



# CLIL or time? Lexical profiles of CLIL and non-CLIL EFL learners



Rosa M. Jiménez Catalán\*, M. Pilar Agustín Llach

Universidad de La Rioja, Facultad de Letras y Educación, Departamento de Filologías Modernas, C/ San José de Calasanz s/n, 26004 Logroño, La Rioja, Spain

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been considerable research concerning the effect of CLIL on English language learners' competence. However, it remains unclear if the positive effects found are due to CLIL or to time. To clarify this issue, this paper focuses on the vocabulary output of CLIL and non-CLIL EFL learners after an equal number of hours of English exposure. The objectives were twofold: (1) to ascertain whether the CLIL group retrieves a higher number of English words than the non-CLIL group; (2) to determine whether the two groups produce the same or different words. The sample comprised 70 Spanish EFL learners in their 8th and 10th year of secondary education. The data collection instrument was a lexical availability task consisting of ten prompts. The data were edited, coded, and subjected to quantitative and qualitative analyses. The results showed that the CLIL group retrieved a higher number of words than the non-CLIL group. However, both groups exhibited similarities concerning most and least productive prompts, first word responses, word frequency, and word level. The findings suggest a need to conduct equal comparisons of CLILs and non-CLIL groups as well as to examine the task effect, and the vocabulary input received by learners.

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## 1. Introduction

There is a great deal of variation when it comes to research concerning the effect of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on the development of competence in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This variation primarily relates to focus, topic and methodologies. For example, certain studies have examined classroom discourse in CLIL contexts (cf. Nikula, Dalton-Puffer, & Llinares, 2013; Whittaker, Llinares, & McCabe, 2011; Evnitskaya & Morton, 2011), while others have compared CLIL and non-CLIL groups in regard to different skills and language components, such as listening and reading (Pladevall-Ballester & Valbona, 2016), receptive vocabulary size (Fernández-Fontecha, 2015), and grammar (Aguilar & Muñoz, 2013). The tendency in CLIL studies has been to explore new avenues rather than to build on previous research; indeed, this makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions, as there does not currently exist a solid body of empirical evidence related to each of the aspects investigated thus far. This occurs, for instance, when it comes to vocabulary, as researchers have dealt with receptive knowledge rather than with productive knowledge. With regard to the latter, scholars have focused on vocabulary size instead of on the qualitative aspects of the words. However, the most serious limitation of CLIL research, as pointed out by

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [rosa.jimenez@unirioja.es](mailto:rosa.jimenez@unirioja.es) (R.M. Jiménez Catalán).

Bruton (2011, 2013), is that most studies have based their conclusions on groups with an unequal number of hours of language exposure. This makes it almost impossible to disentangle the effect of CLIL from the effect of time. The present study is the first to attempt to overcome these limitations by looking at the quantity and quality of the vocabulary output of CLILs and non-CLILs groups, and particularly by comparing these groups when they are exposed to an equal number of hours of English. Our objectives are two-fold. The first is to ascertain whether CLIL EFL learners produce more English words in a lexical availability task than EFL learners enrolled in an ordinary formal instruction programme (non-CLIL). Our second objective is to identify the word types produced by a CLIL group compared to two non-CLIL groups, and to contrast them in terms of three dimensions of productive vocabulary knowledge: lexical availability, word frequency, and word level.

Vocabulary production has been shown to correlate positively with language level as well as with success in communication (see Milton, 2013). Likewise, research has also found that infrequent and advanced words are indicators of lexical richness and language proficiency (Alderson, 2007; Meara, Lightbown, & Halter, 1997; Morris & Cobb, 2004; Laufer, 1998). Since CLIL learners are exposed to higher and richer language input in their learning experience (Cenoz, 2013; Muñoz, 2015; Várkuti, 2010; Xantou, 2011), we might predict that they will retrieve more words and exhibit more lexical richness than non-CLIL EFL learners; this refers to word frequency and word level, i.e. more infrequent or advanced ones. As we will see in the background section, some studies have compared the vocabulary output of CLILs and non-CLILs groups by means of vocabulary tests, compositions, and lexical availability tasks; however, these comparisons have been based on unequal terms. In addition to this, the qualitative aspects of the vocabulary output produced by the groups, such as word frequency, patterns of word responses in lexical availability, and word level, have not been addressed in CLIL studies.

In the remainder of the paper, we first provide a synthesis of productive vocabulary studies within CLIL research, with emphasis on the task used during data collection, and the implications of the findings. We then explain the assumptions of word frequency, lexical availability, and word level, as well as the dimensions of word knowledge addressed in the present study. After posing our research questions, we describe our methodology, report the findings, and discuss said findings in conjunction with previous research. We end the paper with a summary of conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Research on CLIL learners' productive vocabulary

Research on the productive vocabulary of CLIL EFL learners is insufficient and rather varied in terms of focus, data collection task used, and educational context. As shown in Table 1, different aspects of word knowledge have been examined by previous research, with the letter writing task being the most frequently used data collection instrument; in addition to this, studies on primary education have been prevailing over those concerning secondary or tertiary education.

Overall, and as illustrated in Table 1, previous studies have corroborated the CLIL advantage. For instance, with regards the use of vocabulary in letter writing, CLIL EFL learners have, in comparison with non-CLIL learners in Finland and Spain, shown higher performance in lexical production, higher lexical variation, lower word repetition, and fewer errors (e.g., Pietilä & Merikivi, 2014; Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Celaya & Ruiz de Zarobe, 2010; Agustín Llach & Jiménez Catalán, 2007; Agustín Llach, 2014, 2009). Likewise, in a study concerning the use of borrowings and lexical inventions by 7th and 10th graders in Catalonia and the Basque Country, Celaya and Ruiz de Zarobe (2010) found that lexical inventions depended on the age of the learners, but borrowing behaviour was more dependent on the type of learning programme, with CLIL learners borrowing less than learners who used traditional approaches.

However, inconclusive findings, or counter evidence, have also been found. With regard to letters, in Catalan et al.'s (2006) study, the non-CLIL group used a higher number of words than the CLIL group, although the latter exhibited higher lexical variation. In terms of vocabulary tests, Sylvén (2004) in Sweden, and Seregely (2008) in Austria (in a replica of the former) reported higher performance for CLIL groups compared to traditional approaches. An important point to consider when examining Sylvén's study is that CLIL was identified as an important factor in encouraging learners to use English outside the class during, for example, reading activities. As such, it was unclear as to whether the higher number of words produced by the CLIL groups was due to the effect of CLIL or to extramural activities. As regards Lex30 (Meara & Fitzpatrick, 2000), the study conducted by Moreno (2009) illustrated that CLIL 6th grade EFL learners did not produce associations of a higher level than non-CLIL learners; in fact, the word associations observed between the stimulus and learners' word responses were similar across the two groups. This finding mirrors that reported by Karonen (2003) (as quoted in Pietilä & Merikivi, 2014) whose study focused on 6th and 9th graders in Finland; they found that the CLIL and non-CLIL students produced syntagmatic rather than paradigmatic associations, which are usually more frequent among English native speakers. With regards the lexical availability of CLIL and non-CLIL EFL learners, the only study of which we are aware was carried out by Jiménez Catalán and Ojeda Alba (2009a), with the authors observing that non-CLIL groups have an advantage when it comes to lexical output.

While the balance seems to tip in favour of CLIL EFL learners having a larger and more varied productive vocabulary, more studies are needed since we cannot overlook the existence of inconclusive or opposing findings. Furthermore, most CLIL research on productive vocabulary has focused on primary school EFL learners. As yet, we do not know whether the same tendency will be exhibited among secondary school education learners. We are also unsure as to whether CLIL groups will enjoy an advantage when it comes to the quality of lexical output.

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