

## Exploring Soft CLIL as a Motivational Pedagogical Strategy for ESL Learning among Tamil-Medium Undergraduates

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**ABSTRACT:** Motivation plays a vital role in learning any language. The success and failure of learning a language highly depend on motivation. What I perceive as motivation in a language learning context is having a clear and compelling goal or purpose for learning a language. In the Sri Lankan University setting, undergraduates who follow their degree in Tamil (First language- L1) medium hardly find a strong purpose to learn English, as their academic needs are fulfilled with the help of their mother tongue. Even without English language proficiency, they can graduate from the university and find a career in the government sector. However, how they struggle in their workplace without adequate English language skills is to be noted, and a solution sought. Having noticed this problem, a short Soft CLIL course has been experimented with in this research as a motivating factor to learn ESL. In order to analyze the research question, what is the impact of soft CLIL on motivating students to learn ESL?, this study was designed as an experimental research. A mixed-method approach has been adopted to collect data. Pre-test, post-test, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires were used as research tools. Statistical analysis of the data of pre and post-tests proved that the mean value of the experimental group is higher than that of the control group. Analysis of qualitative data also validated the finding that the integration of content gives the students a chance to experiment with their learnt language to fulfill their content area needs. Since the soft CLIL lessons were prepared in accordance with the SIOP model, students couldn't escape from active participation in the classroom activities. Integration of content: students' preferred subject, gives a purpose e.i motivation to be in the ESL classroom and actively learn English. The findings of this research recommend that introducing a soft CLIL course is much required in order to improve the ESL performance of the undergraduates whose medium of instruction is their L1.

**KEY WORDS:** motivation, soft CLIL, ESL, undergraduates, L1

### I. INTRODUCTION

As motivation is a multifaceted phenomenon, it is difficult to give it a specific definition. Keller (1983) defines motivation as “the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid and the degree of effort they will exert in this respect”. There are also several divisions of motivation as “intrinsic motivation”, “extrinsic motivation”, “integrative motivation” and “instrumental motivation”. In this research context of language learning, I perceive motivation as knowing or having a specific goal or a purpose to learn a language. Without knowing how helpful the learning of a language would be, learners will not be interested in learning or even attending the particular language class.

The undergraduates who follow their degree in Tamil medium do not have a strong purpose to learn English. English language proficiency is not mandatory to secure a permanent job in Sri Lanka. Before the intervention, there was a focus group discussion conducted with the participants. During the discussion, there was a question asked, “Why do you attend ESL classes?” The only answer of most of the students was “To get adequate attendance to get the eligibility to sit for the exam”. This answer also reveals a kind of motivation. Students’

motivational stimuli come from outside, i.e., they are extrinsically motivated to attend the class, not to learn what is taught in the class. This kind of motivation will never have a long-term positive impact on learning English as a Second Language (ESL). Soon after the exams, these students will never bother about English. In this research it has been attempted to analyse whether introducing soft CLIL can have any impact on motivating the students to learn ESL. Since the Tamil medium undergraduates do not find an absolute purpose to learn English while doing their degree programme, a soft CLIL course was experimented with as a means of giving purpose.

### **1.1 CLIL and Motivation**

Following the popularity of Content Based Language Teaching (CBLT), at present, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), has been a buzzword in the field of approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT). The term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was originally defined in 1994, and launched in 1996 by UNICOM, University of Jyväskylä and the European Platform for Dutch Education, to describe educational methods where “subjects are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh, 2011. P,2). The concept of CLIL is being discussed both in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) contexts. CLIL is popular in Europe (Smit, 2007), where the use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction in teaching content courses is consistent with the need for multilingual citizens (European Commission, 2010) and CLIL is believed to be an effective way to equip learners with needed foreign language skills (Dalton-Puffer, 2008).

The reasons for the widespread use of CLIL has been researched. A renowned CLIL researcher, David Marsh, explains the importance of opportunity to use the language through the dichotomy: imagine learning to play a musical instrument such as piano without being able to touch the keyboard; consider learning football without the opportunity to kick a ball yourself. “To learn how to master a musical instrument, or football, requires that we gain both knowledge and skill simultaneously.” (Marsh, 2000:6). This is as true for music and football as it is for language. Why and how learning takes place is an ongoing debate, but possibly the combination of motivation plus opportunities could be a powerful recipe for second language teaching/learning. Content Language Integrated Learning, as its name implies, “integrates” both content and language, providing students the opportunity to receive instruction and use the language whilst they learn, challenging the idea of “waiting until I think I am good enough in the language to use it” (Marsh, 2000:6). Language can be acquired unconsciously when the students are in a need to learn the content. Learning a language without having a purpose is impossible. Language development and cognitive development should go hand in hand. People learn second language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring knowledge. Language is learnt more effectively when it is taught in meaningful communicative and academic setting. Thus, CLIL helps to acquire the language rather than learn it.

The process of language acquisition comprises four steps: exposure to input, the processing of meaning, the processing of form and language production. These components correspond to the stages of information processing: input, central processing, and output (Skehan, 1998). As mentioned in Krashen’s input hypothesis (1985), exposure to abundant input was the requirement for the acquisition of a second language. For a second language teacher, the ideal way to involve the students is to create a situation wherein language is used in order to fulfill authentic purposes. This in turn, will help students to ‘acquire’ the language instead of just ‘learning’ it. In order to acquire the language, CLIL sets a situation for the learners. Language learning is more motivated when students are focusing on something other than language, such as ideas, issues and opinions. In a research done by Carmen Munoz (2007) it has been argued that CLIL can provide relevant and plentiful comprehensible input, it can facilitate the processing of meaning and form, and provide justification and motivation for language production in the target language. Furthermore, CLIL presents the most enriching characteristics of the

communicative approach, for example, the use of the language in an appropriate context, the exchange of important information, or involving learners in cognitive processes that are relevant for acquisition.

### 1.2 Soft or Weak CLIL

Ball (2009), Bentley (2009) and Dale and Tanner (2012) suggested weak/soft and strong/hard CLIL continuums with content on one side and language on the other side. In the continuum of Dale and Tanner (2012) on the one side they have subject lesson taught by the CLIL subject teacher as strong/ hard CLIL and on the other side language lesson taught by CLIL language teacher as soft/ weak CLIL. The typical CLIL context in Europe would be the classrooms where academic subjects such as geography, science, or maths are taught in English by non- native content teacher. This type of CLIL setting is identified as ‘strong’ or ‘hard’ CLIL (Ball, 2009; Bentley, 2009), where acquisition of content knowledge and language knowledge is given equal importance. Most of the research findings discussed in recent review articles (Dalton- Puffer, 2011; Perez-Canado, 2012) are based on those prototypical settings.

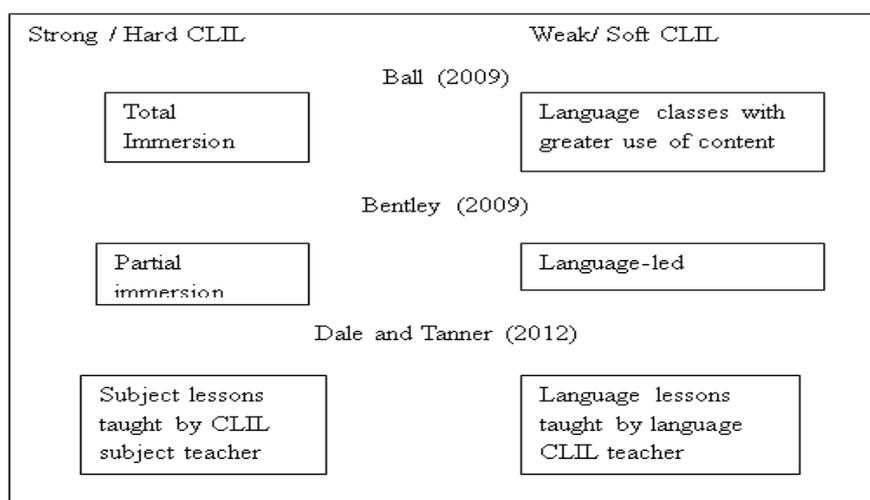


Figure 1.1 CLIL continuums

Comparatively, less research is done on soft/weak CLIL (Ball, 2009; Bentley, 2009). This type of CLIL is taught by native or non-native language teachers with more focus on language learning. As CLIL spreads beyond European boundaries, this ELT (English Language Teaching) type of CLIL is expected to grow, and an indication of such a trend has already appeared. Some updated editions of popular ELT methodology books (e.g. Harmer, 2012; Scrivener, 2011; Ur, 2012), whose target audiences are language teachers throughout the world, have a section describing CLIL as an alternative language teaching methodology. Contrary to this new and expanding phenomenon, research on the ‘weak/soft’ type of CLIL is difficult to locate.

A Japanese researcher, Makoto Ikanda (2013), has done a longitudinal research study on teaching evaluation and learning outcomes of a language-driven (soft) CLIL course in Japan. The result drawn from the study is that a ‘weak’ form of CLIL works to teach EFL to upper secondary class students in the Japanese context if teachers are trained properly. In the research, the researcher defines the Weak/soft’ CLIL as “a type of content and language integrated instruction taught by trained CLIL language teachers to help learners develop their target language competency as a primary aim and their subject/theme/topic knowledge as a secondary aim”. According to this definition, the primary aim of soft CLIL is to teach language than the content. But at the same time, content taught through the language should help the students in enriching their knowledge in the content area.

## **II. RESEARCH PROBLEM**

Even though English is an auxiliary subject at the Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna, the students are not motivated to learn English. Their main purpose of attending English classes is to get the 45% pass mark needed to graduate. Many students are not interested in learning the language; as a result, they remain inactive in the ESL classes. Since these students find it convenient to study their subjects and do their exams in Tamil, their mother tongue, they don't realize the importance of learning the ability to use the English language, until they end up in a workplace that requires English language competencies. The main reason for being uninterested is that they don't find a valid purpose to learn English while they are undergraduates. Even if they are not fluent in English, they can just have a degree and be graduates in society.

In the university, while doing their degree, these students can perform academically without English language skills. But once they are ready to face the real society that waits for them outside the university, it will be difficult for them to compete with others who have a good command of English. Being graduates, these students will need to face interviews to secure jobs in both the government and private sectors. Poor English performance will be a barrier to being appointed to well-paid positions. Even if they are selected to occupy different posts in different departments and organizations, poor performance in English will never let them shine in their jobs.

Moreover, good competency in English helps them a lot even during their degree programme. Although the students in the Arts Faculty follow their degree programmes in Tamil medium, while doing presentations for their main courses, they display the slides in English and explain in Tamil. This is because most of their books are available only in English. When they write their final dissertation, they spend a lot of money on getting English articles translated into Tamil. Therefore, as undergraduates, these students need to develop their academic reading, to refer to books and articles and understand what the author says in an academic context, to summarise what they read. But the irony is that the students are ignorant about their needs. Having noticed this tendency among the majority of the students, I wanted to find ways to encourage the students to learn English, to open their eyes toward the importance of learning English and to find a feasible way to improve their English language skills.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

In order to analyze the research question; what is the impact of soft CLIL on motivating students to learn ESL?, this study was designed as an experimental research. A mixed-method approach has been adopted to collect data. A pre-test was conducted for a set of students and after calculating the average marks, the students were divided into two groups with equal averages. One of the two groups was considered the experimental group and the other was as the control group. The students of the control group went for the normal ESL classes, whereas the students in the control group underwent a soft CLIL course. An intervention of 15 hours soft CLIL course was conducted for the students in the experimental group. A post-test was conducted for the students from both the experimental and the control group. The marks obtained from the pre and post-tests were used as the prime data to evaluate the impact of the usage of soft CLIL on motivating the students to learn ESL. Semi-structured interviews and questionnaires were also used as research tools to understand the factors that motivated the students to learn and perform well in English.

## **IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The table below clearly shows that the overall reading and writing performance of both the experimental and the control groups has increased in the post-test than in the pre-test. Except for one student in the control group, all others scored more marks in the post-test than in the pre-test. The following table helps to evaluate the difference in the increase in marks.

**Table 1: Pre-test and post-test marks of the experimental and the control group**

Experimental Group		Control Group	
Pre test Reading & writing	Post test Reading & writing	Pre test Reading & writing	Post test Reading & writing
62	78	61	68
60	82	58	70
58	82	55	53
54	70	54	68
49	78	46	62
45	79	44	67
43	72	43	65
43	70	42	50
40	63	40	55
38	60	37	56
35	66	34	48
32	54	32	50
31	66	29	53
28	55	28	55
23	50	25	41

**Table 2. Mean value of the total marks.**

	Ex Pre-test TotalMarks	Ex Post-test Total Marks	Con Pre-test Total Marks	Con Post-test Total Marks
N Valid	15	15	15	15
Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean	42.73	68.33	41.87	57.40

The mean value of the pre-test and the post-test of the experimental group is more than that of the control group. But the mean gain of the experimental group ( $68.33 - 42.73 = 25.6$ ) is higher than the mean gain of the control group ( $57.4 - 41.87 = 15.53$ ). The following image clearly depicts the difference in the mean gain.

**Table 3. Paired Samples Test**

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1 Ex Post-test Total Marks – Con Post-test Total Marks	10.933	7.630	1.970	6.708	15.158	5.550	14	.000072

In order to highlight the difference in the mean gain of the post-test of both groups paired sample t-test was conducted. As described in the above table, the difference in the post-test marks is significant. The p-value of the t-test is 0.000072, which is lower than the accepted value 0,05. From this finding, it can be concluded that among the four language skills reading and writing skills of the experimental group has significantly improved after following a soft CLIL intervention.

From the above analysis of using the statistical data, it is evident that after following the soft CLIL course ESL reading and writing performances of the students in the experimental group have significantly improved than that of the control group. This section analyses the reasons behind the improvement and how the students perceive the other two skills.

#### 4.1. Ample opportunity to practice English in the classroom.

As the students in the target group are following their degree in Tamil medium, they lack the opportunity to practice English. These students never read English newspapers or listened to any English programmes. The only platform where they find some opportunity to familiarize themselves with English is Facebook. During the informal interview, it was told that all the students in the experimental group have their own Facebook account and they access it at least once a day. Even though they don't post in English, they have a chance to read few phrases or sentences in English. One student asked me, "What does RIP mean?" and another asked for the meaning of "off to Colombo". Despite the adverse effects that we find with Facebook, it serves as an eye-opener to those who want to improve their language skills.

Though these students have access to Facebook, they mostly depend on English classes to practice English. English classes are expected to provide ample opportunities to the students to practice English language skills. Soft CLIL course was designed in a way to provide more opportunities to the students to practice their English language skills in the classroom. For the question "why do you like these kinds of classes?" one student answered, "these classes contain more lessons to practice English than other classes," and another student answered, "we attend the classes happily and the activities are very interesting". During the informal interview, students expressed that they were given more chances to practice speaking, reading, and writing skills in the classroom.

Since it was found in the focus group discussion of pre-intervention that most of the students attend the ESL classes only to get the eligibility to sit for the exam, the same topic was discussed in the post intervention focus group discussion. To my surprise, none of the participants said that they attended the soft CLIL classes to be

marked present in the attendance sheet, though their presence for the soft CLIL course was also calculated for their eligibility. Instead, they said that they attended the classes to improve their English language skills and to learn economic words and concepts. This transformation in language learning attitude clearly shows the intrinsic motivation of the students. As a result of being intrinsically motivated, all fifteen students attended the classes from the second week onwards, which was proven by the students' attendance sheets.

As David Marsh (2000) stated, to master a musical instrument or a sport, the opportunity to at least touch the instrument or sports equipment should be given. The learners should gain both knowledge and skill simultaneously". (Marsh,2000:6). Gaining knowledge and skill is important not only to learn a musical instrument or a sport, but also to learn a language. During the soft CLIL course, an effort was made to give a chance to handle and practice the language that they learn. The CLIL lessons were designed in a way to make the students actively participate in their classroom tasks. Moreover, they were guided to use the language even outside the classroom. For instance, they were guided to go to the library and refer to certain sections of a book that they use in their main subject, and to prepare a summary to present in class.

#### **4.2. English is not an alien subject**

Students have an attitude of treating ESL as an alien subject and their main subjects, like Economics or Political science as something that belongs to them. This perception of the students was observed in several occasions in this research. Answers from the questionnaires can be quoted here.

"English teaching is related with **our** subject"

"Since it incorporates **our** subject, it's easy to learn English"

"It was an opportunity to use English with **our** subject"

"It was easy to remember the new words as they are related to **our** subject"

The usage of the possessive adjective "our" clearly indicates that Economics is given priority than English. Therefore, integration of Economics with English tries to make the students to share their priority between Economics and English. Integration of content makes English a part of the main subject of the students, thus intrinsically motivating them to learn it.

#### **4.3. Lower anxiety**

Integration of content area with the target language reduced the language anxiety that the students have in regular ESL classrooms. Since the students were more concerned about learning the content area covered in the soft-CLIL course, and they were in some way or other familiar with the input they received in English during the soft-CLIL lessons, they didn't display fear or shyness to participate in the classroom activities in English. Instead, they were enthusiastic to discuss answers and engage in discussions. Reduced focus on the form the language made the students less anxious in the classroom. This in turn motivated the student to acquire the language.

#### **4.4. Authentic content**

The content area integrated with English language teaching was selected after a detailed discussion with the content lecturer. Small sections of all the topics of a particular unit were covered throughout the soft-CLIL course. After the lessons of the 1<sup>st</sup> week, students were enthusiastic, saying that their content lecturer taught the sections in detail and they were able to recall what they studied in my class. The students were happy that they were able to understand the meaning of certain English terms used by the content lecturer. Thus, the authenticity of the content area used for ESL teaching motivated them to learn ESL.

Since the soft CLIL lessons were prepared in accordance with SIOP model, students were encouraged to actively participate in the classroom activities. Integration of content gives a purpose i.e., motivation to be in the ESL classroom. At the same time SIOP strategies give opportunities to practice the language. The combination of motivation and opportunities transforms the students into active learners. As Marsh (2000) stated, CLIL gives an opportunity to the students to use the language then and there, instead of waiting to use the language until he/ she thinks that he/ she is good enough to use the language.

## V. CONCLUSION

Having read that using the CLIL curriculum had a positive impact on European ESL and EFL learners, this research was carried to experiment the method in the Sri Lankan context, especially in Tamil speaking environment. Since the aim was to motivate the Tamil medium undergraduates to learn and improve their ESL performance, a soft-CLIL approach was experimented with as a motivating factor. This study has proved that the activities based on the SIOP framework give opportunities to the students to improve their reading and writing skills. Integration of authentic content with language enabled the students to enrich their content knowledge as well as English language skills. Most importantly soft CLIL course emphasizes the purpose of learning the language and highlights the opportunities to use the language on their own. Hence, the students feel motivated and less anxious to learn the language and become autonomous learners. On the whole, introducing a soft CLIL course is much needed in order to improve the ESL performance of the undergraduates who follow their degree programmes in their mother tongue.

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