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Assessing CLIL: a multidisciplinary approach

Luk Van Mensel ^a and Philippe Hiligsmann^b

^aNaLTT, Université de Namur, Namur, Belgium; ^bInstitut Langage et Communication, Université catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

ABSTRACT

Introduction of the Special Issue 'Assessing CLIL: A multidisciplinary approach'.

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This special issue presents an overview of some of the main results from a large-scale multidisciplinary research project (2014–2019) on Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in French-speaking Belgium, involving ten researchers from two universities and almost a thousand participating pupils from 22 primary and secondary schools. Although the first CLIL programs in the French-speaking Community in Belgium were implemented over two decades ago, research on CLIL in schools in the region remained relatively scarce, and, while often valuable, it was also limited in its scope and based on (very) small samples (for an overview, see Hiligsmann et al. 2017). Furthermore, even if these studies generally projected a rather positive picture of CLIL in French-speaking Belgium, thereby encouraging more schools to implement similar programs, some of the results were inconsistent with respect to the benefits of the CLIL approach.

In order to tackle the shortcomings mentioned above, a joint integrated research project was set up by researchers from UCLouvain and UNamur: *Assessing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL): linguistic, cognitive and educational perspectives*.¹ Besides the relatively large sample, the uniqueness of the project – and hence its relevance for CLIL studies internationally – lies in its longitudinal approach, in the presence of two target languages (Dutch and English), and in its multidisciplinary perspective, combining linguistic, socio-affective, and cognitive approaches to assessing CLIL. In this special issue, each of these approaches will be explored, either in one or two papers. These papers will be preceded by an article that sets the scene of the CLIL learning context in French-speaking Belgium, and the issue will be concluded by an afterword by Ana Llinares. Ultimately, the goal of this special issue is to make a strong empirical and theoretical contribution to the ongoing international scientific discussions on multilingualism in general and CLIL in particular.

CLIL, an educational approach in which part of the curricular content is taught in a second or foreign language (Eurydice 2006), has become increasingly popular across Europe during the past decades (Lyster and Ballinger 2011; Pérez Cañado 2012; Goris, Denessen, and Verhoeven 2019). The initial research findings on CLIL were overwhelmingly positive, resulting in what may be deemed excessive enthusiasm among the research community regarding the potential of CLIL as a means to foster foreign language learning. However, these same studies were later criticized, mainly for methodological reasons, resulting in calls for a more critical and rigorous research

program (Cenoz, Genesee, and Gorter 2014; Coyle 2007; Dalton-Puffer, Nikula, and Smit 2010; Pérez Cañado 2016). Some of the issues concerned the impact of possible selection biases, and, more generally, a lack of longitudinal and multivariate approaches, which would enable researchers to appraise whether any differences found between CLIL and non-CLIL groups could indeed be ascribed to CLIL and not to other variables. The papers in this special issue attempt to address these issues, notably through controlling for a number of background variables such as socio-economic status or non-verbal intelligence.

A second key contribution of the *Assessing CLIL*-project to current research on CLIL is its multidisciplinary. If much research has been conducted on the linguistic aspects (e.g. Dallinger et al. 2016; San Isidro and Lasagabaster 2018), motivational aspects (e.g. Doiz, Lasagabaster, and Sierra 2014; Sylén and Thompson 2015), or cognitive aspects of CLIL (e.g. Nicolay and Poncelet 2013; Goriot et al. 2018), sometimes in combination with content achievement, to our knowledge no research project so far has integrated these different aspects in a single project. The application of these various disciplinary approaches on the same large sample, as presented in this special issue, therefore sheds a more comprehensive light on the CLIL experience.

Finally, the presence of two age cohorts (5/6th grade and 11/12th grade) together with a focus on two different target languages (Dutch and English) offers additional analytic lenses beyond the one provided by the two learning contexts (CLIL and non-CLIL). As Goris, Denessen, and Verhoeven (2019) point out, until recently, CLIL was hardly practiced at the elementary level, and the literature discussing early mainstream CLIL results is still sparse. Furthermore, most research on CLIL typically considers only one target language, mainly English (Dalton-Puffer 2011). By looking at two languages, we are able to gauge the moderating impact of different target language conditions on the potential benefits of the CLIL approach, and to assess the potential impact of attitudinal, motivational and cognitive factors on the learning of the two languages.

Before introducing the various contributions to this special issue, we should briefly mention two previously published articles about more general aspects of the project. For readers interested in the general outline of the research project and the details of the various types and phases of the data collection, we can refer to Hiligsmann et al. (2017). A detailed and critical discussion of the socio-economic background of the participants can be found in Van Mensel et al. (2020a), who conclude that CLIL in French-speaking Belgium, although a priori open to anyone, tends to attract a socially more privileged public. Since this last point may have an impact on the interpretation of the results, the issue is factored into the analyses of each individual paper.

In the first article of this special issue, which sets the context and backdrop for the papers that follow, Mettewie and Van Mensel provide an overview of the current state of affairs regarding foreign language education and bilingual education in the different parts of Belgium. The data they present from the different language communities (Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking) reveal the intricate make-up of language education in Belgium, reflecting a 'tailor-made' approach taken by each of the three official language communities. This tailor-made approach is equally discernible in the implementation of CLIL in French-speaking Belgium, the context of the research project and the studies presented in this issue. Contrary to most other educational contexts where a CLIL program exists, the legislator has left schools a great deal of flexibility with regard to the actual implementation of the CLIL program, for instance in terms of the number of classes offered in the target language, the starting point, or the curriculum. This flexibility has led to a range of CLIL options throughout French-speaking Belgium, and, as Van Mensel et al. (2020a, 3) point out, one may be inclined to speak about CLILs rather than CLIL, an observation that echoes the variety of its implementation in Europe.

The first empirical contribution, by De Smet et al., addresses some of the socio-affective research objectives of the project and dovetails nicely with the issue just mentioned: the potential impact of the complex Belgian situation when it comes to language education and learning. Based on questionnaire data, the pupils' language attitudes were measured in terms of perceived easiness and attractiveness of the target language (Dutch or English) and their motivation was gauged in

terms of expectancy for success, task value, and cost (for the language emotional aspects, see De Smet et al. 2018). If the findings clearly point to more positive attitudes and higher motivation in CLIL compared to non-CLIL, particularly in the secondary school population, the effect of the target language (Dutch vs. English) on the pupils' attitudes and motivation appears to be even more important.

The article by Simonis et al. aligns with the cognitive angle of the project; more specifically it addresses the attentional abilities of the pupils involved. The study can be situated within the broader debate about the possible cognitive advantages that are often associated with bilingualism. There is controversy regarding the presence of an executive control advantage in children who become bilingual through bilingual education (see also Simonis et al. 2020), and it has been suggested that the cognitive advantage for these learners, if it exists at all, lies at the level of attentional abilities. In their study, Simonis et al. look into different types of attention (sustained, selective, divided; auditory and visual) but they do not find any measurable differences between the CLIL and non-CLIL groups. Their findings therefore do not support the attentional advantage hypothesis.

The next article, by Meunier et al., presents and discusses an additional benefit from a large-scale project such as the present one, namely the possibility to create an extensive corpus of language learner data which includes rich metadata. The resulting MULTINCo database (Multilingual Traditional Immersion and Native Corpus) presented in the article furthermore blends these corpus data with other data types that document multiliteracy practices, converting it into a powerful tool for studying various aspects of language learning. This contribution allows us to turn to the linguistic angle of the project in the special issue. The two final articles continue in this vein by focusing on specific aspects of vocabulary acquisition.

First, Bulon and Meunier explore the longitudinal development of the so-called phrasicon (phraseological lexicon) of CLIL and non-CLIL secondary school pupils with Dutch as their target language. Looking at both frequency and accuracy, Bulon and Meunier found no significant differences between the two groups over time. Both the CLIL and non-CLIL learners' phrasicon became more accurate over time but the improvement was not significantly different between the groups; they progressed at a similar pace. The results hint at the limits of the potential beneficial impact of a CLIL environment for language learning and more specifically vocabulary learning at a relatively advanced level.

Next, Hendrikx and Van Goethem focus on the secondary school pupils' receptive knowledge of so-called intensifying compounds (like e.g. *ice-cold*), this time also including the CLIL-pupils studying (in) English. Their analyses show an advantage for the CLIL pupils over the non-CLIL pupils, thus suggesting a wider knowledge of advanced vocabulary, albeit in a restricted target domain. Interestingly, the study yields different results for each target language, in that the positive effect of CLIL disappears in the Dutch sample when other potential contributors to vocabulary acquisition (e.g. extracurricular exposure to the target language) are included, while it remains present in the English one. This converges with similar results obtained for the productive skills of these same pupils presented in Van Mensel et al. (2020b) as well as for their overall target language proficiency (Bulon et al. 2017), in that the gap between the CLIL and the non-CLIL group, if present, appears to be larger for learners of Dutch than for learners of English.

To conclude this special issue, the commentary by Llinares draws together the various threads of research highlighted in the articles and critically assesses their relevance in light of current trends in research on CLIL as well as with a view on future research. She reminds us of recent calls for more interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity in SLA research (e.g. Ortega, 2013), and this is precisely what the UCLouvain and UNamur team has attempted to accomplish with the *Assessing CLIL*-project and with this special issue: to illustrate the added value of looking at the same substantial and robust sample, composed of two age groups and with two target languages, through different disciplinary lenses, thereby providing a comprehensive view on the CLIL experience of these children and

youngsters. We hope this may serve as an invitation and an encouragement for other researchers to undertake similar large-scale multidisciplinary projects.

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Notes on contributors

Luk Van Mensel is a postdoctoral researcher at the NaLTT Institute (Université de Namur, Belgium) and a guest lecturer at KU Leuven (Belgium). He has published on a variety of subjects in SLA and sociolinguistics, and was the coordinator of the research project 'Assessing Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL): Linguistic, cognitive and educational perspectives'.

Philippe Hiligsmann is full professor of Dutch language and linguistics at the UCLouvain (Belgium). His research focuses on contrastive linguistics (Dutch-French) and on second language acquisition (in particular Dutch by French-speaking learners).

ORCID

Luk Van Mensel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0438-5860>

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