Clarifying CLIL for the English teacher

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Clarifying CLIL for the English teacher

Rosie Tanner and Liz Dale offer ideas for integrating the language students need for other subjects into their English lessons.

CLIL and the English teacher

You may have come across key ideas related to CLIL, like these: ‘Every subject teacher is a language teacher’, ‘CLIL is all about integration’, ‘The language of science is different from the language of history’. In many secondary schools, subject teachers are being asked and agree – sometimes enthusiastically, sometimes unwillingly – to teach their subject through English. Teaching a subject through English involves subject teachers interweaving the teaching of their subject matter with learning the language related to the subject, not just teaching their subject in English.

But where does all this leave the English teacher? If the subject teacher is teaching both content and language, what kind of language can English teachers focus on?

Not all subject teachers feel comfortable about or capable of integrating language into their lessons: ‘What’s biology got to do with English?’, ‘If I teach history in English, that’s enough, isn’t it?’ The main focus in CLIL language lessons, then, is not on teaching biology, but rather on familiarising learners with the language they need for their biology lessons. The role of the English teacher is, thus, to help learners to focus on and practise with the language of biology.

Content-based language activities

One answer to this question is to design content-based language activities which can be used either in English lessons or by subject teachers. In this article, we illustrate this idea using a biology coursebook page about the characteristics of animal cells and cell processes to demonstrate how you can create these activities – in other words, how to ‘CLILify’ subject lesson materials.

Few language teachers are subject specialists and vice versa: few subject teachers are language specialists. The main focus in CLIL language lessons, then, is not on teaching biology, but rather on familiarising learners with the language they need for their biology lessons. The role of the English teacher is, thus, to help learners to focus on and practise with the language of biology.

Integrating subject content into English lessons: two ways

Each subject has its own language features: the most obvious is perhaps subject vocabulary (e.g. treble clef in music, canvas in art, or cell wall in biology). And school subjects also have their own typical language features: for example, scientific texts use many ‘if’ sentences for hypotheses and modals to help to describe processes accurately. Each subject also has its own typical text types, e.g. historical texts are often narrative and descriptive. English teachers can use these as a point of departure. Here, we suggest two ways in which English teachers can support subject teachers:

1. Identify language features to be worked on

2. Design CLIL activities to be carried out in the English lessons

Here are some suggestions for content-based language activities which can support learners in succeeding in subject lessons.

1. Identify the language features to be worked on. For example:
   - specialised vocabulary
   - words which are difficult to pronounce
   - everyday words used in a specialised way, e.g. cell in biology means something different from (prison) cell in everyday language; depression in geography is different from depression in history or psychology
   - typical grammatical structures used in subject-specific contexts
   - linking words used to organise and structure text, such as firstly, secondly, lastly, on the other hand
   - language needed to explain or interpret visuals, e.g. This diagram shows how cilia and goblet cells work together to carry dust out of the lungs.

Figure 1 on page 25 shows a page from a biology textbook. We have identified and annotated the page with some typical language features – one of nine examples of annotated subject pages from Dale & Tanner (2012: 82).

2. Design CLIL activities to be carried out in the English lessons. These
**Figure 1: Annotated page from a biology textbook**

**Figure 2: Part of a reading text related to the biology lesson, from http://www.kidsbiology.com/biology_basics/cells_tissues_organs/structure_of_living_things1.php**

**How can English teachers support subject teachers and their learners to understand and use the language of school subjects**

**Biology of Cells, Tissues, Organs, Organ Systems, and Organisms**

You are a member of a very large and complex world. Together with other members of your family, you work to do jobs, like clean your home, set the table, make dinner, and many other important chores. [...] From one individual to an entire planet filled with human beings, each of us have a role to play. Some of us are airline pilots, teachers, doctors, farmers, builders, and more. Without a variety of people with specialized skills working together, our world would be very different. There would be no advancement of technology, no discovery, and medical and food technologies would not exist as they do today. There is a similar organization within the bodies of living things. If we could go inside a living thing, the first thing we would see are what we call cells. Cells are like people in the example above. Each one is an individual entity working hard on specialized jobs. Instead of firefighters, cells might be assigned the job of helping digest food, or carrying messages from the brain, or fighting diseases that enter the body.

**Take place before and/or after the subject lessons. Think about**

- **Language skills:** listening and watching, reading, spoken production, spoken interaction, writing
- **Language systems:** pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, language functions and genres

**How much time will this take?**

Some of these activities involve little preparation, others need more time. Most of them can be reused, so you can gradually build up a bank of activities as a teaching resource.

**Who makes content-based language activities?**

English teachers can create these activities; ideally, develop them with your subject teacher colleagues. You can also involve learners in making the materials – either for their peers, for parallel classes, for a lower year or next years’ classes.

**Who can use the activities?**

The CLIL activities can be used in English lessons or subject lessons, depending on which teacher feels most comfortable or willing to carry them out. The more language work the learners do, the better they will become in the subject and in their language use.

The CLIL activities we present demonstrate a range of language activities, based on the page from a biology book. Of course, you are unlikely to do all of these in one lesson! You can choose how many and which to use, depending which areas you would like to focus on and how much time you have available.

**Reading**

Subject teachers often find that the texts in their coursebook are too difficult for their learners, so it is helpful if the English teacher can support reading about the topic.

**Use another text**

Find a reading text which contains similar information to the subject page, and create reading activities around it. Good sources for texts are Wikipedia, simple Wikipedia or subject sites. On the
Create 5–10. Learners
Give learners a
Cell collage
Cell wanted poster
on a video
Play 20 questions with subject
Make copies of a drawing of a cell.
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n Volume 24      n Issue 2 www.modernenglishteacher.com  27
Figure 2 shows an example of part of a simpler text than the one in the textbook.

Create a class quiz
Ask pairs of learners to write
two questions each on the text.
Alternatively, divide the text up and
ask different pairs to write questions
about their part of the text. Use these
questions to create a class quiz.

Scramble the text
Choose a paragraph from a text and
cut it up into sentences or logical
chunks. Your learners reorder the cut-ups into a paragraph. This helps
learners to notice linking words and how text is organized.

Listening
Search for a video on YouTube on
the subject topic and create
watching activities for your learners.
For example:

- Create 5–10 pre-watching questions. Learners read and predict
  the answers, then listen to check if
  their answers are correct.
- Give learners a list of words from
  the subject page. Their task is to see
  how many of the words in their list
  are mentioned in the video.
- Dictogloss. Read a short text out
  loud while your learners listen. Read
  the text again and the learners take
  notes. They then reconstruct the text
  as well as they can.

Spoken production
Ask learners to create and record their
own spoken commentary on a video
clip on the subject topic.

Spoken interaction
Create information gap exercises
around the topic. For example:

- Learners sit in groups around a table.
  Place four copies of a drawing of
  a cell on tables at the front of the
  classroom. Learner A runs and looks
  at the drawing, then describes it to
  the group; Learner C starts to draw
  the cell; Learner B then runs and
  returns to describe the cell; Learner D
  draws, etc. Give a time limit.
- Make copies of a drawing of a cell.
  Learners work in pairs. One learner
  describes the drawing to their partner,
  keeping it secret. You can find an
  example in Dale & Tanner (2012:
  177–180).
- Play 20 questions with subject
  vocabulary. In groups, one learner
  thinks of a word, the others in the
  group ask a maximum of 20 Yes/No
  questions to discover it.

Writing
Choose a genre which occurs in the
subject and design a writing task which
practises it. For example:

- Cell wanted poster. Learners make a wanted poster for a cell. They
  must include: a diagram or photograph of the type of cell, a
  description of how to recognize the cell, how the cell works, where
  it is in the body and any other identifying characteristics.
- Cell collage. Learners stick a picture
  of a cell in the middle of a piece
  of poster paper. Lines from the cell
  structures lead to 10 pictures cut
  from magazines or newspapers and
  10 written comparisons between the
  cell structure and the picture. For
  example, ‘The nucleus is like a brain
  because it controls what the whole
  cell does in the same way the brain
  controls what the body does.’ Or ‘The
  cell membrane is like a bouncer in a
  disco because it keeps bad things out
  of the cell like a bouncer keeps bad
  people out of the disco’. Share the
  posters: in this way learners become
  familiar with the structure and
  function of cell parts and they are
  practising comparative language.
- Defining. Make cards with words
  from the unit on them and give each
  learner one or more cards. Each
  learner writes the definition of their
  word on their card(s). Take the cards
  in, put the learners in groups. Read out
  the definitions, one by one. The group
  which first guesses a word gets a point.

Vocabulary
1. Ask learners to create or find pictures
   for everyday and specialist words:
   Everyday words: goblet, dust, cell,
   soil, water, root
   Specialist words: cilia, haemoglobin,
   mucus, spinal, epithelium, nerve,
   secrete, impulse
2. Learners find or draw pictures of
   words in the unit: goblet, dust, cell,
   soil, water, root, cilia, haemoglobin,
   mucus, spinal, epithelium, nerve,
   secrete, impulse
3. Create and play a loop game with
   subject words and definitions. Divide
   the class into groups of four. You
   need one set of cards for each group.
   Learners deal out their set of cards:
   each card contains a word and a
   definition of another word, like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An organ system</th>
<th>Which part of a cell controls its activities?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learners can look at their own cards, but not show them to each other. One learner starts the game by reading out the definition (‘Which part of a cell controls its activities?’) on one of their cards and placing it on the table. The person with the card whose word is defined says the word (‘the nucleus’), and reads aloud the question on his or her card, placing the word beside the definition. He or she then reads out the definition next to ‘nucleus’ on his or her card. The game continues until all the cards are on the table and make a ‘loop’. The definition on the last card should be the answer to the word on the first card.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reference: this is a shortened version of https://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Cells-loop-game-3009962

Pronunciation
Create bingo cards and play bingo using subject vocabulary which is hard to pronounce.

Bingo variations:
1. Definition bingo
   Make some bingo cards with definitions of specialist subject words.
They should all be different. Learners take it in turns to pick and say aloud a biology word. Learners cross off the words on their cards which match the definitions and call out ‘Bingo’ when their card is full.

Example of a bingo card
Key: from left to right, row 1: cell, cilia, haemoglobin; row 2: nerve cell, secrete, mucus

2. Word stress bingo
Make some bingo cards showing word stress patterns like this:

Learners read biology words out (e.g. for the left-hand top corner the word is haemoglobin, with the pattern ooOo). They cross off the stress patterns on their cards which match the words and call out ‘Bingo’ when their card is full.

3. Phoneme bingo
If your learners are familiar with the symbols for phonemes, make some bingo cards like this:

Learners take it in turns to pick and read biology words out or the teacher shows them in written form – which is more difficult! Learners cross off the phonemes on their cards which match the words and call out ‘Bingo’ when their card is full.

Grammar
1. Create a crossword online using sample subject sentences to practise the present simple.

Functions
Defining, along with explaining, describing and comparing is a commonly occurring language function in school subjects. Play a definitions game with subject words. Pre-teach key structures and styles for writing definitions. Divide learners into two teams. Each team writes definitions for 10 words, and then give the definitions to the other team. The team reads the definitions and writes down the words on the board. The first team to guess all 10 words wins.

We hope we have provided you with some ways of designing CLIL activities that you, as an English teacher, can use to support your learners and subject colleagues.

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Reference

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