

# CLIL in Colombia: Challenges and Opportunities<sup>1</sup>

AICLE in Colombia: Desafíos y  
Oportunidades

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## Abstract

“Content and Language Integrated Learning” or “CLIL” as it is most commonly referred to, is an innovative methodology that has been gaining interest in the last few years. Although at first its implementation might appear to be something simple, as there is a tendency to think that for the successful application of CLIL based lessons it is only necessary to impart classes in English, in fact, there is a series of elements that language teachers and scholars should consider before reducing such an innovative approach to that simplistic view. In light of this, in this reflective article I address some of the challenges and opportunities that may arise when implementing CLIL in Colombia. Firstly I present a general theorization of CLIL. Secondly, I reflect on three of the challenges as well as on three the opportunities for the implementation of said approach in our national context. Finally, I present the conclusions and some possible research venues revolving around this field.

*Key Words:* CLIL in Colombia, Challenges, Education, Language Teaching, Opportunities.

## Resumen

El “Aprendizaje Integrado de Contenidos y Lenguas Extranjeras” o “AICLE”, como se le conoce comúnmente, es una metodología innovadora que ha venido ganando interés en los últimos años. Aunque en un principio su implementación puede parecer algo sencilla, ya que existe una tendencia a pensar que para la aplicación exitosa de lecciones basadas en AICLE sólo es necesario impartir clases en inglés, de hecho, hay una serie de elementos que los profesores y profesores de idiomas deben considerar antes de reducir un enfoque tan innovador a una visión simplista. En el presente artículo reflexivo analizo algunos de los desafíos y oportunidades que pueden surgir al implementar AICLE en Colombia. En primer lugar presento una teorización general de lo que es AICLE. En segundo lugar, reflexiono sobre tres de los desafíos así como sobre tres oportunidades para la implementación de dicho enfoque en nuestro contexto nacional. Finalmente, presento las conclusiones y algunas posibles vías de investigación en torno a este campo.

*Palabras Clave:* AICLE en Colombia, Educación, Enseñanza de Lenguas, Oportunidades, Retos

## Resumo

A “Aprendizagem Integrada de Conteúdos e Línguas Estrangeiras” ou “AICL”, como é vulgarmente conhecida, é uma metodologia inovadora que tem vindo a ganhar interesse nos últimos anos. Embora a princípio sua implementação possa parecer um tanto simples, pois há uma tendência de se pensar que para a aplicação bem-sucedida de aulas baseadas em AICL é necessário apenas ministrar aulas em inglês, de fato, há uma série de elementos que professores e professores das línguas deve considerar antes de reduzir uma abordagem tão inovadora para uma visão simplista. Neste artigo reflexivo analiso alguns dos desafios e oportunidades que podem surgir ao implementar o AICL na Colômbia. Primeiramente, apresento uma teorização geral do que é AICL. Em segundo lugar, reflito sobre três dos desafios, bem como três oportunidades para a implementação de tal abordagem em nosso contexto nacional. Por fim, apresento as conclusões e alguns possíveis caminhos de pesquisa em torno deste campo.

Palavras Chave: AICL na Colômbia, Desafios, Educação, Ensino de línguas, Oportunidades.

## Introduction

// Content and Language Integrated Learning”, or CLIL, as it is more commonly referred to, is an innovative methodology that has been gaining traction in applied linguistics and language teaching in the last few years. This has occurred probably because of the potential it has for improving language while combining it with subject knowledge. Although this methodology was originally designed for the European context, because of its versatility and adaptability it soon spread to other contexts, and thanks to this situation, multiple empirical and contextual articles have emerged.

An analysis of scholarly literature revolving around CLIL in the international spectrum makes evident that scholars’ interest towards this area of knowledge has grown with no precedent. For example, Curtis, (2012); Lorenzo, (2007); Lorenzo et al. (2009); McDougald and Pissarello (2020) have inquired into the potential of CLIL for English language teaching and learning processes and established that although it is vital to bear in mind the particularities of the context of which this methodology is applied, overall, students who are exposed to this type of teaching show positive results. This affirmation has been further supported by Costa and D’Angelo (2011) who suggests that if well implemented, CLIL “represents an extremely effective approach”.

In the national scenario, CLIL has been gaining notoriety as well. Whereas in previous years English in Colombia was taught following what authors such as Kumaravadivelu (2003) and Reagan (2004) call “instrumentalizing” and “objectifying” views respectively, nowadays educational institutions appear to be more aware of what the overall language teaching and learning process requires and now methodologies as it is the case of CLIL are being implemented.

Even though the previous situation is something positive, it is not undeniable that in Colombia there are some challenges that need to be considered when it comes to the implementation of CLIL. The privilege of English over other languages (including foreign and indigenous), the inconsistency between language policies, and the lack of preparation in teacher education programs regarding CLIL are some of the most recurrent aspects that cause difficulties in the implementation of such a methodology. Considering these elements, in the context of this article I center my attention on analyzing the challenges that arise for the implementation of CLIL in Colombia. However, beyond merely analyzing these factors, I would also like to discuss about the possibilities and benefits of applying CLIL in a context like Colombia, as my intention through this reflective article is to analyze both sides so as to illustrate not only the negative but also the positive aspects derived from the implementation of the process I have been referring to until now.

## Challenges for the Implementation of CLIL in Colombia

### *English is the most privileged language*

When considering the possible challenges that may come when implementing CLIL in Colombia, the first aspect that comes to my mind is related to the privileged position English has in this country.

It is not a secret that in Colombia English is the most privileged language after Spanish. Previous scholarly literature has supported this fact. Guerrero (2008) and Mejia (2011) for example have established that even if other languages as it is the case of French, German, to mention a few, offer excellent opportunities for the educational scenario, English is the most privileged language because of the influence that countries from what Kachru (1992) regarded as the “inner circle” (eg. the United States, England) have over Colombia. This influence has not only positioned English as the most “adequate” language to learn. Further than that, this action has contributed to the spread of native speakerism ideologies and other neoliberal agendas including “Americanization” and “McDonaldization”. As a result of these dynamics, the more American/British you sound, the more proficient speaker of the English language you are considered.

In two critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies, Escobar (2013) and Valencia (2013) reaffirmed this situation and concluded that in Colombia, English has contributed to the “manufacture of consent for foreign intervention” and has also disseminated “identity shaping discourses”. In short, it means that in our national territory, English has acted with a twofold purpose: on the one hand, it has contributed to access to international opportunities and globalization. This is evident. On the other hand, it has fulfilled a type of “linguistic imperialism” (Canagarajah, 1999) and has gained privilege over other languages which deserve equal importance and respect.

When considering all of these circumstances, it is understandable why the dominant language for implementing CLIL in Colombia would be English. Nevertheless, and as suggested by authors from the national panorama, it becomes necessary to transgress this situation and begin to incorporate the utilization of other languages (as I mentioned it above, foreign and indigenous) along with CLIL so that our students have a richer experience when learning through this methodology.

### *Language Policies: decontextualized documents which do not acknowledge our students' realities*

A second challenge that rises when fully considering the implementation of a methodology like CLIL in Colombia, is that for many years national language policies have disregarded our students' realities. Following the perspective of Correa and Usma

(2013), national linguistic policies have been designed under bureaucratic models, which implies that individuals who do not belong to elite communities will not have the same opportunities as individuals who do belong to those. It means that “It is not the same to learn English in a cosmopolitan city like Bogotá as it is in the countryside, or in a highly touristic town like Santa Fe de Antioquia as in a farming town like Yarumal” (P. 236) because of course both contexts are different.

Let us consider for example the case of rural education in Colombia. If we as educators have had the opportunity of engaging in rurality, we know first hand that most commonly, schools in these zones do not count on the necessary equipment to properly develop a CLIL based class as computers, tablets, projectors, cd players are scarce. Therefore, to really promote the implementation of a methodology like CLIL in Colombia (including of course urban and rural zones), it is fundamental to stop designing decontextualized language policies where it seems that policy makers and other stakeholders have been “sitting at different ends of the same table” (Correa & Usma, 2013, p. 239) and acknowledge our schools and students’ contexts by incorporating actors from all scenarios into the process of design of such documents.

Furthermore, and when doing such a task, applying “Ethnographic longitudinal multisite case studies” as suggested by Correa and Usma (2013, p. 232) would be excellent for students coming from all places as that approach could shed light on their “real” reasons for acquiring a foreign language so as to have these motivations more into account when designing new policies..

### ***Lack of preparation regarding CLIL in teacher education programs***

Language teacher education (LTE) programs are the place where prospective teachers prepare them to work in the teaching scenario in their near future. Crandall (2000) manifests that LTE constitutes the space where pre-service teachers’ contact with learning and teaching methodologies shape their initial professional development dimension along with their initial teaching repertoire as language instructors. This is coherent bearing in mind that LTE represents the place where prospective teachers have their first educational experiences within and outside the university.

According to Freeman (1989) and Trent (2010) LTE programs contribute to the development of teachers’ initial identities and practices. Thus, it is in this space where teachers will shape the pedagogical practices they will implement in the future, when they graduate and become in-service teachers. Possibly another challenge that appears when considering the implementation of CLIL in Colombia is that in our national context, in LTE programs prospective teachers are exposed to several courses and areas of knowledge, but, it seems that during this time, there is no formal preparation to teach content through language in the future. This fact has been further asserted by Brown and Bradford (2017) who stress that language teachers are one of the main

difficulties when properly implementing CLIL because they may have not received adequate preparation.

Hence, to contribute to the consolidation of CLIL as an area of interest and knowledge in Colombia, LTE should incorporate in their curricula materials and courses regarding this field as prospective language teachers could feel interested in teaching content through language in their professional milieu. Likewise, teacher training programs revolving around CLIL should be developed in the context of our country because even if prospective language teachers began to receive that type of education at university level, a large number of language teachers (those who have been in service for many years) would still need preparation revolving around CLIL.

The previous idea is asserted by Granados-Beltrán (2011) who holds that LTE as well as development programs regarding CLIL should be designed and subsequently implemented because “it is clear that for these efforts to be fruitful, they cannot be seen as an isolated endeavor undertaken solely by languages departments” (p. 14). Therefore, initial teacher education as well as continuous professional development programs, or teacher training, as it is also referred to, really need to address this situation so that CLIL gains relevance at all educational levels in Colombia. The theme regarding professional development will be better addressed in the following sections, though.

Now I present the opportunities that may derive from the implementation of CLIL in Colombia:

### ***The Consolidation of a New Research Agenda***

In a previous literature review I was able to establish that in Colombia there have been some dominating categories when it comes to research in ELT. Teachers’ professional development (Buendía & Macías, 2019), pedagogical skills and teaching approaches (Álvarez & Sánchez, 2005; Sierra, 2007), reflective practices and research skills (Castro-Gárce & Martínez-Granada, 2016; Clavijo et al., 2004) identities and beliefs (Castañeda-Londoño, 2017; Torres-Rocha, 2017) and virtually mediated teaching and learning environments (Galvis, 2011; Guerrero, 2012) appear to be the most recurrent ones.

Other dominating categories I identified are related to teachers’ emotions (Méndez-López, 2020; Méndez-López & Peña-Aguilar, 2013); English speaking teacher’s perceptions about their non-native condition (Viáfara, 2016), teachers’ socio cultural representations (Álvarez, 2009), EFL literacy teaching and learning (Torres & Castañeda-Peña, 2016; Mora, 2016), gender based pedagogies (Castañeda-Peña, 2010, Mojica & Castañeda-Londoño, 2017), critical discourse analysis on language policies

(Guerrero, 2008) and more recently, professional development within postgraduate education (Viáfara & Largo, 2018). However, it seems to be that despite the fact that quite a few empirical and conceptual articles revolving around CLIL in Colombia have been published (Mcdougald, 2015; Leal, 2015; Otalora, 2019), more research regarding this area is being needed.

Properly implementing CLIL in Colombia may lead, therefore, to the consolidation of a new research agenda that may help shed light on how CLIL is being implemented in the country. Besides, promoting this action is necessary because it would also gradually enhance the incorporation of content through English and would contribute to develop a better understanding on how CLIL, if that is the case, is being applied across different contexts in the national territory.

In short, promoting CLIL as a research agenda is extremely important and urgent because previous scholarly literature on this area has come from private settings (e.g. Universidad de la Sabana, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, among others) and it appears that rural contexts and other spaces as it is the case of public schools and universities have not carried out research studies regarding CLIL. Thus, successfully implementing CLIL would not only contribute to the development of a new research agenda. Beyond this, it would promote the development of studies to continuously examine the advantages/disadvantages that CLIL has for our country.

### ***A Shift of Paradigms: Towards A New Connotation of Bilingualism***

Perhaps one of the most valuable opportunities for the application of CLIL in Colombia is the potential it offers to challenge the wrong perceptions towards bilingualism that exist in the country (as it was already suggested above). For instance, Implementing CLIL with languages different to English would not only contribute to the detachment of native speaker ideologies (Guerrero, 2008; Macias, 2010; Mejia, 2011; Viáfara, 2016). Beyond that, it would raise awareness among the population about the importance other languages have for the cultural panorama of the world and the overall country, as not only in the United States, England, Australia, or Canada; what Kachru (1992) regarded as “inner circle countries” exist opportunities for academic and professional preparation.

This aspect has been discussed by Escobar (2013); Valencia (2013) as both authors argue that in Colombia we have been sold the idea that English equals success and better opportunities in life in this globalized world; aligning with what professor Mahboob (2011) denotes as a “gatekeeping” condition, that is, individuals who have not access to high quality English education will not have the same opportunities than those who can afford to pay for better conditions (Correa & Usma, 2013). Then, promoting the incorporation of other languages into the utilization of CLIL (e.g. French, German, Russian, indigenous), would really contribute to the awareness



raising process about the role of languages worldwide, and about the potential that other territories (including our own) have to offer.

### *New Opportunities for Professional Development*

At first, professional development can be conceived as “a life-long process of growth which involves collaborative and/or autonomous learning” (Crandall, 2000, p. 36). This aligns with Craft’s (2000) ideas where he contends that professional development refers to a set of experiences that educators go through to become more professional within their field. However, other authors such as Johnston (2009) and Freeman (2004) have used the term professional development to be more specific and have stressed that it refers to education that second language educators go through in order to become better prepared in their role as teachers.

Even though various definitions of what professional development converge, it is paramount to characterize the different types of professional development levels that exist in the academic field of English language teaching. For instance, Richter et al. (2014) separate professional development between formal and informal opportunities for learning. Regarding formal opportunities for learning, these authors hold that “these are defined as structured learning environments with a specified curriculum, such as graduate courses or mandated staff development” (Richter, et al., 2014, p. 117). In contrast to this, informal opportunities for learning are seen as actions which do not follow a specified curriculum. Freeman (1989) otherwise, separated the notion of what training is from development. According to Freeman (1989, p. 39), teacher’s training is “a strategy for direct intervention by the collaborator, to work on specific aspects of the teacher’s teaching” while the main objective of teacher’s development is to “generate change through increasing or shifting awareness” (Freeman, 1989, p. 39).

According to Crandall (2000) and Freeman (2013), there have been at least three or four widening gyres within the field of second language teachers’ professional development. Crandall (2000) asserts that the first shift that took place within language teacher education (LTE) was related to the advance from “transmission, product-oriented theories to constructivist, process-oriented theories of learning, teaching, and teacher learning” (p. 34), through which learners became empowered and active participants of their own learning processes.

The second shift highlighted the lack of inclusion of learners’ realities since it appears to be that language teacher education programs have historically “failed to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom” where multiple everyday situations were overlooked. As a result of these acknowledgment processes, the LTE field commenced to progressively incorporate teachers’ situated practices and cognition to foster a higher level of appropriation of all contexts among educators.

The third shift represented, according to Crandall (2000, p. 35) “a growing recognition that teachers’ prior learning experiences (what Lortie [1975] refers to as “the apprenticeship of observation”) play a powerful role in shaping their views of effective teaching and learning and their teaching practices”. This aspect has been especially supported by authors such as Borg (2004) and Freeman (1989) who have held that teachers’ early passive learning experiences as pupils allow them to recognize and shape their initial practices as future novice teachers. However, scholarly literature has also evidenced that through constant exposure to real teaching world and through constant reflection upon their professional and pedagogical dimensions, educators begin to detach from their inherently acquired practices/methodologies to more elaborated and complex ones; moving from what Kumaravadivelu (2003) called “teachers as passive technicians” to what he also regarded as “teachers as reflective practitioners” and “transformative intellectuals”.

And finally, the fourth shift constituted a growing concern for boosting teachers’ professional development through observation, inquiry, workshops, and continuing programs, where collaborative initiatives have gained relevance.

The previous widening gyres, especially the last one, have been really important for the field because they have acknowledged that nowadays teachers’ continuous professionalization is a process of paramount importance. However, it is also essential to remark that not only formal processes gain importance in this regard. Adey (2007) recommends the use of study groups where a number of individuals belonging to the school community may discuss aspects related to policies, lesson planning and students’ work. Ferrance (2000) proposes the implementation of action research studies as a manner to identify school failures and to subsequently work towards solving them, while Butcher (2002) advocates the use of mentoring.

Other authors including Callahan et al. (2001), Crandall (2000), Cosh (1999), Day (2002), among others, have recommended the use of teacher’s reflection logs, journals, video-monitoring, audio-monitoring, portfolios, collaborative learning and formative feedback as a complement to teacher’s professional development.

Bearing all the previous information in mind, CLIL represents the perfect opportunity for the development of new professional development programs in Colombia as many in-service and pre-service teachers are not fully acquainted with this area of knowledge. Short and long CLIL specialized courses (Mcdougald, 2009; 2015); academic events, workshops, SIGS (special interest groups) are some of the initiatives that could take place within the national territory as a manner to keep raising awareness about the potential that CLIL had for our educational scenario.

Besides this, this action would also require the development of new curricula, courses, and syllabi within the framework of LTE programs because these settings represent the place where pre-service teachers would be initially exposed the type of

knowledge, as remarked by Freeman (1989) and Trent (2010) who maintain that LTE represent the starting point of all language teachers.

Finally, I find it worth mentioning that for CLIL based professional development programs to properly work, these must be accessible to teachers from all communities, as highlighted by Torres-Rincón and Cuesta-Medina (2019, p. 22) who affirm that “constant CLIL professional development opportunities need to be accessible to a wider variety of teachers” as it seems that mostly intense or bilingual private settings have had access to this type of experiences.

In another contribution, Granados-Beltrán (2011) suggests that LTE and professional development programs regarding CLIL should be designed and subsequently implemented because “it is clear that for these efforts to be fruitful, they cannot be seen as an isolated endeavor undertaken solely by languages departments” (p. 14). Therefore, continuous professional development programs and initial teacher education within the context of LTE really need to address this situation so that CLIL gains relevance at all education levels in Colombia.

## Conclusions

The first conclusion is that although there are several challenges for the implementation of CLIL in Colombia, there are also opportunities for its proper appropriation. For instance, fostering the consolidation of a research agenda through which many research initiatives would take place, as well as creating new professional development opportunities for language teachers in general are some of the main initiatives to happen if CLIL continues to gain notoriety in the Colombian context and especially in language teaching.

Secondly, through this activity I was able to establish that even though CLIL is a relatively new field for the context of Colombia, there are already some research initiatives that have been contributing to the consolidation of the field. It is the case for example of the initiatives carried out by Mcdougald (2009; 2015); Montoya and Salamanca (2017); Rodríguez-Bonces (2021); who have been inquiring into CLIL and have found that this approach indeed offers advantages for context where English does not hold the status of a second language. Hence, from my view, it becomes extremely urgent to keep conducting research to keep fostering research studies in Colombia as a manner to understand how CLIL develops in several contexts: be these urban, rural, private, or public.

Finally, after having written this article it is also important for me to mention that CLIL is an approach that will continue informing not only my own research agenda

but also my practices as a language teacher, as implementing this approach to teaching in Colombia will surely continue posing new principles, practices, and pedagogical techniques, but as teachers we must stay updated and take advantage of the potential benefits it may have for the overall field of English language education and for our students.

## **Possible Research Venues Regarding CLIL in Colombia**

As suggested until now, although there have been some initiatives revolving around teachers' knowledge base and understandings concerning CLIL, it becomes important to have more research initiatives in order to contribute to the consolidation of this area nationally. Future research projects may examine for example the intersection between CLIL and language teacher education, teacher's identity, and materials and curriculum design as a manner to have a wider understanding on how this approach has been permeating these other areas of knowledge within the field.

Additionally, future research projects may examine how the possible benefits or disadvantages that using CLIL with languages different to English may have on students overall educational process, as there has been a tendency in Colombia to associate CLIL with English, and other languages; be these indigenous or foreign, have been left aside (Mejia, 2011).

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