

Exploring the Impact of CLIL on Secondary School EFL Learners: A Performance-Based Approach to Integrated Content and Language Learning

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Abstract

This study investigates the pedagogical impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Romania, focusing on learner engagement, cognitive development, content understanding, and intercultural competence. Drawing on the 4Cs Framework, Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, this qualitative classroom-based research employs structured observations across seven CLIL lessons delivered in English to 25 students aged 14 - 15. A custom-designed observation instrument was used to assess learner performance across five pedagogical domains using a 3-point rubric. The findings reveal high levels of engagement, particularly in lessons with thematically relevant content such as digital literacy and intercultural awareness. Despite these constraints, the results underscore CLIL's potential as a transformative instructional model that aligns with 21st-century educational goals. The study concludes with recommendations for systemic investment in teacher training, curriculum integration, and assessment innovation to support sustainable CLIL implementation in Romanian secondary education.

Key-words: Content and Language Integrated Learning, Intercultural Competence, Cognition, Learner Engagement, Language Proficiency

1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Rationale

In the context of contemporary educational reforms aimed at enhancing multilingual competencies, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has emerged as a strategic pedagogical response to the dual challenge of improving both subject mastery and language acquisition. Defined as “an educational approach in which subjects are taught in a foreign language with a dual-focused aim” (Coyle, Hood and Marsh 1). CLIL has received strong

institutional support across Europe. The European Commission has identified CLIL as a key instrument for fostering language proficiency and intercultural understanding within mainstream education systems (D. Marsh). By merging content instruction with language use, CLIL contributes to a more dynamic and contextually meaningful learning environment, particularly within secondary education.

Unlike traditional EFL approaches, which tend to emphasize decontextualized linguistic structures, CLIL promotes language development through authentic, content-driven tasks. This integrative approach engages learners both cognitively and communicatively with subject matter. As a result, it supports academic achievement while enhancing communicative competence (Dalton-Puffer). The CLIL model is also closely aligned with sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning, which stress the importance of meaningful interaction and knowledge construction within real-world contexts. As noted by Llinares, Morton, and Whittaker (2012), CLIL classrooms provide extensive opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and develop discourse competence through sustained engagement with academic language.

This study explores the student performance in a secondary level English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in a Romanian secondary school and potential benefits from CLIL pedagogy, with a focus on its impact on learners' language proficiency, cognitive engagement, and intercultural competence. Based on the theoretical foundation of Coyle, Hood, and Marsh's 4Cs Framework, Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, this research adopts the perspective that language development is optimally achieved through integrated, content-rich instruction. The research addresses three core questions: (1) How do secondary EFL learners engage with CLIL instruction in terms of participation, interaction, and use of language during integrated content-language lessons? (2) What performance outcomes are evident among learners in relation to language proficiency, content understanding, cognitive skills, and intercultural competence as a result of CLIL instruction? (3) What instructional challenges and opportunities arise during CLIL implementation, as reflected in classroom dynamics and learner responses?

Using a qualitative case study approach, the study draws on classroom observations and document analysis to examine how CLIL functions in practice. The structure of the study unfolds as follows: Section 1 and 2 introduce the theoretical and policy foundations of CLIL; Section 3 contextualizes its application within Romanian secondary education. Section 4 outlines the research design and observation methodology, while Section 5 and 6 present the research findings. Section 7 concludes by summarizing the research.

1.2 The Emergence and Development of CLIL

The emergence of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is closely linked to broader sociopolitical and educational transformations that took place across Europe during the 1990s. The term "CLIL" was first introduced by David Marsh in 1994 to describe a pedagogical approach designed to promote multilingualism and intercultural competence through the integration of subject content and language instruction (D. Marsh). Ball & Lindsay (2012) note that CLIL is a method of bilingual education where the language and curricular content (such as geography or science) complement each other. Unlike traditional secondary education, CLIL does not presume that students are proficient enough in a foreign language to comprehend the course material (Ball & Lindsay). At the same time Heyer (2000, as cited in Myronenko, 2024) states that this method, allows teachers to simplify the curriculum's content in advance, which lowers students' subject competency or results in their having an incomplete comprehension of the subject. Ravelo (2014) further defines CLIL as "an educational approach in which various language-supportive methodologies are used which lead to a dual-focused form of instruction, where attention is given both to the language and the content. (...) CLIL can also be regarded the other way around: as a means of teaching English through study of a specialist content" (pp. 72-73).

CLIL was conceptualized as a response to the perceived shortcomings of traditional language teaching methods and was aligned with European Union initiatives aimed at fostering linguistic diversity, enhancing cross-cultural understanding, and improving global competitiveness (D. Marsh). CLIL evolved from earlier models such as Canadian French immersion, which integrated language learning with subject content to promote bilingualism. Both immersion and CLIL emphasize that language is not learned separately but through meaningful academic use.

Notably, the implementation of CLIL has not adhered to a standardized model. Coyle et al. (2010) synthesized the core pedagogical principles of CLIL into the widely recognized 4Cs Framework, Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture. This framework conceptualizes CLIL as a learner-centred methodology that fosters both higher-order thinking and intercultural dialogue. As the authors state, "CLIL is about allowing individuals to construct their own understanding and be challenged..." (p.54). The 4Cs model has since been broadly adopted as a foundational structure for CLIL lesson planning, instructional material development, and assessment design across various educational systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sociocultural and Constructivist Foundations of CLIL

CLIL pedagogy is deeply rooted in both sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning, which emphasize the active, social, and contextual nature of knowledge construction. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights the centrality of socially mediated activity in cognitive development, with language serving as the primary cultural tool through which learners internalize and apply new knowledge (Vygotsky). Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space between what learners can do independently and what they can achieve with guided support. In CLIL classrooms, peer interaction and teacher scaffolding activate the ZPD, fostering language acquisition and conceptual understanding simultaneously (Coyle, Hood and Marsh).

Closely aligned with sociocultural principles, constructivist theory posits that learners construct meaning through reflection, exploration, and collaboration (Allen). In CLIL, this is operationalized through authentic, task-based instruction, where language is embedded in disciplinary discourse rather than practiced in isolation (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker). Motivation plays a critical role; Pérez-Cañado (2012) notes that CLIL enhances learner engagement by linking content to real-world contexts, promoting both attentiveness and autonomy.

CLIL also fosters intercultural awareness, treating culture not as static knowledge but as an interpretive, evolving process. Moate underscores language's dual role in accessing disciplinary content and initiating learners into academic discourse, while Coffey (2005, as cited in Harrop) highlights how CLIL enables reflection on self and others. Myronenko et al. (2024) affirm that CLIL's dual focus on content and language promotes interdisciplinary thinking and prepares learners for holistic, 21st-century education.

2.2 The 4Cs Framework: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture

The 4Cs Framework, developed by Coyle et al. (2010), forms the cornerstone of CLIL pedagogy. It integrates four interdependent dimensions, Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture, that collectively define the dual focus of subject learning and language development.

Content refers to disciplinary knowledge and the construction of meaning. As Coyle et al. (2010) note, CLIL is "content-driven," enabling learners to create knowledge through personalized engagement rather than passively receiving it (p. 1).

Communication is both the means and goal of learning. Effective CLIL practice involves the “language of learning” (subject-specific terminology), “language for learning” (interactional structures), and “language through learning” (language developed via reflection and dialogue) (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Central to this dimension is classroom discourse, where peer and teacher interaction fosters deeper conceptual understanding (p. 35).

Cognition involves the development of both lower- and higher-order thinking skills. Gabillion (2020) emphasizes that CLIL tasks should support reflection, analysis, and creation (p. 101). Aligned with Bloom’s taxonomy, CLIL encourages learners to engage in complex reasoning (Coyle, Hood and Marsh)

Culture, the often-overlooked “fourth C”, cultivates intercultural awareness and global citizenship. It encompasses identity formation and self-other understanding (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). As Gimeno et al. (2013, as cited in Griva, 2017) argue, culture-based projects enable students to “build intercultural knowledge and understanding” (p. 10).

The strength of the 4Cs lies in their synergy. As McDougald (2016, as cited in Sujana, 2023) notes, the integration of content, communication, cognition, and culture yields meaningful and transformative learning experiences (pp. 331–332). This flexibility also allows educators to scaffold language while maintaining cognitive rigor (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker).

2.3 Origins, Application, and Challenges of CLIL in EFL Contexts

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) emerged in the early 1990s as an educational response to the growing need for integrating language and subject learning. David Marsh first conceptualized CLIL as an approach that “gives attention both to language and content” through flexible, language-supportive pedagogies (Marsh, 1994, as cited in Marsh et al., 2001; Coyle, Hood & Marsh). Unlike traditional bilingual or immersion models, CLIL is adaptable to diverse national curricula and school contexts (Cenoz, Genesee and Gorter). Its development aligns closely with European Union policies promoting multilingualism, mobility, and intercultural awareness (European Commission; Pérez-Cañado).

The pedagogical foundation of CLIL lies in sociocultural and constructivist theories, emphasizing language as a tool for cognitive development and social mediation (Vygotsky; Dalton-Puffer). CLIL tasks are designed to cultivate both disciplinary knowledge and linguistic competence, promoting scaffolded, discovery-based learning (Coyle, Hood and Marsh).

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, CLIL is particularly valued for its motivational benefits. By linking language learning to real-world content, it fosters both

intrinsic and extrinsic engagement (Dornyei; Pérez-Cañado). Learners report higher enjoyment and perceive CLIL as more dynamic than traditional EFL instruction (Lasagabaster). Motivation in CLIL is reinforced by the cognitive and emotional relevance of content, task authenticity, and learner autonomy (Meyer; Dalton-Puffer).

CLIL also enhances long-term retention of academic vocabulary and discourse. Engaging with subject matter in the target language facilitates deeper processing and more spontaneous, fluent language use (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker; Lorenzo). Students develop discourse-level competence and strategic communication skills, including genre awareness and pragmatic fluency (Halliday; Ball, Kelly and Clegg). Research shows that CLIL learners outperform their EFL peers in grammatical complexity, owing to the integration of form and meaning (Dalton-Puffer; Coyle, Hood and Marsh).

Despite its pedagogical strengths, CLIL faces persistent implementation challenges. Chief among these is the lack of dual-qualified teachers. Most are trained either in content or in language, rarely both, creating instructional gaps (Pérez-Cañado; Ball, Kelly and Clegg).

Teachers frequently struggle to balance language support with cognitive rigor in the absence of curricular guidance, resulting in inconsistent quality (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker; Dalton-Puffer). Instructional materials pose another obstacle: most textbooks lack linguistic scaffolds and require extensive adaptation (Meyer; Ball, Kelly and Clegg). These adaptations are time-consuming and often misaligned with standardized assessments.

Assessment frameworks remain underdeveloped. Conventional systems prioritize content mastery, neglecting the language development central to CLIL (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Informal evaluations often lack validity and reliability, reducing their effectiveness in guiding instruction (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker; Dalton-Puffer).

Therefore, while CLIL represents a transformative model for integrating content and language learning, especially in EFL contexts, its sustainability depends on comprehensive teacher training, curricular alignment, and resource development. Without structural support, its potential benefits are being diluted through uneven or superficial adoption.

3. CLIL in the Secondary EFL Context

3.1 Age-Specific Linguistic and Cognitive Traits of Secondary Learners

Secondary learners (ages 12 to 18) undergo concurrent development in cognition, language, identity, and motivation, making this stage both promising and challenging for Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Coyle, Hood and Marsh; Pérez-Cañado;

Meyer). Cognitively, adolescents transition to abstract reasoning and hypothesis testing, skills well-suited to CLIL's dual focus. With proper scaffolding, they can process complex content in a second language, reinforcing both subject mastery and linguistic growth (Ball, Kelly and Clegg; Meyer).

Linguistically, learners increasingly command academic discourse, yet their language development may lag behind cognitive abilities in L2 contexts (Dalton-Puffer). Sustained exposure to disciplinary genres, supported by scaffolding, is essential for academic language acquisition (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker; Lindsay).

Motivation also plays a central role. Autonomy, task relevance, and collaboration foster deeper engagement, especially when language is tied to meaningful content rather than isolated instruction (Pérez-Cañado). Integrative and instrumental motivations, linked respectively to cultural interest and academic achievement, further enhance learner investment (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). CLIL students often report higher enjoyment and confidence compared to peers in traditional EFL programs (Lasagabaster).

As learners develop metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness, they begin to reflect on how language shapes meaning, skills central to CLIL's 4Cs Framework (Coyle, Hood and Marsh; Llinares, Morton and Whittaker). Given the diversity in adolescent development, CLIL instruction must be differentiated and supported by formative assessment to ensure responsive, inclusive pedagogy (Pérez-Cañado; Meyer).

3.2 Institutional Implementation: Curriculum, Language Policy, and Material Design

Coyle, Hood, and Marsh (2010) argue that effective CLIL implementation in secondary education requires institutional coherence across curriculum, language policy, instructional resources, and assessment. Although widely recognized for its pedagogical innovation, CLIL's long-term viability depends on sustained national and local support (Pérez-Cañado).

European Union policy has played a central role in advancing CLIL, promoting plurilingualism to enhance mobility, employability, and social integration (European Commission). This policy-driven expansion has encouraged diverse implementation models, from bilingual streams to modular CLIL units, adaptable to local contexts (Marsh, Maljers and Hartiala). However, this flexibility has also led to regional inconsistencies. For instance, Andalusia implements a coordinated bilingual curriculum across core subjects, while others lack such alignment, creating disparities in curriculum integration (Lorenzo).

A persistent challenge lies in the gap between ambitious policy and the pedagogical infrastructure needed to realize it. Many national programs fall short in resourcing teacher training and learner support (Ball, Kelly and Clegg; Pérez-Cañado), leaving educators underprepared to deliver complex subject matter in a second language and students without adequate scaffolding (Dalton-Puffer).

Instructional materials remain a weak link. Most textbooks are monolingual and lack integrated supports such as glossaries or genre-based tasks (Ball, Kelly and Clegg). As Meyer (2010) observes, teachers frequently adapt materials themselves, raising workload and risking inconsistency. Context-sensitive, linguistically responsive materials require institutional investment (Pérez-Cañado).

Assessment systems pose another barrier. Standard evaluation frameworks often fail to capture CLIL's dual focus, leading teachers to emphasize content at the expense of language (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Llinares, Morton, and Whittaker (2012) note that current tools lack validity and reliability for integrated assessment, diminishing their pedagogical value..

While EU policy has created fertile ground for CLIL, disparities in implementation, institutional capacity, and political will persist. Without structural coherence, CLIL's transformative promise may be undermined by fragmented practice (Coyle, Hood and Marsh; Pérez-Cañado).

3.3 Intercultural Competence in CLIL

Intercultural competence is increasingly recognized as a core aim of secondary education, particularly within the CLIL framework (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Beyond linguistic development, intercultural education nurtures adolescents' identity formation, ethical reasoning, and social awareness (Pérez-Cañado). Given their cognitive readiness for abstract thought and global reflection, CLIL provides an effective platform for integrating content with cultural inquiry (Ball, Kelly and Clegg; Meyer).

CLIL's curricular flexibility allows the integration of global themes across subjects, enabling learners to engage with culturally situated tasks, such as comparing environmental policies or analyzing historical narratives, that foster intercultural literacy (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker). These experiences promote critical thinking and empathy by challenging ethnocentric assumptions.

Thematic relevance also enhances motivation, as learners use language to explore real-world issues, thereby engaging more deeply and expressing nuanced ideas (Dalton-Puffer; Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Additionally, CLIL strengthens pragmatic competence by

emphasizing tone, register, and culturally appropriate language, elements often overlooked in traditional EFL settings (Llinares, Morton and Whittaker).

Whether in diverse or homogeneous classrooms, CLIL cultivates intercultural awareness: validating students' experiences in multicultural settings and broadening perspectives in monolingual ones (Diab, Abdel-Haq and Aly). These outcomes align with broader educational goals of democratic participation and global citizenship (Ball, Kelly and Clegg).

As Coyle et al. (2010) argue, intercultural objectives must be integral to CLIL pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment. This aligns with EU education policy, which promotes plurilingualism and intercultural dialogue as drivers of social cohesion (European Commission). Recent findings by Nguyen (2024) affirm that culturally enriched CLIL fosters both linguistic proficiency and openness to cultural diversity. Anchored in the 4Cs Framework, content, communication, cognition, and culture, CLIL offers a holistic model for educating globally competent learners.

3.4 CLIL in Romanian Secondary Education

Romania's education system strongly aligns with EU multilingualism goals, introducing English early in primary school and ensuring that by 2020, over 86% of students studied at least one foreign language (European Commission). In secondary education, English is typically continued, often accompanied by French, and Romania is the only EU country where more than 90% of vocational upper secondary students study two or more foreign languages. Latin is also compulsory at the lower secondary level, reflecting a robust commitment to classical and modern language education.

Despite this linguistic orientation, CLIL has not been systematically integrated into national policy. Existing bilingual programs remain limited to urban, well-resourced schools, with minimal presence in disadvantaged areas (Cuciureanu). The absence of national coordination, limited teacher training, and underdeveloped assessment frameworks significantly hinder CLIL's scalability (Herescu).

Some progress has emerged through EU-funded initiatives. Projects such as CLIL-VET, C4C, and CAMPS have demonstrated the viability of integrating language and technical content in domains like tourism and IT, especially within private institutions (Stinga; Lazar; Colibaba, Gheorghiu and Hultoana). However, most Romanian teachers are qualified in either language or subject content, but not both, complicating implementation efforts (Herescu).

Teacher education remains fragmented, lacking formal CLIL certification pathways, while instructional materials are often inappropriately adapted from monolingual resources (Stinga).

Nevertheless, Romania's linguistic tradition and engagement with EU projects offer a solid foundation for broader CLIL adoption. Cuciureanu advocates for a national strategy encompassing curriculum reform, dual-competency teacher training, inclusive materials, and equitable access, measures essential for aligning with EU objectives and advancing CLIL nationwide.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, classroom-based observational methodology to examine the multifaceted impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) on learner engagement, cognitive development, communicative practices, subject-matter comprehension, and intercultural awareness within a secondary English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. A qualitative approach is particularly well-suited to CLIL research, as it allows for the in-depth exploration of the complex, situated interactions through which language and content are co-constructed (Dalton-Puffer).

Classroom observation offers a privileged lens into the lived realities of CLIL instruction, capturing spontaneous discourse, learner behavior, and pedagogical decision-making as they occur in authentic educational settings. As Llinares, Morton, and Whittaker (2012) emphasize, such methods are especially valuable in CLIL environments, where integrated outcomes, such as the development of academic language, critical thinking, and intercultural competence, may not be fully discernible through standardized tests or retrospective interviews.

By grounding the analysis in naturally occurring classroom dynamics, this study generates context-rich insights into the enactment of CLIL at the micro level. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced and practice-informed understanding of CLIL pedagogy, offering implications for both instructional refinement and policy advancement in multilingual educational settings.

4.2 Observation Instrument

The principal data collection instrument in this study is a custom-designed classroom observation sheet, systematically developed to assess five key domains of CLIL pedagogy.

These domains are grounded in the theoretical frameworks discussed in Sections 2 and 4 and draw from established literature in CLIL, second language acquisition, and educational psychology. The tool captures observable behaviors reflecting both linguistic and cognitive engagement, offering a structured, theory-informed lens for examining CLIL practices at the secondary level.

Each domain comprises a set of clearly defined indicators:

- **Learner Engagement** (6 indicators): Assesses behavioral and emotional participation, including attentiveness, enthusiasm, initiative, and peer collaboration, following Coyle et al. (2010).
- **Content Understanding** (4 indicators): Evaluates conceptual learning and the use of subject-specific vocabulary, task performance, knowledge transfer, and prediction, as outlined by Lorenzo, Casal, and Moore (2010).
- **Communication** (5 indicators): Draws on Llinares, Morton, and Whittaker (2012) to assess target language use, vocabulary application, instruction comprehension, peer interaction, and sentence variety.
- **Cognition** (6 indicators): Reflects Meyer's (2010) focus on higher-order thinking, including analysis, synthesis, problem-solving, argumentation, creativity, and metacognitive awareness.
- **Culture and Context** (4 indicators): Based on Coyle et al. (2010), examines learners' ability to connect content to cultural experiences, compare perspectives, and demonstrate intercultural openness.

All indicators were crafted to reflect observable, meaningful classroom behaviors and support consistent qualitative coding. This instrument enables rigorous, replicable analysis of CLIL instruction and contributes to the empirical depth of the study (Ball, Kelly and Clegg).

4.3 Scoring System

To evaluate the indicators across the five CLIL pedagogical domains, this study employed a 3-point analytic rubric designed to capture varying levels of learner behavior while preserving qualitative depth. The rubric criteria are as follows:

- **Excellent (3):** The behavior is consistently demonstrated independently, without prompting or support, indicating strong internalization and autonomous engagement.
- **Satisfactory (2):** The behavior occurs intermittently, typically in response to teacher scaffolding or peer interaction, reflecting emerging but not fully autonomous performance.

- **Needs Improvement (1):** The behavior is rarely or never observed, even with support, suggesting a need for targeted instructional attention.

This rubric offers a structured means of quantifying qualitative observations, supporting comparative analysis across sessions while maintaining the interpretive richness essential to classroom-based inquiry.

4.4 Setting and Participants

The research was carried out in a public secondary school located in Iași, Romania, a setting where Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is routinely implemented as part of the curricular approach. The selected site provided a representative context for investigating CLIL pedagogy in practice, as it operates within a broader national education framework that promotes the integration of subject content and foreign language instruction. This alignment with CLIL principles reflects broader European trends aimed at fostering multilingual competencies and interdisciplinary learning.

The focal classroom comprised 25 students, 12 males and 13 females, between the ages of 14 and 15, who were engaged in CLIL-based instruction within the lessons covering topics such as history, science and information technology. These lessons were delivered exclusively in English, providing an authentic context in which to examine the interaction of linguistic and cognitive development. The lessons observed varied in structure, including both teacher-led and student-centered formats, as well as individual and collaborative learning tasks, thereby offering a diverse set of instructional scenarios for analysis. The study was conducted from October 2024 to March 2025.

Each lesson had a standardized duration of 50 minutes. A total of seven classroom observation sessions were conducted over the course of 6 months, ensuring repeated and sustained engagement with the teaching-learning environment. This temporal distribution allowed the researcher to capture variation across lesson types, instructional strategies, and student responses.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data from the structured classroom observation sheets were analyzed using a mixed approach of thematic grouping and descriptive statistics. Indicators were first organized under the five pedagogical domains, Learner Engagement, Content Understanding, Communication, Cognition, and Culture and Context, based on the study's conceptual framework. Each

indicator was scored across six sessions using a 3-point rubric, enabling the identification of trends in student performance.

Frequency distribution tables summarized how often indicators received scores of 3 (Excellent), 2 (Satisfactory), or 1 (Needs Improvement). These visual tools facilitated cross-lesson comparisons, highlighting consistent patterns or deviations. To complement the numerical analysis, field notes, capturing student language, teacher prompts, and observed behaviors, were thematically reviewed to contextualize the statistical findings.

This dual-method approach, supported by Llinares et al. (2012), enriched the analysis by revealing both the prevalence and qualitative nature of observed behaviors. For example, high engagement scores were often linked to collaborative, student-led, or real-world tasks, consistent with constructivist learning principles (Dalton-Puffer). Conversely, lower scores in the Culture and Context domain occurred in lessons lacking explicit intercultural content, underscoring a need for stronger integration of cultural objectives in CLIL instruction (Coyle, Hood and Marsh).

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Learner Engagement and Interaction

Analysis of observation logs and student activity sheets revealed notable variations in learner engagement across different thematic units, reflecting not just statistical differences but deeper pedagogical dynamics related to task design, learner identity, cognitive demand, and thematic resonance. As shown in Table 1, average engagement scores ranged from 2.48 to 2.68 on a 3-point scale (83% to 89%).

The highest engagement score (2.68) was recorded for the “Modern Technology” lesson (Feb. 10, 2025), which successfully integrated reading and writing with digital tools and real-life relevance. Warm-up questions such as “What apps or websites do you use most?” elicited spontaneous responses, while discussions around “You Are What You Share” facilitated connections to digital identity, privacy, and online behavior. Vocabulary such as cyberbullying, digital footprint, and privacy settings was actively adopted, and students demonstrated critical language use in a final task where they designed original digital platforms. The blend of real-world relevance, student-led exploration, and linguistic creativity contributed to exceptionally high engagement.

The “Netiquette” lesson (Mar. 10, 2025) closely followed with a 2.65 score. Focusing on digital responsibility, the lesson fostered critical thinking, peer collaboration, and vocabulary development through authentic tasks. Word clouds, blog comment analysis, and a collaborative poster activity encouraged reflection on safe online behavior. Students consistently demonstrated thoughtful contributions and applied new vocabulary in structured yet meaningful ways.

“History and Myths” (2.63) and “Myths and Legends” (2.61) also performed strongly, engaging students through culturally rich content and creative storytelling. In “History and Myths” (Dec. 9, 2024), learners explored the Arthurian legend through interactive tasks and shared imaginative story endings. Similarly, in “Myths and Legends” (Nov. 18, 2024), visual stimuli and collaborative writing on mythological creatures inspired vivid responses and personal investment, showing the power of imaginative content to support both language acquisition and intercultural competence.

The “Learning and Schools” lesson (2.61) demonstrated high engagement through globally themed comparisons and reflection on students’ personal educational experiences. Tasks such as analyzing international timetables and sharing ideal school days supported intercultural awareness while reinforcing academic vocabulary and structured argumentation.

By contrast, “Health is Wealth” (2.50) and “The Blue Zone People” (2.48) showed slightly lower engagement. Though relevant, these health-focused lessons required more abstract reasoning and personal introspection, which proved challenging for some learners. While activities like food pyramid design and blog-style writing allowed for personalization, contributions were often formulaic. In “Blue Zone People” (Nov. 4, 2024), students engaged with longevity and lifestyle topics, but deeper reflection required repeated scaffolding. Responses remained sincere yet brief, suggesting a need for more imaginative or problem-solving elements to stimulate higher engagement.

In summary, lessons with high engagement featured relatable, creative, and socially meaningful content, supported by interactive tasks and contextualized language use. Conversely, more abstract themes required additional scaffolding to sustain learner involvement. These findings affirm that thematic relevance and cognitive accessibility are key to fostering active participation in CLIL classrooms.

5.2 Performance Outcomes

5.2.1 Learner Engagement

Content Understanding scores across the seven observed lessons reflected consistently strong comprehension, ranging from 2.40 to 2.58 (approximately 80 - 93%) as shown in *Table 2*. The *Modern Technology* unit achieved the highest score (2.79), reflecting the strong appeal of digital themes and the integration of technology-based activities. Students actively discussed topics such as *cyberbullying*, *digital footprints*, and *online privacy*, demonstrating enthusiasm and autonomy through interactive tasks, including the design of original digital platforms. The relevance of the topic to students' everyday experiences contributed significantly.

Netiquette followed closely with an engagement score of 2.77, confirming that lessons addressing social responsibility in digital spaces effectively promote active learning. Collaborative tasks such as analyzing blog comments, designing posters on safe online behavior, and using word clouds to generate key vocabulary encouraged critical reflection and peer collaboration, resulting in lively, meaningful interaction.

Lessons featuring narrative and cultural dimensions, *History and Myths* (2.60) and *Myths and Legends* (2.57), also fostered strong engagement. These units invited creativity and personal expression through storytelling, myth interpretation, and role-play activities. Students connected emotionally with the material, sharing imaginative responses and exploring cultural symbols, which enhanced both linguistic fluency and intercultural awareness. Similarly, *Learning and Schools* (2.57) maintained high engagement through globally comparative activities that allowed students to reflect on education systems worldwide and relate them to their own experiences.

In contrast, *Health is Wealth* (2.40) and *Blue Zone People* (2.41) registered the lowest engagement levels. Although the topics were informative, they required abstract reasoning and background knowledge that limited students' ability to connect personally with the material. Activities such as analyzing diets or discussing longevity lacked the immediacy and creative dimension that characterized the more engaging lessons, resulting in shorter and less spontaneous contributions.

Overall, the data suggest that learner engagement peaks when lessons are personally relevant, interactive, and culturally resonant, encouraging creativity and collaboration. Conversely, abstract or informational topics demand greater scaffolding, through visual aids, guided discussions, and contextual examples, to maintain attention and ensure active participation in CLIL classrooms.

Table 1. Average Score per Lesson

Lesson Topic	Overall Average Score
Modern Technology	2.68
Netiquette	2.65
History and Myths	2.63
Myths and Legends	2.61
Learning and Schools	2.61
Health is Wealth	2.50
Blue Zone People	2.48

5.2.2 Content Understanding

Cognitive engagement was consistently high, with scores ranging from 2.51 to 2.69 (83.7% to 89.7%) as shown in Table 2. *History and Myths* scored highest (2.69), supported by tasks requiring sequencing, inference, and creative reinterpretation of legends, activities that fostered synthesis and evaluation. *Learning and Schools* (2.67) also performed strongly, with analytical writing and international school comparisons encouraging critical thinking.

Myths and Legends (2.65) engaged learners in imaginative writing and narrative prediction, while *Modern Technology* (2.61) emphasized real-world relevance through application-focused tasks. *Netiquette* (2.59) promoted vocabulary use and personal reflection, though students often drew on prior experience rather than deep textual analysis. The health-focused units (*Health is Wealth* and *Blue Zone People*) both scored 2.51, reflecting limited abstraction and critical extension due to the complexity of wellness topics and their informational nature.

Overall, lessons that incorporated narrative, comparison, and open-ended problem-solving elicited stronger cognitive responses, reinforcing the need for structured scaffolding to support complex thinking within students' linguistic capacities.

5.2.3 Cognitive Skills

Scores in the Culture and Context domain were uniformly high, ranging from 2.67 to 2.85 (89% to 95%) as shown in Table 2. *Modern Technology* led with 2.85, demonstrating how digital themes like identity and cyber safety resonate with learners' lives and foster intercultural reflection. Close behind were *History and Myths* (2.84) and *Netiquette* (2.83), which explored ethical values, cultural norms, and digital citizenship.

Myths and Legends (2.82) capitalized on global storytelling traditions, allowing learners to express cultural identity and explore universal archetypes. *Learning and Schools* (2.80) prompted cross-cultural comparisons and personal reflection on global education practices, reinforcing themes of fairness and access.

Although slightly lower, *Health is Wealth* (2.78) and *Blue Zone People* (2.67) still demonstrated strong performance. While less immediately grounded in cultural contrast, both engaged learners in meaningful discussion of lifestyle habits and food practices.

These results affirm CLIL's capacity to connect language learning with global awareness. Lessons rooted in students' lived realities or cultural heritage, whether digital, mythological, or institutional, fostered deeper intercultural engagement and contextualized language use.

Table 2. Average Score per Pedagogical Domain

Lesson Topic	Learner Engagement	Content Understanding	Cognition	Culture and Context
Health is Wealth	2.40	2.42	2.51	2.78
Blue Zone People	2.41	2.41	2.51	2.67
Myths and Legends	2.57	2.54	2.65	2.82
History and Myths	2.60	2.53	2.69	2.84
Netiquette	2.77	2.52	2.59	2.83
Modern Technology	2.79	2.58	2.61	2.85
Learning and Schools	2.57	2.54	2.67	2.80

5.3 Instructional challenges and opportunities

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is widely recognized for its dual focus on content mastery and language development. However, its effectiveness hinges on factors such as topic selection, task design, learner proficiency, and contextual relevance. Analysis of classroom dynamics across seven CLIL lessons highlights both instructional challenges and pedagogical opportunities that influence engagement, cognition, comprehension, and intercultural competence.

Lessons with strong thematic relevance, particularly *Modern Technology* and *Netiquette*, achieved the highest engagement scores (2.79 and 2.77), demonstrating how contemporary, real-world topics enhance student motivation, authentic language use, and cross-cultural awareness. High *Culture and Context* scores (above 94%) further underscore the value of integrating ethical and societal themes, such as digital identity and online behavior, supported by critical vocabulary and personal relevance.

Conversely, abstract or informational topics like *Health is Wealth* and *Blue Zone People* yielded lower engagement and content scores (≈ 2.4), reflecting the difficulty students faced when encountering unfamiliar concepts without narrative framing or cultural anchoring. These findings emphasize the need for scaffolding strategies, such as visuals, simplified texts, and culturally resonant examples, to bridge gaps in background knowledge and facilitate deeper understanding.

Narrative-based lessons, *Myths and Legends* and *History and Myths*, demonstrated strong cognitive engagement (2.65 and 2.69), supported by prediction, storytelling, and creative writing tasks. These approaches encouraged students to apply grammatical structures and thematic vocabulary while exploring intercultural themes. However, such lessons require careful scaffolding and formative support to ensure accessibility, particularly for learners with varying literary backgrounds.

The *Learning and Schools* unit illustrates CLIL's interdisciplinary potential, achieving high scores in both cognition (2.67) and cultural responsiveness (2.80). Students critically examined global education systems, expressed personal values, and engaged in comparative reflection, practices that integrate sociocultural analysis with functional language use. Nevertheless, such discussions require educators to possess both content expertise and intercultural sensitivity to navigate diverse perspectives responsibly.

In summary, CLIL's success relies on thematically engaging content, scaffolded instruction, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Narrative, comparative, and real-world themes tend to support deeper learner engagement and understanding, while abstract topics demand differentiated strategies to achieve comparable results. These insights underscore the need for sustained teacher training, curricular adaptability, and interdisciplinary collaboration to realize the full potential of CLIL across diverse educational settings.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the pedagogical impact of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in a Romanian secondary EFL context, focusing on learner engagement,

cognitive development, content mastery, and intercultural awareness. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining structured classroom observations, categorical scoring, and thematic analysis, it provided empirically grounded insights into CLIL's effectiveness and limitations. Findings affirm that CLIL, when thoughtfully implemented, enhances not only linguistic proficiency (Dalton-Puffer; Pérez-Cañado) but also integrative academic and intercultural competencies (Coyle, Hood and Marsh; Llinares, Morton and Whittaker).

The analysis of performance across pedagogical domains revealed *Culture and Context* as the highest-performing category, with approximately 70% of students achieving high scores, as shown in Table 3. This finding underscores CLIL's distinctive strength in fostering intercultural competence through meaningful and context-rich instruction, one of the core dimensions of the 4Cs Framework (Coyle, Hood and Marsh). Learners demonstrated the ability to reflect on cultural norms, challenge ethnostereotypes, and reflect critically on global and local values, confirming earlier observations by Llinares et al.'s (2012) that CLIL promotes intercultural literacy through language-mediated learning.

Table 3. Student Performance Across Categories

Category	Score 3 (High)	Score 2 (Moderate)	Score 1 (Low)
Learner Engagement	~58%	~39%	~3%
Content Understanding	~47%	~47%	~6%
Cognition	~50%	~42%	~8%
Culture & Context	~70%	~26%	~4%

Cognition and *Learner Engagement* also showed strong results, with 50% and 58% of students achieving high scores. These results highlight CLIL's effectiveness in cultivating higher-order thinking, creativity, and intrinsic motivation. Lessons that incorporated authentic, thematically relevant, and collaborative tasks, such as digital citizenship, global education, and mythology, proved especially effective in promoting reflection, problem-solving, and peer interaction. Such activities align with Dalton-Puffer's (2011) and Iwaniec and Khaled's (2024) findings that cognitively stimulating, socially meaningful context enhance both motivation and task engagement in language learning. (Dalton-Puffer; Ball, Kelly and Clegg; Iwaniec and Khaled).

Content Understanding, however, showed a more balanced distribution, with 47% high and 47% moderate performance levels. This equilibrium reflects both the potential and

challenges inherent in CLIL's dual focus on conceptual mastery and linguistic accessibility. As emphasized by Cenoz, Genesee, and Gorter (2014) and Ball, Kelly, and Clegg (2015), achieving depth of content understanding while supporting language development remains a pedagogical tension. The observed variability in scores suggests that differentiated scaffolding, including pre-teaching of key vocabulary, contextual aids, and adaptive feedback, is essential for ensuring equitable comprehension across proficiency levels (Meyer).

Gender-based analysis revealed a consistent pattern of slightly higher performance among male students, particularly in lessons emphasizing *Cognition and Engagement*. As shown in *Table 4*, male learners achieved overall averages ranging from 2.58 to 2.79, compared to 2.40 to 2.58 for female students. The most pronounced differences appeared in *Modern Technology* (male = 2.79; female = 2.58) and *Netiquette* (male = 2.74; female = 2.57), where task design favored interactive, problem-solving, and technology-driven activities that appeared to resonate more with male participants. Similarly, in narrative-focused lessons such as *History and Myths* (2.72 vs. 2.54) and *Myths and Legends* (2.71 vs. 2.51), male students demonstrated greater initiative and creative engagement during storytelling and discussion tasks.

Female students, while slightly lower in quantitative scores, displayed greater consistency across topics, particularly in culturally oriented and reflective tasks. Their steady performance suggests a balanced engagement with both cognitive and affective aspects of learning, aligning with observed strengths in *Culture and Context* domains.

Although these trends remain exploratory, they mirror findings by Lasagabaster (2009) and recent OECD (2024) research on gender-inclusive pedagogy, which highlight subtle differences in motivational and interactional patterns between male and female learners. These results underscore the importance of differentiated instructional strategies, balancing analytical, creative, and intercultural tasks, to ensure equitable participation and maximize learning outcomes for all students in CLIL classrooms.

Table 4. Average Score by Sex

Lesson Topic	Female	Male
Health is Wealth	2.42	2.59
Blue Zone	2.40	2.58
Myths and Legends	2.51	2.71
History and Myths	2.54	2.72
Netiquette	2.57	2.74

Modern Technology	2.58	2.79
Learning and Schools	2.53	2.70

Content familiarity and thematic appeal emerged as strong predictors of engagement and performance. Units such as *Modern Technology*, *Netiquette*, and *Myths and Legends* consistently scored higher across domains, confirming the importance of relevant, cognitively engaging topics (Meyer; Dalton-Puffer). Lower engagement in abstract units like *Health is Wealth* and *Blue Zone People* underscores the need for scaffolded connections to learners' lived experiences.

Despite these successes, the study highlighted key challenges. Chief among them is the shortage of teachers trained in both content and language pedagogy, a dual qualification essential for CLIL delivery (Ball, Kelly and Clegg; Pérez-Cañado). While EU initiatives like Erasmus+ have offered some support (Stinga), Romania lacks a coordinated national strategy for CLIL teacher preparation and certification.

Assessment remains another critical barrier. As Llinares et al. (2012) and Dalton-Puffer (2011) note, most teachers lack the training to design tools that measure both content knowledge and language proficiency. Without dual-focused rubrics or national guidelines, teachers often default to content-heavy or language-light evaluations, diluting the integrative aims of CLIL.

In conclusion, this study affirms CLIL as a pedagogically robust and contextually relevant approach to EFL instruction in Romania. Its potential to promote communicative competence, academic development, and intercultural awareness is well-aligned with the European Commission's (2023) strategic goals. However, to realize its full promise, Romania must invest in systemic reforms: embedding CLIL in the national curriculum, establishing formal teacher training pathways, and developing coherent assessment frameworks. With such support, CLIL can serve as a comprehensive and future-oriented model for 21st-century education.

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