

Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an increasingly popular teaching method, where regular subjects, such as history and math, are taught in a foreign language in order to enhance target language exposure and acquisition. In 1999, approximately 20 percent of the upper secondary schools in Sweden were implementing some kind of CLIL. Yet, research into the effects of CLIL in Sweden is scarce.

The present work investigates incidental vocabulary acquisition among CLIL students, compared with a control group of “traditional” students, having Swedish as the main medium of instruction, English being a separate subject. A total of 363 students were involved (99 CLIL, 264 control) in a longitudinal study, spanning two full school years and comprising three test rounds. The first test round was conducted at the beginning of the first year of upper secondary school and the third at the end of the second year. A test battery of four different types of vocabulary test was used on each test occasion. Questionnaires concerning personal background were also filled out by students and teachers.

The results show that the CLIL students outperform their control group peers in the areas tested. However, they were outperforming them already from the outset of the investigation, i.e. before the CLIL students had been exposed to CLIL. In addition, both groups improve significantly over the test period, but the CLIL students do so to a greater extent. In the analysis of the results, other factors – above all, extra-curricular reading of English texts – were shown to have an impact on students’ lexical development. Furthermore, parents’ level of education was higher among top-scoring students in both CLIL and control groups. Attitude and motivation were also important factors with regard to the acquisition of a rich vocabulary. In a comparison between high and low scorers in the CLIL and the control groups, the high scorers in both groups had more features in common than did the high and low CLIL students. The greatest development of test results was seen in the CLIL group with the least amount of English input.

The superior lexical development of the CLIL students is clear, yet it is difficult to attribute the good results only to the CLIL method. A fact contributing to the difficulties in drawing conclusions regarding the CLIL method in Sweden is that there are no national guidelines for schools implementing CLIL to follow regarding, for instance, target language competence among CLIL teachers.

Apart from the main objective of the study, an error analysis was carried out on the fairly large number of incorrect answers obtained on the various tests in order to see if CLIL students behave differently from traditional students in the way they approach unknown English words. Although differences were small, there was a greater tendency among CLIL students to use a semantic approach when trying to understand a new word, whereas traditional students tended to go more by formal likeness.

The results of the study are also discussed in connection with other aspects of the CLIL method, including negative effects on and possible domain losses in Swedish, as well as detrimental effects on subject-content proficiency.

Key words: content and language integrated learning; CLIL; bilingual education; immersion; incidental vocabulary acquisition; second language acquisition; English vocabulary; error analysis.