

Content-Based Instruction, CLIL, and Immersion in Teaching ESP at Tertiary Schools in Non-English-Speaking Countries

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ABSTRACT

The common features and differences of three kindred methods of teaching English for professional communication at tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries are discussed. The methods analyzed are content-based instruction, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and immersion. The most important common feature of all three is thought to be integrated language learning where the focus of instruction is shifted from language to its integration with the content matter of non-linguistic disciplines. The principal difference between content-based instruction and immersion is seen in the fact that the former refers to language courses and the latter to courses of non-linguistic disciplines taught in the target language. Content-based instruction and CLIL are considered as practically identical methods, with CLIL being broader in scope. Immersion is stated to be the highest form of integrated language learning, and a stage-by-stage procedure of introducing immersion into teaching English for professional communication at tertiary schools is suggested.

Keywords: content-based instruction, CLIL, immersion, integration of language and the content matter of non-linguistic disciplines, tertiary schools, non-English-speaking countries.

Introduction

When English (or any other foreign language for that matter) is taught to tertiary students in non-English-speaking countries, it is practically always ESP only – the language for professional communication that learners are supposed to acquire. This is why the methods of teaching in such cases invariably presuppose the inclusion of professional content matter into language courses. But there are several ways of achieving such an inclusion.

The first way is the more or less traditional ESP teaching methodology based on focusing students' attention on the linguistic peculiarities of professional communication and the professional language for that communication (Robinson, 1991). The two other ways are content-based instruction and/or content and language integrated learning (CLIL) – those two ways being quite difficult to distinguish from each other (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Coyle, 2007; Marsh, 2002; Stoller, 2007; Tarnopolsky, 2012). Finally, target language immersion (Calvé, 1991; Johnson & Swain, 1997; Rehorick & Edwards, 1994; Walker & Tedick, 2000) is also gaining prominence in tertiary education outside English-speaking countries (Tarnopolsky, 2012) – especially in Europe where the use English as the language of instruction is spreading fast through universities on that continent (Kerikaan, Moreira, & Boersma, 2008; Phillipson, 2006; Tarnopolsky & Goodman, 2012).

However, there is hardly any literature discussing in details the major differences (as well as the common features) of the four above listed forms of teaching the target language for

professional communication. So, the goal of this paper is to analyze the similarities and distinctions of content-based instructions, CLIL, and immersion, in particular as compared with more traditional ESP teaching. The area of application (*area of usefulness*) of each of the forms needs to be considered, too. Also, the opportunities of combining them in teaching English for professional purposes to students of different majors should be discussed with the view of ranking those forms as to the level of their difficulty and as to arranging them in a sequence allowing learners to progress from a simpler to a more sophisticated form of language acquisition. These issues are the subject matter of the following analysis.

Integrated vs language-focused ESP teaching at tertiary schools

If English language education at tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries is practically always connected with ESP teaching and learning, the first question to be answered with the view of improving the teaching/learning efficiency is the question about the possible forms of ESP teaching for the conditions in which students are learning the language for professional communication while having little or no access to professional environment where English is used as a medium of such communication.

Actually, there are only two such basic forms and the first and most widely used of them is **the traditional ESP teaching** with its focus on learning *the language* for professional communication (Robinson, 1991). This kind of focus means that the language is being learned in connection with the content matter of students' future profession but that content matter is nothing more than the source from which language forms for learning are obtained (e.g., terminology) and the background for acquiring those forms. The professional content matter has no learning value as such so that, while learning ESP, students do not acquire any professional knowledge or professional skills new for them.

The form that may be considered as opposing language-focused ESP is the **integrated language (ESP) learning**. In integrated ESP learning the focus is shifted from learning the language to learning in unison both the language for professional communication and the professional content matter of that communication. Learning the language and learning future profession are united, even integrated so that each one contributes to the other (Snow, Met, & Genesee, 1989; Spanos, 1990).

It is the integration of learning the target language and professional content matter that unites into one single approach all the different forms of integrated learning to be further discussed in this paper: content-based instruction, CLIL, and target language immersion. The differences between those three forms are beside the point in this part of the article. What is important is 1) the integration of language and content which is their most important common feature and 2) the proven success of integrated learning in what concerns the learning outcomes (Johnson & Swain, 1997; Rehorick & Edwards, 1994). That success is such that there are even voices claiming the necessity of totally discarding traditional language-focused ESP teaching as obsolete in favor of integrated learning. For instance, Bicknell (2009) posed the question why we should teach Business English traditionally if CLIL can do it much more efficiently.

So, the question is whether we should really do away with language-focused traditional ESP teaching totally replacing it with integrated ESP learning.

The question is difficult to answer if ESP is taught in the English-speaking professional environment or if it is taught to experienced professionals who know their profession quite well and lack only English for communicating in it on professional matters. But such conditions are absolutely outside the scope of this article.

However, the answer to the question is definitely negative if, as it is in this paper, we are speaking about an ESP course for university students who are studying it in a non-English-speaking country with little or no access to *genuine* professional communication in English during the period of their studies. There are two reasons why the answer can only be negative:

1. The first reason is that, as a rule, in the first year of their university studies (when in most cases an ESP course starts) students not only do not know much but often even do not even have any clear ideas about their future profession. Integrated learning, which requires side-by-side acquisition of the language for professional communication and professional content matter and knowledge, may prove to be too hard for them because professional content difficulties are superimposed on language ones making the overall “burden” on a student too heavy to count on successful learning outcomes.

2. Quite often students in a number of non-English-speaking countries (for instance, in countries of Eastern and Central Europe) enter their first university year with a level of English that is not high enough for integrated learning which presupposes the shift in focus from language to content. Insufficiently English-proficient students need language focusing at the start of their ESP course to raise their consciousness as to ESP language peculiarities (*consciousness-raising* – cf. Rutherford, 1987) and to eliminate the drawbacks in their English-language education that were left over from learning English at secondary schools. A traditional language-focused ESP course can solve this problem.

In this way, in the conditions under discussion, there is quite a definite and important place for a traditional language-focused ESP course. It is the early period of students’ ESP training (usually their first year at university) when learners need to improve their English, realize some fundamental linguistic peculiarities of their particular target kind of ESP, and to get some basic ideas about the content matter of their future specialty. So, such a language-focused ESP course may be considered as a **preparatory one** before integrated ESP learning starts, or as a **buffer course** between secondary school’s General English courses and university’s integrated ESP course. Being such a preparatory, or buffer, course at the start of learners’ university ESP studies may be considered the **area of usefulness** of traditional language-focused ESP teaching.

Naturally, the traditional language-focused ESP course should be followed by the simpler forms of integrated learning to ensure the gradation of difficulties and learners’ gradual and step-by-step approach to its more sophisticated forms. In this respect, content-based instruction and CLIL are worth to be considered next.

Content-based instruction and CLIL: the area of usefulness

Brinton et al (1989) define content-based instruction as the one that is based on parallel acquisition by students of knowledge related to a certain non-linguistic discipline(s) and target language communication skills. In this way, the learning of content helps in learning the language while the language mastery facilitates students’ access to content in their vocational

or occupational areas (Stoller, 2007: 59). To achieve such parallelism in content and language acquisition, EFL content-based instruction classes may be designed as modeling classes on non-linguistic disciplines. For instance, the target language curriculum may be based on the curriculum of one or several non-linguistic disciplines so that the sequence of acquiring the language/communication content follows the requirement of acquiring the content of non-linguistic subjects.

Due to focusing students' attention on specialized/professional content rendered and learned through the medium of the target language, the language itself and communication skills are mastered to some extent implicitly, without students' conscious efforts to remember language forms, i.e. by way of unconscious acquisition which is the most natural and probably the simplest way of gaining command of any language (Krashen, 1981). Thus, the learning process in the content-based approach mostly involves such learning activities as case studies, brainstorming, discussions, project work, simulations, searching for and processing authentic professional sources of information in English, listening to shorter or longer lectures in English, etc. – those activities that model, or imitate, learning non-linguistic/professional disciplines or solving professional tasks. The principal difference between a content-based ESP classroom and an ordinary classroom for studying some non-linguistic/professional subject is in the medium of classroom communication – the target language in the former case and students' L1 in the latter one.

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) may be considered as a specifically European version of content-based instruction. According to Marsch (2002: 15), every kind of language learning in which a target language is also used for teaching students non-linguistic content can be called CLIL, so that CLIL is an umbrella term for all such dual-focused educational contexts (Coyle, 2007: 97). It is this broad interpretation that determines the peculiarities of CLIL as compared with content-based instruction.

CLIL includes a much broader complex of various approaches than content-based instruction does because it is not specifically oriented at ESP and adult education, as the latter one mostly is; it is no less, if not more, oriented at secondary school and the language education of adolescents (Euridice Report, 2006). This, no doubt, also requires some specific methodological solutions and specific, as compared to content-based instruction, modifications of the approach. Those modifications do not interest us because they mostly do not concern tertiary education. What does interest us is the general advantages of CLIL which embrace content-based instruction as well – as a narrower (oriented only at ESP and adult education) version of CLIL. Those advantages were formulated by Coyle (2007, pp. 104-105) who has shown that CLIL (and correspondingly, content-based instruction) can:

- “Raise learner linguistic competence and confidence;
- Raise teacher and learner expectations;
- Develop risk-taking and problem-solving skills in the learners;
- Increase vocabulary learning skills and grammatical awareness;
- Motivate and encourage student independence;
- Take students beyond ‘reductive’ foreign language topics;
- Improve L1 literacy;
- Encourage linguistic spontaneity (talk) if students are enabled to learn through the language rather than in the language;

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- Develop study skills, concentration – learning how to learn through the foreign language is fundamental to CLIL;
 - Generate positive attitudes and address gender issues in motivation;
 - Embed cultural awareness and intercultural issues into the curriculum.”

Having listed the advantages of both CLIL and content-based instruction as the narrower version of CLIL, it seems rational to discuss only content-based instruction further since, unlike very broad CLIL, its primary target, as it has already been said, is ESP and adult education – the area analyzed in this paper.

It should be noted that content-based instruction as related to ESP teaching at tertiary schools (and further on it is going to be considered only in that quality) may itself be divided into several versions.

Brinton et al (1989) distinguished three organizational forms of content-based instruction which were developed and described for teaching EAP (English for Academic Purposes) to international students learning English as a second language (and not as a foreign one – as is the case in this article) at US universities. The same forms are worth considered for teaching ESP in EFL learning situations at universities in non-English-speaking countries.

The first form is *adjunct language instruction*, the most advanced of all the three forms. Adjunct language instruction is a course of English *accompanying* total English immersion (see further). It is organized for those international students at American universities who are taught their majoring subjects in mainstream courses together with American students but need some help to cope with their language problems in those mainstream courses. Adjunct language instruction is designed specially for rendering such help, so it cannot be considered as an independent language course. This kind of instruction can also be used when English for professional communication is taught as a foreign, and not as a second language at tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries. But that should better be done at a much later stage than the stage when students have only started their ESP course or even are in the intermediate period of learning it (i.e. not in their first or even second year of studies). Adjunct language instruction is required if and when students are quite ready both in what concerns the language and in what concerns the content to be taught their professional academic courses in English only (total English immersion). That becomes possible after a long and arduous language and professional training – not earlier than the senior years of students’ university studies. This is why in the conditions under discussion such a kind of content-based instruction cannot follow a preparatory (buffer) course of more traditional language-focused ESP training (see above) but should be postponed until a much later period – if it can and should be introduced then (which is doubtful – see further).

The second form is *sheltered content instruction*. It was developed for those international students at American universities whose English (as a second language) was insufficient for attending mainstream courses on academic/professional subjects together with American students. They have separate courses on those subjects organized for them only, and such courses are taught in English that is modified and simplified, i.e., specially adapted to the level of students’ command of the language.

In the terminology of this article, such a form is not content-based instruction at all but a *simplified (as to language) form of English immersion*. This is so because the language for professional communication is acquired not in language (ESP) classes but in classes on some other academic disciplines. In the conditions of teaching English as a foreign and not as a second language, it is rational to distinguish between forms of learning when the target language is acquired in language courses and when it is acquired quite involuntarily and subconsciously (implicitly) in classes on other disciplines. Such a distinction will help clarifying the optimal ways of organizing the target language acquisition process in the situation when there is no outer world support for such acquisition – students come into contact with the target language for professional communication in their classrooms only. But that contact is different in language classrooms and in classrooms on other disciplines taught in English. In the former case, even if the instruction is content-based, the focus on language inevitably is (and should be) greater than in the latter case when English is used only as a medium (with no special focus on it) of instruction in a class on some academic/professional discipline in the course of that discipline.

From that point of view, it is rational to use the term “*content-based instruction*” for tertiary school’s ESP *language* courses in EFL teaching situations. The term itself presupposes *language instruction*, though it may be content-based, and that, in its turn, means a language course with some kind of balance between teaching language and teaching content (see further). Unlike that, when there is no balance and teaching content absolutely dominates, we have English as a medium of instruction only and not something that is purposefully and systematically taught. This situation emerges when we are teaching some other subject through EFL in a university course on such a subject – and here the term “*immersion*” is much more suitable since no conscious focus on language is suggested by the term itself. Such a distinction between content-based instruction and immersion is useful for ESP training at universities in non-English-speaking countries because it makes clear what kind of classes are meant in each case.

The third form of content-based instruction suggested by Brinton et al (1989) is of the greatest interest to us. The authors call it *theme-based language instruction*. It is specially designed for ESP classes only, and not for some kinds of immersion teaching. The content-based course of ESP, when it is designed as theme-based instruction, is structured around a set of professional topics (themes) that follow each other in a logical consecutive order which corresponds to the order of studying those themes in an academic course on some majoring discipline or in courses on several such disciplines. In view of what is going to be said in the next paragraph, of special significance is also the fact that, according to Brinton et al (1989), in theme-based instruction special attention is paid to the *integration* of reading, speaking, listening, and writing for professional purposes in the teaching/learning process.

The *theme-based language instruction* is probably the best suited form of content-based instruction to be used immediately after a more traditional language-focused ESP course with which, as follows from what was said in the preceding section, ESP training should start at tertiary schools where English for professional communication is taught as a foreign language, i.e. outside the English-speaking environment. It is the simplest form of content-based instruction so, logically, it is the best choice for introduction after the language-focused ESP course (for instance, if the latter one is taught in the 1st year of students’ university studies, the former can be started in the 2nd one). It is so because in a theme-based instruction

course the attention of the teachers and students is supposed to be shared in a more or less balanced manner between the language and content matter (the language and content can either be equally focused upon or the focus on content may only slightly dominate over the focus on language). This is why in theme-based instruction so much attention is paid to the integration and equalization of developing all the four basic language communication skills – speaking, reading, listening, and writing (see above). This balanced focus on language and content makes theme-based instruction a natural continuation of language-dominated traditional ESP teaching in the **continuum of gradual advance** towards the most sophisticated forms of integrated ESP learning in the conditions under consideration. Just this is the **area of usefulness** of content-based instruction (as it is interpreted in this article) in the conditions under consideration.

In this case, the following form in the advancement along the ways of making integrated ESP learning more sophisticated can only be one of the forms of immersion to be discussed in the next section of the article.

Immersion: the area of usefulness

Immersion programs for tertiary schools are defined as foreign language learning integrated with teaching other academic/professional subjects for providing students with the best means of acquiring their target language for professional communication (Walker & Tedick, 2000). Such programs, unlike content-based instruction (as it is interpreted above), are always taught not in ESP language classes but in classes on non-linguistic academic disciplines.

Some authors (Stoller, 2007) consider immersion as the supreme form of content-based instruction. However, there are good reasons to think that, though content-based instruction and immersion are very closely related, they should better not be considered as lower and higher levels of one and the same approach, i.e. identical in all fundamental features.

In our context (teaching ESP to tertiary students outside English-speaking environment), the principal difference between content-based instruction and immersion lies in the fact that, as it has already been said, while content-based instruction belongs to a language course, since it is taught within classes on the target language, immersion belongs to course of non-linguistic disciplines. It is in classes on those disciplines, and not in language classes, that immersion is usually organized, this is why if in content-based instruction the teacher and students' attention can be focused both on content and on language in a more or less balanced manner (see the preceding section), in immersion only the content matters while the target language is taken for granted. Thus, immersion is, in fact, outside the specific domain of foreign language's purposeful teaching.

Everything said above means that in ESP language classes both traditional language-focused ESP teaching and content-based instruction (interpreted as it is done in this article and having the form of theme-based language instruction) are **two consecutive stages preceding the introduction of English immersion in classes on non-linguistic academic/professional disciplines and preparing students for such an introduction.**

However, in the conditions of ESP teaching/learning at tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries there are some doubts that total immersion (see further) that takes students' complete command of English for granted can be accessible to all learners even after the two preparatory courses discussed above. Learners may not be sufficiently prepared for it linguistically and psychologically. It might be a kind of psychological shock for them to be "immersed" into a linguistically not supportive classroom on an academic/professional discipline taught in English only without taking any account of their real command of it. In this case, even additional ESP classes (*adjunct language instruction* – see above) will not be of great help, all the more so that in non-English-speaking countries ESP courses are rarely organized after the second year of student's university studies. The standard linguistically and psychologically supportive environment of language classrooms can hardly make students quite ready for the "harsh realities" of classrooms on non-linguistic subjects taught in English only. What can do that are "softer" forms of immersion preceding the total one.

Total immersion, which has already been mentioned several times in the paper, is the highest but not the only possible form of immersion. In total English immersion (Johnson & Swain, 1997) there is no adjustment of the level of the English language in which the subject is taught to the level of students' command of English, which means that this latter level is expected to be high enough (at least, B2, and often C1 according to the *Common European framework of reference* – Council of Europe, 2001). More than that, such a high level of command of English should embrace not only (and not so much) General English but English for professional communication as well. Our research has shown that the suggested approach when students study a language-focused ESP course in their first university year and a content-based ESP course in their second year practically always safely brings them to B2 level in their command of English for professional communication (Tarnopolsky et al, 2008). But it rarely allows them to attain C1 level while total immersion often requires it. Besides, as it has already been implied, not more or less standard language classes (with at least some language focusing) but immersion itself, though in its "softer" forms, can prepare students psychologically for total immersion. There are two such "softer" forms of immersion that can precede the total one:

1. The first of these "softer" forms is *sheltered/structural immersion* (Cummins, 2001; Freeman, 2000; Kerper, 2004) which is the lowest level and the simplest form of immersion. It is based on permanent but limited use of students' L1 in the English immersion classroom. For instance, lectures in the academic course can be delivered in students' L1 (with the lecturer obligatorily summarizing and briefly reviewing everything that was said by him/her in English at the end of every lecture). As distinct from lectures, practical classes and seminars are held mostly in English, though occasional recourse to students' native language is not impossible. Papers written by students and all kinds of tests in the course are also held in English. Another version of sheltered immersion is what Brinton et al (1989) called *sheltered content instruction* – see above. It means teaching academic/professional disciplines in *English specially adapted* to the specific level of learners' command of the language.
2. The second "softer" form of immersion which is of a higher level of difficulty for students is *partial immersion* (Holobow, Genesee, Lambert, Gastright, & Met, 1983). It is a higher level of difficulty in immersion teaching and learning because it presupposes only temporary inclusion of students' L1 in an English immersion course of an academic discipline. For instance, lectures can be delivered in students' L1 at the beginning of the course, but gradually the lecturer passes on to lectures in English only, thus replacing partial immersion with a total one.

The research conducted by Z. Kornieva in Ukraine, i.e. in the conditions of teaching ESP to tertiary students in non-English-speaking environment, showed that, after two first years of ESP training in ESP language classes, it was possible to introduce total English immersion in courses of academic/professional disciplines – but such an introduction could only be successful if, and only if, the course of total immersion was preceded by one year of sheltered immersion and one year of partial immersion (Z. Kornieva, 2004).

In this way, a sequence of language training programs may be suggested that can lead an ESP student of a university in a non-English-speaking country from the simplest and traditional language-focused ESP training in a language course to a total English immersion program in non-linguistic courses on academic/professional disciplines: **traditional (language-focused) ESP training (a language course) → content-based (theme-based) instruction (a language course) → sheltered immersion (a course on a non-linguistic discipline) → partial immersion (a course on a non-linguistic discipline) → total immersion (a course on a non-linguistic discipline).**

It has been proved in the research conducted by Z. Kornieva (2004) and in further research (Tarnopolsky et al, 2008) that this approach works quite successfully allowing to introduce English total immersion programs as the supreme form of integrated ESP learning even in such countries as Ukraine where a great number of students enter their first year of university studies with poor command of English and with quite a vague idea about their future specialties.

Following that approach, the **area of usefulness** of English immersion programs for such conditions covers the senior years of students' university studies when those programs are used in order of their difficulty for learners – beginning with the simplest ones (sheltered immersion) in the third year and ending with the most sophisticated ones (total immersion) in the fifth year.

Conclusion

The article was discussing the conditions of ESP teaching to students of tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries when learners start their university studies unprepared for learning non-linguistic academic courses through the medium of English. The goal was to pinpoint the ways that could permit introducing English-medium classes and courses on non-linguistic disciplines under such unfavorable conditions. For that purpose, the four forms of students' ESP acquisition were analyzed: more traditional language-focused ESP instruction, content-based ESP instruction, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), and immersion. The last three forms were considered as being kindred because they all belong to integrated learning where language acquisition is integrated with learning the content matter of professional disciplines.

CLIL and content-based instruction were interpreted as one and the same form, the former being broader in scope and designed not only (and not so much) for adult training but also for language teaching at secondary schools. The latter one was considered as better adapted to tertiary school conditions, so only it was analyzed in the article.

It was shown that in the condition under discussion both traditional language-focused ESP instruction and content-based instruction (in the form of theme-based instruction) consecutively lead and prepare students for ESP immersion in courses on non-linguistic academic/professional subjects. But it was also demonstrated that in most cases a content-based (theme-based) instruction language ESP course cannot be directly followed by total ESP immersion in courses on non-linguistic academic/professional subjects. There should be intermediate programs of sheltered immersion and partial immersion in courses on those subjects preceding total immersion.

The approach suggested in the article opens up prospects of introducing integrated ESP learning (including its highest and most sophisticated forms) into ESP teaching process at tertiary schools in non-English-speaking countries in the conditions where ordinarily such learning is not used at all

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