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.

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

   - 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.

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
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   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

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.

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

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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
topic of cells for biology, for example, these sites include texts:

http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cell
http://www.cellsalive.com/
http://www.kidsbiology.com/

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>goblet, dust, cell</td>
<td>nucleus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>soil, water, root</td>
<td>membrane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cilia, haemoglobin</td>
<td>mitochondria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mucus, spinal, epithelium</td>
<td>cytoplasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nerve, secrete, impulse</td>
<td>cytoskeleton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.

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.

**Cells and the present simple**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Across</th>
<th>1. Cilia cells do this.</th>
<th>2. Cells __________ different jobs.</th>
<th>7. Ciliated epithelial cells __________ mucus out of the lungs.</th>
<th>9. These kinds of cells are very long.</th>
<th>10. Blood cells __________ oxygen to every other cell in our body.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Down</td>
<td>2. How many different kinds of cell are there in animals and humans?</td>
<td>3. Goblet cells __________ sticky mucus.</td>
<td>4. There __________ a million types of animals.</td>
<td>6. Your brain and spinal cord __________ and receive messages.</td>
<td>8. The sticky mucus in goblet cells __________ dust.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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:

- ooOo
- o
- o000

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:

- θ
- b
- tʃ
- ð
- æ
- e

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.**

| carry | carries |
| take | takes |
| is | are |
| trap | traps |
| has | have |

**Grammar**

1. **Create a present tense competition**

Students work in teams. Each group has a set of 10–12 cards with verbs in the present tense. Show sentences, one by one, on the smart board: each sentence contains a gap where a present tense should go. Each group discusses their answer, then holds up the correct card. The team gets a point if they get it right.

**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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This article was written co-operatively, as are all our joint publications. In order to show this, we alternate the sequence of authors.

**Reference**


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