arise, which in turn lead to an exploration of different cultural viewpoints and, subsequently, enable shifts between these.

Keywords: Intercultural learning, modern paradigms in foreign language learning, third space metaphor, shifting cultural perspectives, CLIL teaching materials
I. The wider frame – A glance at language, its ties with culture and the intercultural aspect of using a foreign language in educational contexts

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world – A possible, albeit simplified, reading of this Wittgensteinian quotation is connected to the notion of linguistic and cultural relativity. According to this, language can be viewed as the matrix through which people express, perceive and interpret the world around them. The much debated idea of linguistic relativity is by no means a novel concept; in fact it has (re)appeared throughout time and links can be drawn, for example, to the works of W. Humboldt as well as Sapir and Whorf (Humboldt, 1836; Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956). In a more recent contribution, the sociolinguists Gumperz and Levinson revisit the notion of linguistic relativity and devise the following premises and their deduction (Gumperz / Levinson, 1996: 12):

Given that:
(1) differences exist in linguistic categories across languages;
(2) linguistic categories determine aspects of individuals’ thinking;
then:
(3) aspects of individuals’ thinking differ across linguistic communities according to the language they speak.

The implications of Gumperz’ and Levinson’s conclusion, “aspects of individuals’ thinking differ […] according to the language they speak”, can be exemplified in the context of translation processes. Even the task of transferring seemingly straightforward words from one language to another might prove to be a challenge (Finkbeiner, C., Koplin, C., 2002: 7):

In Turkish or Chinese, for example, there are different words for brother-in-law, depending on whether one is referring to the man’s or woman’s family. In those cultures the male and female categories are more distinct and culturally more important. […] In English-speaking countries, blue represents sadness, but in Germany you are “blue” if you had too much to drink and in Cameroon and Nigeria, blue is the colour of happiness and peace because it evokes the blue sky.

The connotations, the interpretations and referential meanings of words are embedded within the cultural contexts in which these words have evolved. Thus, translation processes include transfers within two interconnected codes, the linguistic and the cultural ones. With reference to the initial Wittgenstein quotation it may, therefore, be argued that entering another language means entering another world. Even though there might be only fine difference between the two worlds in question, there are these instances in which one is seemingly lost in translation, amazed by the differences or just reassured by the similarities.

In foreign language learning contexts, the immanent tie between language and culture bears a significant potential for intercultural learning processes. Within the field of educational foreign language learning, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) may be taken as an example. In its chapter on Language use and the language user/learner, the potential for intercultural learning is described as follows (Council of Europe, 2001: 43):

The learner of a second or foreign language and culture does not cease to be competent in his or her mother tongue and the associated culture. [...] The learner does not simply acquire two distinct, unrelated ways of acting and communicating. The language learner becomes plurilingual and develops interculturality. The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how.
The process of becoming plurilingual and developing interculturality as well as the notion of merging the “linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language” shows parallels to Kramsch’ concept of thirdness in foreign language education (Kramsch, 1993). Her metaphor of third space explores the potential for foreign language learners to establish an enriched cultural identity – one which is enhanced by the integration and fusion of the various cultural influences present and presented within the learning process.\[1\]

The field of modern foreign language learning pedagogy provides solid foundations to support the formation of a third culture and, as the CEFR puts it, to enable the development of interculturality and “intercultural awareness, skills and know-how”. The (post-)communicative era of foreign language teaching is closely connected to the student-centred approaches of task-based and project-based language learning (Willis, 1996; Stoller, 2002; Ellis 2003). Embedded within these frameworks, one finds the call for authentic language learning contexts that are linked to the real world and its issues (connection to the Lebenswelt). Here, the main emphasis is placed on the functional use of language, i.e. to utilise language as a tool for communication. These function-focused classrooms are often described by using the dichotomies of fluency before accuracy or meaning before form (Littlewood, 2004). Learners are engaged in authentic communication processes and acquire skills and strategies to successfully carry out given tasks. As such, the learning environment lends itself to forms of learner autonomy (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995) as well as cooperation and collaboration; furthermore, it promotes the active construction of knowledge (Wolff, 2002).

It is the integral element of modern, function-focused language learning – the various facets of task orientation – that strengthens the potential for the fusion of language learning and intercultural learning. The language learning classroom reaches out beyond its traditional scope of language related objectives and opens up to include real-world topics. The context within which language is used becomes fundamentally important and often issues are raised which – traditionally – are covered within content subjects. This development supports the efforts of cross-curricular teaching and clearly shows the conceptual parallels of modern language teaching and CLIL-teaching. Experiencing and understanding a foreign language in a content-based way opens the doors to intercultural learning processes. By using materials that convey, portray or reflect insights into foreign viewpoints, it becomes possible to (re)construct the underlying perspectives. Foreign positions on a given topic, underlying assumptions, attitudes, feelings and interpretations can be grasped and analysed. By aligning and comparing these with one’s own perspectives, intercultural learning can be initiated: The linguistic and cultural worlds begin to open up and their explorations lead to the above mentioned “knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how” (Council of Europe, 2001: 43); as such, content based and thus contextualised, culturally loaded language work enables a deeper understanding of the foreign linguistic and cultural codes. Transfers from one set of codes to another (e.g. translation processes) may still be difficult; however, interculturally competent language learners are (more) aware of the cultural conventions underlying the wor(l)ds they encounter and use.

\[1\] Rather than referring to the development of third culture as the integration and fusion of one’s own and the foreign culture, it is described here as “the integration and fusion of the various cultural influences present and presented in the learning process”. This is to avoid the oversimplified dichotomies of one’s own language and culture and a foreign language and culture (L1-C1 and L2-C2), as these foster a rather static view of culture. On top of that, these dichotomies do not reflect the dynamic, ever-changing character of cultures. Nor do they consider the diversities of the cultures in question (e.g. sub-cultures). The description of the development of third culture as “the integration and fusion of the various cultural influences present in the learning process” does, furthermore, suggest that the creation of a third culture leads to something greater than the sum of its parts.
II. The inner frame – CLIL as a catalyst to promote intercultural learning

The methodological affinity of a modern, student-centred, task-oriented foreign language learning classroom and of best practice in CLIL-teaching has already been referred to. Ideally, the dual-focussed nature of CLIL-programmes fosters per se the usage of the foreign language as a tool to communicate and work on content matter; as such, students utilise the foreign language in a functional as well as authentic way and deal with the tasks and problems the subject raises. Almost by nature, a real world connection can be observed: to name but a few, the fields of history, politics, the social and life-sciences show an immediate relevance to the students’ Lebenswelt.

The prerequisites for intercultural learning seem fulfilled in CLIL contexts and, thus, a number of researchers suggest that the potential for intercultural learning processes in CLIL is particularly high (e.g. Wildhage/Otten, 2003; Breidbach, 2007). The following statement by Wolff can be used as an example (Wolff, 2007: [online]):

[…] wenn interkulturelles Lernen als schulisches Lernziel überhaupt eingelöst werden kann, dann sicherlich am besten im bilingualen Sachfachunterricht.

[…] if intercultural learning can at all be implemented as an educational objective, it may certainly be best implemented in CLIL teaching. [my translation]

The ascribed intercultural potential of CLIL can be seen in connection with its engagement with topics that contribute to the formation of the cultural identity of people. Gaining knowledge about evolution theories, studying the World Wars, learning about judicial or political systems can be seen as examples of school mediated additions to the process of constructing cultural identity. It may well be argued that all school subjects – regardless of their CLIL or non-CLIL nature– serve as building blocks in the learners’ process of growing into a culture, i.e. enculturation process. In CLIL classes, however, an added dimension can be introduced: the intercultural one. In addition to approaching a culturally loaded topic from one’s own cultural perspective, a foreign perspective can easily be accessed and (re)constructed.

It is the foreign language which may serve as an initial stepping stone to open the learner’s eyes to a foreign perspective. Often cited examples in English medium CLIL-programmes in German speaking countries are the terms Barbarian Invasion and its counterpart Völkerwanderung (literally: <migration of peoples>) as well as Western Civilisation and the corresponding Christliches Abendland (literally: <Christian occident>). A contrastive analysis of these word pairs makes an exploration, analysis and comparison of the different underlying connotations and perspectives possible. A discussion of these arises on the basis of the linguistic differences triggered by the CLIL environment and would not necessarily occur in mainstream subject teaching.[²]

In CLIL contexts, it is not only the linguistic level that enables the initiation of intercultural learning processes. In trying to create a rich CLIL learning environment, it seems almost logical to resort to authentic materials in the target language which are taken from respective foreign cultural contexts. Besides various other sources (e.g. print or film media), the digital world offers ample opportunities to access such authentic materials for CLIL-subject purposes. Foreign textbooks, i.e. “target culture” textbooks, may serve as additional points of reference. Additionally, using a foreign language should trigger and support the efforts to draw on foreign cultural examples to work on content subject matter (cf. Wildhage/Otten, 2003: 20).

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² In a German speaking non-CLIL history lesson on Völkerwanderung, using a German textbook or other material written in German, a discussion of the English term Barbarian Invasion does neither seem likely, nor immediately necessary.
Authentic materials, foreign textbooks and foreign cultural examples can all be utilised in an intercultural learning process: they can be used to develop an understanding and reconstruction of a foreign perspective on a particular topic. To make this an intercultural endeavor, however, it is necessary to accompany these foreign cultural insights with an awareness of one’s own cultural perspective. In turn, these perspectives are brought together in a process that does not lead to a decision for or against either of them but rather to an integration of both (cf. the above mentioned metaphor of the third space). As such, it becomes possible to shift and mediate between the different perspectives, a state which is outlined by Skopinskaja as follows (Skopinskaja 2003: 40):

> In acquiring knowledge about and reflecting on the target language culture, students need to be encouraged not simply to observe similarities and differences between the two cultures, but they should also analyse them from the viewpoint of the others and try to establish a relationship between their own and other systems (Byram 1997: 14 and 34; McKay 2002: 83). This “perspective consciousness” (Strasheim 1981 quoted in Tseng 2002: 12), or the ability to “decentre” (Kohlberg 1983 quoted in Byram 1997: 34), or establishing “a sphere of interculturality” (Kramsch 1993: 205-206), is the precondition for successful intercultural communication as well as understanding other cultures.

Relativising cultural perspectives and the ability to shift between them can be seen as a key element in intercultural learning and development of intercultural competence (Bennett, 1993).

III. A field of research – Analysis of CLIL material design in the light of intercultural learning

The high intercultural potential of CLIL classes is strongly connected to the learning environment that is created in practice. CLIL teaching may open doors to a student-centred, function-focussed, task-oriented, authentic and constructivist classroom; it may even serve as a means of promoting learner autonomy. However, depending on the methodological approach taken and the teaching materials used, CLIL classes can also be turned into a less valuable experience. Here, traditional, repetition targeted, form focussed exercises, e.g. gap-fill texts on historical, geographical or political issues, may serve as examples. An online search for sample CLIL materials provides prototypes from both ends of the methodological continuum.[3]

It seems only logical that an exploration and (re)construction of different cultural perspectives is unlikely to occur in the contexts of, for instance, form-focussed gap-fill exercises. As such, the high intercultural learning potential of CLIL-classes is tied to the described rich learning environments. An integral role in the creation of such environments is played by the teaching materials. Referring to textbook use, for instance, Rivers states: “The importance of the textbook cannot be overestimated. It will inevitably determine the major part of the classroom teaching and the students’ out-of-class learning” (Rivers, 1981: 475). Of course, the materials used and/or the textbooks employed have to be seen in connection to the tasks and activities created around them.

Insights into the potential and the implementation of intercultural learning in CLIL materials can, for example, be gained via textbook analyses. Within the framework of a categorical, qualitative study, a catalogue of criteria was devised in order to identify the presence (or absence) of various aspects of intercultural learning processes in textbook materials and their corresponding tasks (Sudhoff, forthcoming). The starting point of this textbook analysis is concerned with the question of whether or not a topic is introduced in a way that reflects a cultural perspective. This

[3] Readers are invited to perform the described online search for sample CLIL materials. One easily finds both private and corporate contributions of varying quality. Within the scope of the article at hand, however, it seems almost impossible to analyse, evaluate and critically review such sample materials. In the present context, it only needs to be pointed out that form-focussed, present-practice-produce related activities seem to diminish the intercultural potential of CLIL teaching; the (re)construction of different cultural perspectives seems unlikely in the context of e.g. gap-fill exercises. An exploration of cultural perspectives and a shifting between these is more closely connected with task-oriented activities, e.g. role plays.
can be seen as the basis and prerequisite for activities in which the students explore the apparent cultural perspective; i.e. in corresponding tasks, the textbook might invite students to (re)construct and shift into the portrayed cultural perspective.\(^4\) As an added dimension, the students may then be asked to compare and coordinate the portrayed perspective and their own perspective, thus, engaging in a process of possible mediation between the two.

Within the framework of the study conducted, including the development of a catalogue of criteria for CLIL-textbook analyses with regard to intercultural learning, the suggestion that CLIL contexts offer a variety of opportunities to promote intercultural learning processes could be supported. The following non-exhaustive draft list of measures may be seen as a sample selection:

- Impulses for intercultural learning on the basis of content subject related linguistic and terminological differences (L₁ vs. L₂)
  - Drawing on word choice, connotative differences, referential meanings, underlying interpretations and literal translations can serve as examples.

- Exploration of cultural perspectives on the basis of materials used in teaching content subject matter
  - Using authentic materials to discover differences (and similarities) in cultural viewpoints and portraying various own cultural and foreign cultural views (catering for a possible diversity of viewpoints; dynamic and hybrid character of cultures and sub-cultures).
  - Using educational materials (e.g. own and foreign cultural textbook resources) in order to point to, (re)construct and extract cultural perspectives on a given topic. Here, the perspective lies, for example, in the ways in which textbook authors, teachers and other educational professionals involved decided to present a given topic. In this context it seems also interesting to analyse where in the representation of a topic the main emphasis is placed and which of the relevant issues are included or excluded within the material.

- (Re)constructing, shifting between and coordinating one’s own and foreign cultural perspectives on the basis of content subject topics
  - A variety of content subject topics evoke different culture dependent standpoints, opinions, interpretations, beliefs, emotions, etc. To name but a few, historical events, political and judicial systems, topical agendas within societies, geographical implications and environmental issues, may trigger cultural specific perspectives. These perspectives need to be approached and (re)constructed within CLIL learning environments (e.g. via project work: encounter projects or correspondence projects which enable and facilitate the interaction with members of the foreign culture).
  - A variety of content subject topics evoke same or similar cultural perspectives; intercultural learning processes focus not only on cultural differences but also on overlaps, correlations and simile across cultures.
  - Reaching the third space, relativising one’s own cultural perspective and integrating different cultural perspectives involve the core ability to shift between different cultural perspectives. As such, rich CLIL environments promote the learners’ skills to decentre, take on and mediate between different cultural perspectives (activities include for example role plays).

\(^4\) Textbook activities that aim at the (re)construction of cultural perspectives and cater for the shifting between different cultural perspectives can take a variety of forms. They may, for example, invite students to take on the perspective:

- of a particular person
- of a member (anonymous) of a cultural community
- of a cultural community (i.e. a collective identity)

introduced within the text. Note that the degree of abstraction required to perform shifts in perspectives is steadily increasing.
IV. Conclusion

Fostering intercultural communicative competence is one of the challenges facing education in the globalised world of the 21st century. The integrative nature of CLIL classes provides an opportunity for taking not only a dual-focussed but a triple-focussed approach: simultaneously combining foreign language learning, content subject learning and intercultural learning. CLIL environments can be designed to promote intercultural communicative competence as described in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

To enable and facilitate intercultural learning processes various measures can be taken. First, CLIL curriculum designers, authors of CLIL textbooks and materials, CLIL teacher trainers, and CLIL teachers and learners, as the architects of rich CLIL environments, would need to develop an increased awareness of the intercultural potential within CLIL contexts. Secondly, learning materials can be analysed from an intercultural viewpoint by extracting similarities, differences and the author’s perspective. As well, the use of modern, student-centred paradigms of teaching methodologies that foster task and project work, authenticity, and real world orientation can provide ample opportunities for intercultural learning in CLIL contexts.

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