

New Perspectives for CLIL in the Revised Primary Curriculum in Austria

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ABSTRACT

Since language acquisition in early childhood is a multifaceted and fascinating endeavour, the integration of English as a foreign language or language of instruction in the primary classroom is a truly challenging and complex process for all involved. In the new Austrian primary school curriculum, CLIL is explicitly propagated as an opportunity to use English as the language of education for the integrative teaching of learning content and language skills alike. Yet the relevant programmes offered by university colleges of teacher education vary greatly across Austria, not least due to the lack of educational policy guidelines to date. Empirical evidence has predominantly shown that children enjoy CLIL units and adopt or develop a generally positive attitude towards English. Hence, it is anticipated that the clear postulates of the new curriculum regarding a ‘CLIL renaissance’ will be duly reflected in the revised curricula of Austrian universities and teacher training colleges.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Charlemagne (748–814), king of the entire Western Europe, already believed that ‘speaking a second language means having a second soul.’ This quote has become even more true in the face of advancing globalization and the associated urgency of targeted (foreign) language promotion. As the 21st century progresses, the English language is not only seen as a central means of communication in a political and economic context but, above all, as a unifying element in multicultural dialog and coexistence. The aforementioned Europeanization and globalization efforts have intensified the call for the promotion of additional language skills in early childhood (Böttger, 2020). A higher sensitivity and ability to reflect on linguistic structures (on a metalinguistic level) are often regarded as positive effects. Furthermore, the ability to find diverse solutions to problems with the help of divergent thinking processes can be increased. The role of primary school teachers in the development of children’s first and second languages is of fundamental importance here. The type and quality of language contact, as well as the degree of exposure to the respective language of instruction, can contribute significantly to the students’ vocabulary and language awareness. Teachers can thus have a consistently positive influence on the linguistic, cognitive, social, and

emotional development of children, provided they adopt a multilingual perspective in their lessons.

2. EARLY ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

The issue of early English instruction in primary school has been a topic of debate in the past, with concerns raised as early as first grade. However, the fear that this would have a negative impact on German language acquisition has been empirically refuted on several occasions, as has the frequently raised objection to excessive demands (Rymarczyk, 2010; Tracy, 2020). There is now a broad consensus on the positive effects on cognition and creativity, as well as on metalinguistic skills such as learning strategies and decoding skills. According to Rymarczyk (2010, p. 77), “English should be integrated into the primary school curriculum from the very beginning, with as much contact time as possible,” without, as is explicitly emphasized, excluding writing.

Since language acquisition in early childhood is a multifaceted and fascinating endeavour, the integration of English as a foreign language or language of instruction in the primary classroom is an extremely challenging and complex process for all involved (Tracy, 2020). In principle, however, cross-curricular, holistic language learning is very



easy to implement due to the classroom teacher principle that prevails in Austria. Based on [Reimann's \(2016\)](#) model of multilingual didactics and its fields of discourse and action, [Bellet \(2022\)](#) propagates a model of holistic language didactics adapted to the needs and possibilities of the primary level. The model is comprised of four sub-areas, which, taken together, are designed to advance individual multilingualism. In addition to the promotion of German as a language of instruction - especially for children with a different first language - the other components are aimed primarily at English as a second or third language. The promotion of language awareness and cross-curricular language learning are key strategies for enhancing transcultural and communicative competence (*ibid.*).

3. ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF EDUCATION

In the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) educational approach, language mutates from lesson content into a medium of instruction, whereby learners acquire not only basic language skills but also specialised vocabulary in the sense of an educational language. A key characteristic is that the focus is not on a comprehensive mastery of everyday language but rather on those language skills that are essential for the acquisition of knowledge. The possibilities and potential of bilingual teaching have been investigated since the beginning of the 20th century by Vygotsky, Piaget, and Bruner, among others, which led to the development of a socio-cultural, constructivist perspective on learning ([Coyle et al., 2010](#)). The umbrella term 'CLIL' as an independent concept was created in the early 1990s and has been researched on several educationally relevant levels since the beginning of the 21st century. Especially since the 'Action Plans for the Promotion of Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity' of the European Commission in 2003 and 2014, CLIL has been given a central role as an alternative language learning method, which on the one hand, has given rise to countless CLIL language teaching programmes and on the other hand has driven research - both in terms of the linguistic and subject-related aspects ([Virdia, 2022](#)). The classroom teacher system prevalent at the primary level allows teachers to integrate CLIL relatively flexibly and thus initiate the learning of new content in the foreign language. In a way, the symbiotic content and language learning kills two birds with one stone ([Gruber, 2017](#)). The teacher can use a variety of media and activities to create a stimulating learning environment in which permanently learnt facts can be linked to the foreign language. This creates contextual and cross-curricular learning bridges that ultimately lead to better linguistic and subject-specific knowledge integration ([Bellet, 2022](#)). In addition to the obvious gain in language skills, positive effects on metacognition and learning motivation have often been observed ([Wegner, 2022](#)).

4. NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM—NEW UNIVERSITY CURRICULA

The aim of primary school-specific English didactics is 'to teach children English - in an appropriate amount of time and under the most authentic conditions possible' ([Böttger, 2020](#), p. 10). For him, English lessons must by no means be a 'playground for English didactic dogmatism and methodological prescriptivism' (*ibid.*, p. 10). This is a thoroughly ambitious catalogue of demands which, however, is only partially reflected in the reality of Austrian schools. Since 2018, work has been underway to revise the primary school curriculum, which has been in force since 2005. This came into force on a rolling basis from the 2023/24 school year. With the development of a new curriculum, English lessons at primary school will now be adapted to international standards, and the focus on competences will also be anchored in early foreign language teaching. The subject 'Living Foreign Language English' has undergone some changes in the new curriculum. Here are some of the most important changes:

- Compulsory practice begins in the first grade and comprises two lessons per week in order to enable an early and intensive encounter with the foreign language ([Federal Ministry of Education, 2023](#)). However, as the timetable has not been expanded, this inevitably propagates and enforces cross-curricular language learning approaches in order to fulfil this plan.
- From primary level 2 (years 3–4), English will become a compulsory subject with two lessons per week instead of the previous one. This naturally presents teachers with completely new challenges in terms of teaching and assessment.
- In addition to the previously valid orientation towards level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), there are now plans to integrate the competence area of writing—an area that was previously explicitly excluded.

This represents a long overdue rapprochement with Germany in this educational sector. In our neighbouring country, where English lessons are not regulated uniformly at the federal level but are the responsibility of the respective federal states, foreign language lessons have been offered across the board in all federal states for over a decade—in most states, they are compulsory from the 3rd grade, in six states from the 1st grade. Two lessons per week have always been available here ([KMK, 2013](#)). Since 2023, in the course of this process, university colleges of teacher education have been entrusted with the task of adapting the existing training curricula to the future framework conditions -the new curriculum- shortened the basic study period to 3 instead of 4 years. As the Ministry of Education is aiming to start the new training model in the academic year 2025/26, this places considerable pressure on the curriculum commissions of the respective universities and teacher training colleges.

5. EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES IN CLIL

The timetable for primary schools has remained unchanged in the new curriculum, which raises questions about the feasibility of the two hours of English per week (available throughout Germany, for example). Consequently, CLIL is explicitly propagated as an opportunity to use English as a language of education for the integrative teaching of learning content and language skills outside of foreign language lessons (Federal Ministry of Education, 2023). It is notable that bilingual concepts were already partially embedded within the previous curriculum, which was introduced in 2005. It was explicitly stated that the majority of subjects (with the exception of German) were suitable for the gradual implementation of the foreign language as the language of instruction for the expression of basic facts. It is regrettable that the reality of the Austrian school often differs from this ideal. At a national level, Dalton-Puffer *et al.* (2011) came to the conclusion that the frequently postulated demand for subject-language integration based on long-term teaching concepts rarely takes place. According to the authors, didactically sound implementation still fails due to inadequate training at universities and teacher training colleges (*ibid.*). The relevant programmes offered by university colleges of teacher education vary greatly across Austria, not least due to the lack of educational policy guidelines to date. The European Commission's latest report on language learning in European schools from 2017 shows that Austria is not alone in this problem. It states that CLIL is now represented almost everywhere in primary and secondary education. Nevertheless, it points out that this still only takes place to a limited extent and is not very widespread in the 28 member states. The concept, which has once been labelled an 'innovation,' is still only being implemented by a small number of teachers (European Commission, 2017).

Successful implementation of CLIL is contingent upon the attitude and willingness to cooperate of all stakeholders, including schools, parents, and children. A review of the literature reveals a positive outlook, as evidenced by studies conducted by Gruber (2017), Wegner (2022), Virdia (2022), and others. In terms of linguistic and communicative competences, CLIL learners sometimes significantly outperform their classmates (with regular EFL lessons). A limiting factor is that the linguistic output lacks stylistic and functional diversity due to the pragmatic use of language, as the focus is primarily on content (Jornet, 2015). Empirical evidence has predominantly shown that children enjoy CLIL units and adopt or develop a generally positive attitude towards English. Parents appreciate the flexible use of foreign languages, the associated intensification of English lessons, and the positive effects on the educational process in general (Wegner, 2022). Contrary to widespread fears, there were no complaints about children being overburdened. However, the significantly greater amount of preparation required was cited as a limitation by teachers. In addition, the still prevailing lack of teaching and accompanying material was regretted (Gruber, 2017). In general, an extension of the units (instead of concentrating on two hours per week, for example) to the whole week is considered beneficial (Wegner, 2022). Overall, there is a

general consensus that CLIL can make a not insignificant contribution to the general improvement of school quality (Gruber, 2017).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

In retrospect, it must be noted that the extent and quality of CLIL as a teaching concept in Austrian primary schools has varied greatly to date, and its potential has remained largely unutilised. The noble goal of simultaneously increasing subject-specific and foreign language competence cannot be achieved by automatic means or didactic patent remedies. It requires a consistent teaching concept and systematic scaffolding in order to generate truly sustainable teaching results (Bonnet, 2016).

As Austrian primary school teachers are primarily trained as generalists, English didactics plays a rather subordinate role in university curricula *per se*. Specialised CLIL methodology is often completely lacking (Gruber, 2017). In terms of a competence-oriented approach, it would be essential to provide prospective teachers with explicit CLIL knowledge and appropriate methodological and didactic tools, ideally in all phases of teacher education (Bonnet, 2016). In view of our socio-demographically heterogeneous classrooms, teachers should, in the long term, have knowledge of the whole language—a desideratum that can realistically only be fulfilled with advanced professionalisation and years of professional experience (Bellet, 2022). It remains to be hoped that the clearly formulated postulates of the new curriculum with regard to a 'CLIL renaissance' will also be adequately reflected in the curricula of the universities of teacher education.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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