

APPLYING CLIL TO COLLEGE ENGLISH FOR NORMAL
UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

Approved: Yuanyuan Hu Date: May 27, 2025
Paper Advisor

Suggested content descriptor keywords:

Content and Language Integrated Learning

College English

Normal Universities

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UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA

A Seminar Paper

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

English Education

By

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2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Yuanyuan Hu, without whose guidance and detailed comments, I would not have been able to complete this seminar paper. At the brainstorming stage, when my idea was obscure, Professor Hu patiently navigated me through the fog. At subsequent stages of my seminar paper, Professor Hu carefully read my draft and provided me with several rounds of meticulous feedback.

I feel indebted to Professor Yuanyuan Hu not only because of her guidance that led me through the challenging times of writing this seminar paper, but also because of her academic rigor, patience, and work ethic that would shine on my way, constantly bringing me back to the right track. I also would like to thank her for the many meetings she held for us to guide us throughout this degree program, for the meeting minutes she sent to each of us, and for the encouragement she gave us when we were not so sure of ourselves.

In particular, I would like to say thank you to Professor Yuanyuan Hu for the wonderful lectures she gave us when she taught us Methods of Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Attending her classes was a wonderful experience for me. The way she designed and implemented her classes, the new ideas and concepts she cleverly introduced, the magic words she used, the lively interaction that took place in her classes, and the class vibe peculiar to her classes never failed to fascinate me.

Last but not least, I want to say thank you to all the teachers in this program for the wonderful classes I attended, to all my classmates for their friendship and help, to my family for their support, and to staff members in the Office for International Cooperation and Exchange at South Central Minzu University for all the work they have done to make this program happen.

Abstract

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Rongrong Tong

Under the Supervision of Yuanyuan Hu, Ph.D.

College English is an important compulsory course for university students in China. However, relevant studies show that many College English students lack motivation. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), with its dual focus on language and content, can be adopted to address this problem. This paper provides a review of the definitions, benefits, applications, and challenges of CLIL. Based on the review, a framework for the application of CLIL to College English for normal universities in China has been proposed. In this framework, College English should be integrated with Education, Psychology, and Pedagogy, the three content areas required for all future teachers. A new name and more credits are needed for this integrated course. Finally, the paper argues that College English teachers can be ideal instructors for this integrated course, given their previous educational background in Education, Psychology, and Pedagogy, but they should be provided with additional training for a smooth transition from language teachers to CLIL teachers.

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Chapter I Introduction

College English is an important compulsory course for university students in China. It is a required two-year course for the majority of non-English majors at colleges and universities in China. The course usually meets twice a week for two hours. It consists of two modules: the Reading and Writing module and the Listening and Speaking module. In both modules, the emphasis is usually given to receptive skills (i.e., reading and listening) rather than productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). The first module takes three-fourths of the total class time, and the remaining one-fourth of the class time is allocated for listening and speaking.

Despite its status as an important compulsory course, College English has been experiencing an increasing number of unmotivated students. One major reason why College English students are unmotivated is that its content resembles that of high school English, except for vocabulary breadth and depth (Zhu, 2017). In a typical College English class, improving students' English language proficiency is the only goal for both teachers and students. For example, teachers and students seldom appreciate the content of the passages they read in College English, depriving College English of the meaning brought about by its content. As a result, English language learning in College English has turned into a form-focused, boring activity for both teachers and students.

Moreover, students taking College English usually have no practical need for English in China, and the majority of them have no immediate plan to travel abroad, where the instrumental value of English may be actualized. Exams have become the only instrument to motivate students to learn. To make the situation worse, many undergraduate students have begun to wonder whether it is still necessary to learn English when AI can provide free and ready

translation for research papers in English. A reform is urgently needed for College English to remotivate students to learn English.

Against this backdrop, various reforms have been carried out to revitalize College English in China (Wang, 2024; Yuan, 2010). One of them is the adoption of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Liu, 2022; Yuan, 2010) to add a new purpose to English language teaching. Although CLIL has won the recognition of many scholars in China, its practical application is still very limited (Xu, 2023). According to Zhu et al. (2021), CLIL has been adopted in two universities to teach such content courses as British Society and Culture, British History and Culture, and American Society and Culture. These content courses traditionally have been taught in English, with language learning being an implicit teaching objective. They may serve as a natural bridge for the transition from language or content only courses to CLIL courses.

In CLIL classes, students improve their English language proficiency; at the same time, they also learn content knowledge (Coyle et al., 2010; Gawlik-Kobylińska & Lewińska, 2014; Džemila, 2020; Gearailt et al., 2023). Students benefit from CLIL classes as the content in CLIL gives meaning to language learning. They can learn and use content-specific terms and expressions (Goris et al., 2022). In other words, the English language gives students a tool to learn subject knowledge, sometimes about the latest development presented in English.

Despite all these benefits of CLIL, no research focusing specifically on the application of CLIL in College English for normal universities in China has been conducted. A few publications (e.g., Hu & Zeng, 2025) that relate CLIL to College English mainly focus on the educational value of College English in addition to the development of student language competence. To address this research gap, this study aims to examine the application of CLIL to

College English for normal universities within the Chinese context, exploring the benefits and challenges of applying CLIL as well as the framework for its application. Normal universities are chosen because students of different majors in normal universities share some common goals.

Statement of the Problem

Normal universities account for almost 10% of four-year universities and colleges in the Chinese educational system. These universities and colleges are the main force in educating and preparing future teachers for Chinese society. The quality of teacher education in these universities directly affects the educational quality in general.

College English is historically a very important course for students at normal universities. Over the years, however, the course has been viewed only as a language course with the sole goal of cultivating students' competence in the English language. Many students and even many College English instructors consider English only as a tool for communication. Little or no attention has been paid to its humanistic and scholarly values.

CLIL is an innovative teaching approach that integrates language teaching with the teaching of content knowledge. It is an ideal solution to the current problem faced by College English teachers. However, no study has been carried out on the application of CLIL to College English at normal universities in China. Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research questions:

1. How has CLIL been applied in language teaching in EFL contexts?
2. How can CLIL be applied to teaching College English at normal universities in China?

Definition of Terms

CLIL is a teaching approach that aims to develop students' foreign language competence and expand students' subject area knowledge in one course (Marsh, 1994; López-Medina & Casado, 2024).

Purpose of the Study

First of all, this study aims to provide a review of the definitions, benefits, applications, and challenges of CLIL. Based on the review, this study aims to develop a framework for the application of CLIL in teaching College English at normal universities in China.

Significance of the Study

Theoretically, the current study fills the research gap and adds to the research about applying CLIL to teaching College English at normal universities in the Chinese context. Practically, the current study provides a pedagogical solution to the situation faced by College English at normal universities in China. The proposed framework for the application of CLIL in College English at normal universities can also be useful for College English at other types of universities in China.

Methodology

This researcher conducted library research for this study to collect and review the definitions of CLIL, the benefits of CLIL, the application of CLIL in language teaching in EFL contexts, and the challenges of applying CLIL in EFL contexts. Based on the four reviews, the researcher developed a general framework for the application of CLIL in teaching College English at normal universities in China.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Many articles have been published on the topic of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) since its emergence in 1994, covering a wide variety of issues related to CLIL. This review mainly focused on its definitions, benefits, applications, and challenges, which provided a theoretical basis for applying CLIL at normal universities in China.

Definitions of CLIL

A brief review of the literature shows that the definitions of CLIL can be categorized into four types. The first type emphasizes the development of language competence; the second type emphasizes the learning of subject knowledge; the third type advocates a 50 to 50 proportion between language development and content learning; the last type focuses on adding additional objectives to the approach.

Marsh's Definition

According to Marsh (1994), CLIL is a dual-focused approach that aims to develop learners' language skills and improve their subject knowledge with the target language used as a medium of instruction. This is the original definition of CLIL, which has been interpreted differently by many researchers, such as Soomro (2012), Vázquez and Ellison (2013), Lo and Macaro (2015), Golovchun et al. (2017), Perez et al. (2018), and Mahan (2022).

Language-Emphasis Interpretations

Based on Marsh's original definition of CLIL, some researchers, such as Moore and Lorenzo (2015) and Itoi (2024), have interpreted and used CLIL as a language teaching approach in which content is used as a means to promote language development. According to Moore and Lorenzo (2015), CLIL, in essence, means the use and learning of another language in the process of content learning. Itoi (2024) further consolidated the idea by claiming that in Asia, CLIL is

mainly used to promote the development of English language skills. In such definitions, CLIL is only a language teaching approach, with which the content is used to enhance language teaching; the dual focus of CLIL proposed by Marsh has been lost.

Content-Emphasis Interpretations

In contrast to those researchers who have taken the side of language as the key focus of CLIL, many other researchers, such as Carloni (2014), Leščinskij (2014), Calvete Gaspar et al. (2017), Somers (2017), Abbate (2018), Bianco and Andonova (2020), and Rutta et al. (2021), have taken the content side. For them, CLIL is mainly a teaching approach used to teach content knowledge. According to the definitions leaning toward the side of content, language is used only as a tool for learning the content; learners' language skills may be implicitly enhanced while they are learning the content expressed in that language.

Definitions Balancing Content and Language

Contrary to the above two groups of researchers, many other researchers believe that a 50/50 balance should be maintained between content and language while CLIL is implemented. According to Aro and Mikkilä-Erdmann (2015), equal importance should be attached to both language and content learning. Paliwoda-Pękosz and Stal (2015) have classified CLIL under bilingual education, claiming that teachers should focus simultaneously on subject knowledge and language skills. Džemila (2020) further emphasized the balance between content and language by claiming that language is used to learn content, and content is used to learn language. This study also adopts a 50 to 50 interpretation.

Expanded Interpretations

Some researchers have expanded the goals to be achieved with CLIL. Tarabar and Neslanović (2021) claimed that the development of thinking skills can be one of the main goals

for CLIL. Itoi (2024) went even further into possible learning outcomes of CLIL, arguing that CLIL can also be used to develop “critical thinking”, “problem-solving”, “creativity”, collaborative skills, and “cross-cultural awareness”. Goris et al. (2022) pointed out that CLIL can be used to develop learners’ cultural awareness and prepare learners to become global citizens.

Benefits of CLIL

In general, the benefits of CLIL are various, but its core benefits revolve around motivation, interest, and autonomy. Morgan (2006) summarized the following benefits of CLIL as identified by previous researchers. CLIL can help develop students’ independence, autonomy, and collaborative skills, provide various opportunities for using the language, and encourage students to seek connections between language learning and the learning of subject knowledge, to look at things from different angles, and to take responsibility for their own learning (Morgan, 2006). Belenkova (2015) has found CLIL to be efficient and beneficial in developing students’ confidence and motivation in learning. Vázquez and Ellison (2013) summarized the benefits of CLIL as follows: CLIL helps develop students’ interest, motivation, and autonomy in learning, and reduce their stress in language learning. Leščinskij (2014), acknowledging the benefits identified by previous researchers, argued that CLIL helps learners communicate authentically in the target language. Schmiedebach and Wegner (2021) concluded that CLIL helps develop students’ interest in learning and also strengthen their content-specific language skills.

Applications of CLIL

Since it was first proposed in 1994, CLIL has been applied widely first in Europe, then all over the world. A review shows that the successful application of CLIL is a complex process. It involves new requirements for stakeholders, such as teachers and students. It also requires upgrades for the main elements of teaching – goals, content, methods, and assessment. The

following review is about the applications of CLIL in general since few sources are available about the application of the 50/50 balanced interpretation of CLIL.

Requirements for the Main Stakeholders in CLIL

The application of CLIL puts high demand on teachers. According to Vázquez and Ellison (2013), teachers using CLIL should be equipped with subject knowledge, language competence, and be willing to embrace language as a tool in itself rather than a subject. Brooke (2020) has highlighted that it is important for CLIL teachers to teach in a way appropriate to the needs of their students. Džemila (2020) has provided a comprehensive review of the good qualities required of a CLIL teacher, such as the ability to teach in an appropriate as highlighted by Brooke (2020), language skills and flexibility in teaching as considered to be important by Vázquez and Ellison (2013), and the ability to collaborate with the other content or language teachers. According to Lo and Macaro (2015), for the interaction in a grade 10 class of any content area in a Medium of Instruction (MoI) switching school and two English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) schools to proceed successfully, teachers need interaction skills to be able to engage students, and correspondingly, students need sufficient language skills to interact in class.

Students' language proficiency, learner autonomy, confidence, and motivation are vital to the successful application of CLIL. According to Bianco and Andonova (2020), students' English language proficiency is directly related to their achievement in CLIL classes as well as their willingness to attend CLIL classes. Lo (2025) argued that students should develop their self-regulation skills to be prepared for CLIL classes. Goris et al. (2022) have found that students' EFL aptitude, confidence, and international orientation tend to be positively correlated with the successful implementation of CLIL.

Redefining the Main Teaching Elements

A review of the application of CLIL finds that successful application of CLIL requires a redefinition of the main elements in teaching, such as goals, methods, content, and assessment. Teaching goals should be redefined first. In traditional classes, the teaching goal is either oriented toward the language or to the subject content. With CLIL, however, subject knowledge and language skills serve as dual goals (Soomro, 2012; Vázquez & Ellison, 2013; Lo & Macaro, 2015; Golovchun et al., 2017; Perez et al., 2018; Mahan, 2022). In addition to the above two basic goals, some researchers have included thinking skills, collaborative skills, cultural awareness, creativity, and problem-solving skills (Tarabar & Neslanović, 2021; Goris et al., 2022; Itoi, 2024).

CLIL also redefines the classroom language. A CLIL class does not necessarily mean using only one language. For CLIL to be applied successfully, Itoi (2024) has advocated using multilingual resources. According to Itoi (2024), teachers and students in a CLIL class can take advantage of all the languages they are familiar with to enhance the learning and comprehension of language and subject knowledge. Kontio and Sylvén (2015) have argued that a CLIL class with English as the medium of instruction does not necessarily entail that only English is used; instead, students and teachers can switch from English to their native language and from their native language to English to facilitate learning.

For CLIL to be applied, ready-to-use teaching materials need to be designed. Lorenzo (2008) suggested that teaching materials need to be adapted to meet the needs of CLIL classes. Moore and Lorenzo (2015) outlined the principles to be followed in content design, arguing that a balance between linguistic skills and subject knowledge should be maintained for CLIL materials.

Moreover, new ready-to-use assessment tools for CLIL classes must be designed for CLIL to be applied successfully. Morgan (2006) has summarized assessment challenges for CLIL teachers, including what to focus on, subject knowledge or language skills, and what criteria to use. New assessment tools for CLIL classes should reflect CLIL teachers' beliefs and teaching practices. Based on some empirical studies on CLIL teachers, Xavier (2016) concluded that there was a discrepancy between beliefs held by CLIL teachers and their assessment practices.

CLIL Applications in China

As can be seen from the names of the authors of the articles reviewed above, CLIL has been minimally applied in China. Relevant research (e.g., Hu & Zeng, 2025) on the applications of CLIL in universities in China mainly focuses on the educational value of CLIL. There has been no research on the applications of CLIL to College English for normal universities in China.

Challenges of Applying CLIL

A brief review of the relevant research on the applications of CLIL, which includes but is not limited to the application of 50/50 balanced CLIL, shows that the lack of textbooks, qualified teachers, and an appropriate assessment system are the three major challenges faced by the advocates of the CLIL approach. Moore and Lorenzo (2015) argued that adapting the subject content textbooks for language teaching remains an underexplored area. Lorenzo (2008) argued that the rapid dissemination of CLIL has led to a series of challenges, with the lack of CLIL teaching materials as one of them. One way to overcome this challenge is for teachers to adapt teaching materials for CLIL classes, but they must first learn how to adapt them (Lorenzo, 2008). Vázquez and Ellison (2013) and Džemila (2020) believed that the lack of competent teachers

poses a serious challenge for the application of CLIL, as CLIL language and content teachers need to learn to collaborate to implement CLIL. Morgan (2006) argued that with the development of CLIL, the main challenge for CLIL is the development of an appropriate assessment system. Although these challenges add to the difficulty of implementing CLIL, they also serve as new areas of development for CLIL.

Summary

Previous studies have proved CLIL to be an effective approach in fostering learning efficiency and motivation, examined the applications of CLIL from the perspectives of the main stakeholders and the key elements involved in a CLIL class, and identified challenges faced by teachers in implementing CLIL. The reviewed definitions draw a clear picture of CLIL and delimit CLIL to be applied to College English at normal universities in China. Although CLIL has been interpreted and implemented in various ways worldwide, this study has chosen the interpretation highlighting a balance between subject knowledge and language skills. The benefits of CLIL can justify its application in new contexts. The effectiveness of CLIL in developing students' interest, motivation, and autonomy in learning makes a strong case for applying CLIL. The review of the applications of CLIL in different contexts suggests implications for the applications of CLIL to College English for normal universities in China. The review shows that for CLIL to be applied, teachers and students should be well prepared. Teaching objectives, textbooks, instructional language, and assessment need to be redefined. The major challenges in implementing CLIL thus lie in the lack of qualified teachers, textbooks, and an appropriate assessment system. These challenges, however, can serve as the starting point for the design of a new framework to apply CLIL to College English at normal universities in China.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Despite its benefits, the application of CLIL to College English for normal universities in China has rarely been explored. Adding to current CLIL research, this paper has proposed a framework for the implementation of CLIL at normal universities in China and discussed its implications.

A Framework for Implementing CLIL at Normal Universities in China

Normal universities should integrate Education, Psychology, Pedagogy, the three required content areas, with College English. According to the normal university curriculum, students should take Education, Psychology, Pedagogy, and College English courses. The integration of these courses can be beneficial to students and practically feasible. First, with the integration of these courses, students can learn English and the other three courses at the same time, which may improve their learning efficiency. Second, the integration of these courses can motivate students to learn English as the content areas inject meaning into English language learning. Third, English books on education, psychology, and pedagogy are available on the book market, so teaching materials may not be a challenge.

This integrated course should be given a new name. College English would no longer suffice as the title of the course. A course title such as College English and Education Integrated Course, College English and Psychology Integrated Course, or College English and Pedagogy Integrated Course can be used to highlight the integration between language and subject content.

The credit for the integrated course should be more than that for College English since the integrated course covers English and the three content areas. A certain percentage of the class time originally for the content areas should be allocated to the integrated course so that teaching objectives for both English and the content areas can be achieved.

Normal universities should advocate the application of a balanced CLIL to the integrated course. It means that teachers of the integrated course need to teach both language and content explicitly and evaluate students not only in terms of their language development but also in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the content areas. If we focused too much on the content, the integrated course would become Psychology taught in English, Education taught in English, or Pedagogy taught in English; it would be taught with the English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) approach rather than CLIL. If we focused too much attention on English, the integrated course would remain as College English, but the dual focus of CLIL would be lost..

Normal universities should select current College English teachers instead of content teachers to teach the integrated course. First, current teachers in the three content areas are generally not ready to teach the English language or the content areas in English because of their insufficient language competence. Second, current College English teachers, most of whom are graduates from normal universities, are usually well educated in the three content areas. They are likely qualified to teach not only English but also subject content in education, psychology, and pedagogy.

Implications of the Framework

This section discusses the implications of the proposed framework. For College English teachers, the framework implies new requirements for them to be qualified for teaching the integrated course. Although College English teachers are generally trained in education, psychology, and pedagogy, teaching the content areas requires a deeper understanding of them. They must further develop their knowledge in education, psychology, and pedagogy, and learn from subject teachers on how to teach subject content to students. They also must develop their content-specific language competence, in particular their competence in technical terms. Thus,

normal universities should offer continuing education for College English teachers in the content areas. Continuing education in these fields would provide College English teachers with the necessary training, making their transition from language teachers to CLIL teachers easier.

For College English at normal universities, this framework can be used with minor modifications. However, for comprehensive universities where students are not necessarily trained to be teachers after graduation, the proposed framework may not be applicable. They can consider integrating College English with a general education required course. The subject content should be carefully chosen to ensure that students are interested in the content, and College English teachers are capable of teaching the content.

Summary

In summary, one way of applying CLIL to College English at normal universities is to integrate Education, Psychology, and Pedagogy, the three content areas required for all future teachers, with English. A new name is needed to highlight the integrated nature of the new course. More credits should be assigned to the course so that it has more weight than College English or any of the content courses on its own. The balanced CLIL should be adopted to ensure that both the content and language objectives are achieved. Finally, College English teachers can be ideal instructors for this integrated course given their previous educational background in Education, Psychology, and Pedagogy. However, they should be provided with additional training for a smooth transition from language teachers to CLIL teachers.

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