CLIL and Learner Autonomy: relating two educational concepts

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I will start by discussing some general features of CLIL and learner autonomy and then analyse the concept as a product of the idea of “fusion” discussed in philosophy, politics, and the New Technologies. In the third part I will look at content as an important concept both in CLIL and in learner autonomy before looking at the CLIL classroom and learner autonomy from the perspective of interaction and learning. In my concluding remarks I will sum up the main issues of this paper.

Introduction: Approaching the Topic

It is quite amazing to see how fast Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has conquered classrooms all over Europe during the last ten years. Almost unknown at the end of the last century it has now found its place in mainstream education in most European countries (Maljers et alii. 2007). This rapid growth has not only been advantageous for the development of CLIL: teacher training has been disregarded to a large extent, for example, and no coherent and convincing methodology has yet been developed. On the other hand, CLIL is beginning to influence institutionalised education in a positive way: the integration of languages and content subjects seems to confirm innovative methodological claims and lead to new pedagogical insights. This is the reason why CLIL cannot simply be called a current trend in language and/or content learning but must rather be seen as a more general concept through which we are able to
bring about change in our educational systems. CLIL shares this principle with learner autonomy, which is also built on the idea of change and based on the conviction that it is possible to change the current educational system in order to make students independent and responsible learners who are able to organise their own learning.

My paper is based on the assumption that CLIL is a suitable tool to make learner autonomy more prominent in our classrooms. I assume that CLIL has the potential to make teachers and learners better understand the concept of learner autonomy and to see its advantages when introduced into the classroom. I believe that this is possible because learner autonomy and CLIL have a fairly close relationship with respect to a number of important pedagogical issues which are looked upon in the same or similar ways. In order to make more explicit the plausibility of my assumption I would like to analyse, in my paper, some of the concepts by which CLIL and learner autonomy are related.

This presentation consists of four parts. I will start out by discussing a few general features of CLIL and learner autonomy which I will need to take up later. In the second part I will talk about a fairly theoretical relationship between CLIL and learner autonomy, based on the concepts of fusion, emergence and self-organisation. The third part is devoted to a discussion of the concept of content and its importance in CLIL and learner autonomy. In the fourth part I will talk about the CLIL classroom and learner autonomy and focus on interaction and learning in these classrooms. Here I will also present a short excerpt from a CLIL lesson and show how CLIL classrooms seem to attract principles of learner autonomy even if the teaching/learning process is not autonomy-oriented.

Some General Features of CLIL and learner autonomy

So much has been said about CLIL that I need not go into much detail here (cf. however Wolff 2009). Let me just highlight some general features which are important in order to understand the concept of CLIL:

1. CLIL is not a new method to teach/learn foreign languages; neither does it profess to be a new approach to the teaching of content subjects. It is an integrated approach to foreign language and subject learning. In some European countries the language learning aspect is given priority; in others it is the content aspect which has more weight.

2. CLIL is not restricted to particular content subjects or languages, though subjects located within the Humanities like History, Geography or the Social Sciences are chosen more frequently. Although the most often
used CLIL language is English, other official languages, regional languages and minority languages are also used as classroom languages.

(3) CLIL approaches can be found in primary, secondary and tertiary education. From a didactic point of view they are different; in tertiary education the content aspect is more important than, for example, in primary and secondary education where the foreign language needs to be highlighted as well.

(4) CLIL is not committed to any specific methodological approach, neither in foreign language nor in content learning. CLIL is like an open shell; any methodology can be introduced and used. This makes CLIL a fascinating but also a somewhat dangerous teaching/learning tool; fascinating for those who like to try out new approaches and see how they work; dangerous, because teachers often tend to fall back on rather traditional language learning methods arguing, for example, that content subjects cannot be learned without a terminology which needs to be acquired through learning lists of words.

(5) In some countries, for example in Germany, CLIL is regarded also as a way to promote bilingual education. That is why the term “bilingual content learning” (bilingualer Sachfachunterricht) is used here. This term includes the notion that CLIL can serve as a means to develop mother-tongue competence as well.

For reasons of space I will restrict myself, in discussing learner autonomy, to only one definition. I have chosen the one by Holec (1981) although it is worthwhile looking at others especially Little’s (1991) or Benson’s (2001). Holec states that autonomy implies that learners take their own learning in hand, that is:

- to be made and held responsible for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning, i.e.:
  - determining the objectives;
  - defining the contents and progressions;
  - selecting the methods and techniques to be used;
  - monitoring the procedure of acquisition proper (rhythm, time, place, etc.)
  - evaluating what has been acquired (Holec 1981: 3).

Fusion – Emergence – Self-Organisation

Let me begin now with my exploration of some of the conceptual relations between CLIL and learner autonomy. I will start out with a fairly
theoretical issue: an indirect relationship which I discovered only recently when looking at the status of CLIL as a new subject originating from a fusion between two already existing subjects, a foreign language and a content subject or, as we could also say, from an integration of the two.

The term fusion is, in fact, a political term. It is often used in the context of economic policy when amalgamations or mergers of companies and banks are discussed. It has also become a buzz-word in the European Commission in the context of integrating the economies of the EU member states. The term globalisation is related to fusion as well. And in the context of the New Technologies the term prosumer (a fusion of produce and consume) is a convincing example of the power of fusion in denoting new concepts. In pedagogy and psychology the term is being used more and more frequently in order to denote interdisciplinary cooperation between the humanities.

One outcome of fusion is mentioned only rarely in this discussion. When companies, banks or school subjects fuse, the former entities are not simply added up: companies and banks will lose employees and/or will focus on new markets, school subjects will be restructured and new contents and methodologies will be developed.

We enter here the realm of psychology, or, to be more precise, cognitive psychology. Already years ago, cognitive psychologists found that humans are in constant interaction with the world around them. They process the information from the outside by comparing and matching it with the information already stored. Only these processes make it possible to make the incoming information comprehensible. The information processed and stored is, however, not simply the sum of the old and the new information, it is something different which needs not even contain elements of the information informants were exposed to (Wolff 2004). Psychologists use the term emergence to describe this phenomenon; Heinz von Foerster, a constructivist philosopher, writes “emergence is my ability to see things anew” (von Foerster 1973) and holds it responsible for the human’s capacity for creative thinking. Other researchers see emergence as a process of developing new structures or new properties by combining elements in a complex system. Emergent properties are elements of a “whole” which cannot be derived directly from its parts. The “whole” is more than the sum of its parts. Coming back to the term fusion and to CLIL as a fused subject we can understand now why CLIL should be seen as a “new” subject: it is an integration of two former subjects through which we are able to see things anew.
Readers will probably have become impatient at this stage and ask themselves what the possible relationship between CLIL and learner autonomy might be. It is easier to see than one might think. If fusion leads to emergence and thus to creative thinking humans must be able to order, structure and organise the results of their thinking. Humans are able to organise themselves, i.e. autonomously, in their thinking and in their behaviour. And this is one of the most important principles on which the concept of learner autonomy is based. Self-organisation is in a way the rationale of learner autonomy, as Holec’s definition makes clear.

There can be no doubt that this relationship between CLIL and learner autonomy is of a rather abstract and indirect nature. But if we look at the chain of concepts: fusion – emergence – self-organisation from a learner’s perspective, we can argue that CLIL presents itself to the learner as something “fused” as well, a combination of new elements which will make him/her see things anew because of that capacity for emergence and self-organisation. On a very abstract level CLIL as a fused subject provides a learning environment in which emergence and self-organisation are powerful tools to guide the learning process. CLIL fosters self-organisation and thus contributes to discover and develop an important capacity in learner autonomy. One may conclude, therefore, that CLIL as a fused subject provides a learning environment which promotes the capacity for self-organisation.

**Content as a concept in CLIL and in learner autonomy**

When we look at the concept of content in our school systems we must admit that reflection on it never really played an important role. Content in content subjects is recorded in textbooks and curricula based on catalogues of knowledge derived from scientific evidence and/or cultural traditions. It is often simplified but does not change very much over the years and is supposed to reflect the cultural heritage of our respective countries. The final decisions about the choice of content in content subjects are usually made by administrators and educationalists. But on the whole, content does not give rise to much discussion.

When we look at content in the traditional foreign language classroom, a similar picture emerges. Curricula and textbooks are built on well-established lists of topics which have been changing only rarely in the course of time: they are arranged according to the learners’ age, and expected language competencies. Topics are also chosen with the intention of promoting intercultural competence. But when looking at foreign language textbooks over the decades one can see that their topics have been
transmitted from generation to generation of textbook writers, i.e. on the whole, they are not really different, either.

Research on foreign language learning in the classroom is one of the domains of second language acquisition research. SLA researchers have analysed a large number of different aspects related to classroom learning, but content has never really been focused upon. Research rather dealt with what is called input in SLA terminology; investigators were mainly interested in the specific linguistic features of the teachers’ discourse (teacher talk) and not so much in its content. They were interested in discursive features of the teacher-student interaction but not so much in the content of this interaction. The question in what way content influences the foreign language learning process was not asked until recently, when researchers experimentally modified content in order to see whether specific contents improved language learning results (Platt & Brooks 2002).

Both in CLIL and in learner autonomy content is viewed from a different perspective. Content in CLIL is defined as that of the content subject, as it is laid down in the content subject curricula. Quite often the content subject curriculum taught in the learners’ first language is also the CLIL curriculum. In some countries it is reduced in order to facilitate the learning process, in others it is modified in order to foreground the target language culture. But on the whole, the content subject determines the CLIL learning process. Language is secondary; as we will see in the last part where the CLIL classroom is discussed, language is dependent on content.

Research in CLIL has shown quite clearly that subject content is more motivating for the students than the content usually dealt with in the language classroom. In History, for example, students are more interested in dealing with historical facts and processes (which are part of a real world) than with texts written up by textbook writers and often belonging to a fictional world. Enhanced motivation seems to come partly from the realia character of the content, but partly also from the fact that the students are working in a foreign language. In recent research (Lamsfuß-Schenk 2007) it could be shown, for example, that they are better at picking up content when the working language is a foreign language than when it is the students’ mother tongue. The researcher holds the students’ deeper processing in the L2 responsible for this rather surprising result. That the foreign language learning process highly benefits from such a process as well need not be emphasised in particular.
To conclude we can say that the subject content in CLIL seems to have a beneficial effect on the learner. He/she is motivated to work with real world facts and processes and equally motivated to do this in another language. On the one hand this motivation leads to a better understanding and learning of these contents and on the other to a better learning of the language. The student is involved in the content and this is the reason why he/she also learns the language.

Let us have a look at content in learner autonomy now. Anyone working within the paradigm of learner autonomy in a foreign language classroom knows how important the authenticity of the content is in this approach. Theoricians and practitioners underline the importance of both the authenticity of the materials and the authenticity of the classroom interaction (cf. for example Widdowson 1990). Students work with materials which are from many different sources: from the school library, from the teacher, the internet, the students themselves, from textbooks, etc. Simply the fact that these materials are chosen by the students makes them authentic in their eyes and more motivating for them to work with. Similar to CLIL, this motivation makes the students process these materials more deeply: both language and content learning are promoted.

I think I have made it clear that content is a concept which has a similar status both in CLIL and in learner autonomy. In both teaching and learning approaches the authenticity of the content is of vital importance.

The CLIL classroom and learner autonomy: interaction and learning

Let us take a closer look now at what goes on in a CLIL classroom. Earlier on I mentioned that CLIL is like an open shell with respect to classroom practice. Anything is possible in CLIL from the most traditional to the most advanced. And this diversity is exactly what we find in CLIL practice. Very traditional transactional approaches - in which the teacher simply transmits knowledge to the students and does not tolerate any interruption - are still in existence. While these are found mainly at tertiary level they are not uncommon in secondary schools too. This is an old-fashioned content subject methodology which teachers make use of, especially teachers who are content subject teachers and do not know much about language learning. But we also find more interactional approaches, and they are probably the most common in all teaching/learning contexts nowadays. The so-called teacher-controlled interaction where both linguistic and content subject knowledge is constructed by teachers and learners in interaction but where the teacher is fully in control of the interaction is the most common approach. They are very frequent in CLIL as well, and language teachers
feel more at ease with them than content teachers. A third kind of approach views the teaching/learning process in a much more modern way: concepts like project work, group work, task-orientation, and self-evaluation play an important part. It is interesting to note, however, that learner autonomy as an overreaching concept does not play a significant role in CLIL methodology.

In modern interactional CLIL approaches discourse and interaction are very important concepts. I am using the term interaction here in a global sense, including both classroom discourse in its narrow sense (the linguistic means teachers and learners apply in order to turn the classroom into a learning environment) and classroom interaction (what teachers and learners do, language-wise, in order to negotiate meaning). Interaction is an important concept both in SLA and in Applied Linguistics. It has also played an important role in the foreign language classroom since communicative language learning has taken over. But when looking into the communicative classroom and the interaction going on there one is fairly disappointed with respect to the quality of the discourse. Especially in the early years learners do not really communicate but rather repeat sentences learnt by heart. This is both true for classroom discourse and classroom interaction. Dialogues like “my name is Peter – what is your name? – My name is Jack. Where do you come from?” (which are repeated 25 and more times depending on the number of pupils) are very common not only in beginners’ English classes. Learners do not learn how to use the foreign language because they simply focus on chunks learnt by heart. Interaction comes to a halt as soon as ready-made chunks are not available. In the majority of cases the communicative language classroom is not a classroom where genuine communication takes place but rather one in which routines are used repetitively and in which learners do not use language actively to negotiate and construct meaning.

Research on discourse and interaction in CLIL and bilingual education in general has become quite important in recent years (Dalton-Puffer 2006, Gajo 2007, Smit 2010, Dalton-Puffer, Nikula & Smit 2010). It is mainly classroom interaction both in secondary and tertiary education which is at the centre of this research. Laurent Gajo is interested in one aspect of discourse which seems to me important in our context as well. His research shows that classroom interaction in bilingual education is the link between language and content. According to Gajo integration takes place through the negotiation of both linguistic and content knowledge. For him classroom interaction should therefore focus both on language and on content.
Let me have a look now at a piece of authentic interaction in a CLIL classroom. From the interactional classroom data we have collected in Wuppertal over a number of years a general tendency emerges very clearly: learning and interaction in all CLIL classrooms, even if the learning approach is very traditional, have a tendency to shift towards learner autonomy and its principles. In the following excerpt from a classroom interaction this stands out very nicely. The excerpt is from a ninth form (15 year-old students) in a German CLIL classroom where learners are learning History through French. The learners are in their fourth year of French, the data are from Lamsfuß-Schenk 2007, the methodological paradigm is teacher-controlled interaction.

T: Quelle est la réaction des Indiens en ce moment. S17, tu veux dire quelque chose ?

S17: Mm, peut-être ils, mm, vont attaquer les Français...

S1: Les was (what) ?

S17 ...pour, mm, un die zu befreien, ihre Kollegen (to liberate them, their colleagues)

S3: leurs collègues

S17: leurs collègues, genau (exactly), merci

T: oui, libérer, D’autres idées, d’autres idées. Est-ce que tout le monde est d’accord avec l’idée de S17 ?

S10: Non. Moi, j’ai une autre idée. Alors, il est probablement possible que les Français naviguent, mm, que les Français retournent en Europe, avec le chef des Indiens, des indigènes, pour montrer aux autres.

T: Chut, elle a raison.

S11: Il est possible que les Français retournent en Europe avec le chef des indigènes, des indigènes, pour montrer aux autres qu’ils ont *conquéri la terre

S7: Conquis

T: Oui, qu’ils ont conquis la terre. Oui, d’autres idées?

S1: Mm, ils vont... ils vont parler avec le chef qu’ils ont em ils vont parler avec le chef, qu’ils ont plus de force qu’eux.

S2: Die Indianer sind viel zu tapfer, um sich zu unterwerfen. (The Indians are too brave to be conquered)
Let me discuss some of the features of this excerpt which are, in my opinion, indicators for this shift away from traditional teaching/learning procedures:

(1) Code-switching: Like in the foreign language classroom where code-switches into the source language are fairly common, this strategic behaviour can be found here as well. Normally, it is the teacher, however, who initiates the switch back into the target language. In our example we find several examples of code-switching back into the target-language but carried out by the students: In line 3 S1 switches into German, this is taken up by S17 in line 4 who starts the utterance in French (pour) but continues in German. In line 5 S3 switches back to French, in line 5 S17 agrees by repeating the utterance of S3 in French, then falling back into German (genau-exactly) and back into French again (merci). All this takes place without the teacher intervening. This kind of behaviour can be observed in other excerpts as well, it seems to be characteristic of bilingual classrooms. It can be interpreted in different ways, of course, but for me it is an example of the sort of student behaviour which we would like to develop in an autonomous classroom. The participants in the interaction try to make it take place in the target language only; they feel responsible for the discourse taking place in their classroom knowing (consciously or unconsciously) that they will learn the foreign language only if they use it.

(2) Corrections: In the excerpt there is one instance where a student’s utterance is corrected. This is in lines 10 and 11, S11 uses the wrong participle conquéré and is corrected by S7, who helps out with the correct form conquisé. This is an example of peer correction which we can find in foreign language classrooms as well. But I think the underlying motivation of the corrector is not to show how much better he is in French, but to contribute to a comprehensible interaction in the target language, i.e. he feels co-responsible for the interaction. In this excerpt the teacher does not correct the students’ language. In line 7 she helps out with the word libérer which the students do not know, but this is not an incident of correction.

(3) The teacher: In the excerpt the teacher intervenes four times in the interaction. This is not very much if one takes into account that the excerpt consists of 14 turns. S17 speaks almost as often. It is even more interesting to characterise the teacher’s interventions: twice she asks the students to bring new ideas into the discussion, once she confirms a student’s utterance and once she confirms another student’s correction. I don’t want to claim here that the teacher is acting like a teacher in an autonomous classroom,
but I think it comes out quite clearly that she does not act like the omniscient teacher in a teacher-controlled classroom environment.

These three examples show quite clearly that though CLIL can be approached methodologically in all kinds of ways, there seems to be a natural tendency in this approach to shift towards forms of learning which can be related to learner autonomy. The lesson from which my data comes is not part of the autonomous paradigm, but both learners and teacher seem to feel that they are working better together if they accept joint responsibility for what is going on in the classroom and if they work as partners and not as teachers and learners in the traditional sense. Is it CLIL which makes them act like this? I do not know, but somehow there seems to be a relationship of the kind that CLIL tends to enforce learner autonomy, which I cannot prove yet, however.

Concluding Remarks

I believe that four conclusions can be drawn from this paper:

• There are connecting links between CLIL and LA both in theory and practice
• CLIL as a fused subject provides a learning environment which promotes the capacity for self-organisation
• Both in CLIL and in LA content is looked upon in a similar way: content needs to be authentic and processed in an authentic manner
• CLIL as a learning environment lends itself to an autonomous approach in the classroom. The example makes this quite clear: the rules of teacher-controlled classroom interaction are broken fairly often.

Bibliography


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