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Walking backwards into the future — looking forward into the past

About the history, present, and future of CLIL in primary education

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Abstract

This paper looks at the past, present, and future of content and language integrated learning in primary school. It draws on research into Lower Austrian classrooms as well as international evidence. Its outlook suggests a need for change in the way we approach educational innovation, emphasizing a stronger focus on the pupils as change makers by giving them the opportunity to become the primary social agents in their foreign language education.

Keywords:
CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)
English as a Foreign Language
Primary education

Schlüsselwörter:
Inhaltsintegrativer Sprachunterricht
Lebende Fremdsprache Englisch
Primarstufe

Foreword

When colleagues retire, it gives a reason to look back and think about past, present, and future of pedagogical practice, opportunities, and challenges. This is a contribution to a special issue of the open online journal R&E-SOURCE, which publishes scientific articles on occupational field-related educational research. This issue's honouree is the publisher, and it offers a welcome opportunity to walk backwards into the future and look forward into the past. A Maori proverb (Rameka, 2016) is a fitting metaphor, not only for Kurt Allabauer's forward looking pedagogy and leadership, but also for his beliefs and innovative stance, deeply-rooted in the classroom (his past) and thus his special responsibility towards the learners as the recipients of educational change and prospect (Lower Austria's future).

I first met Kurt Allabauer as a fellow student. Many years later I collaborated with him not only as a colleague, but also as my head of department and the leader of the international research and study programme, which benefitted from his collegiality, generosity, and foresight. I am writing this paper as a tribute to his interest in the teaching and learning of children, their talents and needs, and for an equally forward and backward looking pedagogy for Lower Austria.

1 Introduction

The study of other languages is probably recent in terms of the history of mankind. The acquisition of other languages through using them for purposes of communication is, on the other hand, as old as language itself.
(Krashen & Terrell, 1995, p. 7)

The paper's title "walking backwards into the future" does not mean we are missing out on important requirements in our new millennium, or that if we draw on knowledge, good practice, experience, and evidence from the past in the development of education we lose opportunities for young language learners to become the adult communicators of our future. Quite contrary, it aims to give more context to the above

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quotation, which emphasizes our natural ability to acquire languages directly and in real-life situations for the purpose of communication, which is considered “as old as language itself” (ibid.).

Although the last centuries produced various approaches to foreign language (FL) learning, many methods claiming to implement authentic and communicative learning still included the study of formal grammar and pattern drills, evidenced in the audiolingual approach, which seemed to have been the dominant method of language teaching, together with grammar translation for a (far too) long time (Johnstone, 1994, p. 21). When the Natural Approach claimed to have “rediscovered” (Krashen & Terrell 1998) natural and direct approaches to FL acquisition, it was expected, via its major hypothesis, the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1981; Krashen, 2004) would drastically change classroom practice. However, Krashen’s hypotheses were challenged by others, such as the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2000) or the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996), followed by a debate on whether or not there was an interface between subconscious acquisition and conscious learning. Although all hypotheses emphasised the need to provide meaningful input in a natural way, truly communicative approaches did not find a swift way into classroom practice that was easy enough for real-life application. On the contrary, Resnick (1987) asserted that many learners still saw little connection between what they learned in the classroom and real life, a circumstance that would hamper acquisition in two ways: instruction remained focused on form and drill rather than on natural communication, and opportunities for developing fluency and accuracy were limited. Moreover, Lovelock (1996) reiterated that the strategies used in many classrooms still lacked the authenticity of real-life FL use. In the search for change, it became necessary to find a balance between two paradigms: “focus on meaning”, as suggested by natural approaches to FL education, and the more traditional approach emphasising “focus on form”. These present no contradiction, as suggested by Krashen and Pohn (1975), but teaching often considered one, or lacked a purposeful alignment of the two.

In the light of a rapid development of international information transfer and travel, as well as an increase in the use of modern media, which has “increased language contact, language change, and language conflict [...] language education entails more than the task of enabling people to communicate” (Mewald, Paradise Lost and Found: A Case Study of Content Based Foreign Language Education in Lower Austria., 2004, p. 13). Language education also has an obligation to promote the status of language(s) within society and to address language acquisition as a part of a person’s identity formation (Byram, 2008; Kalantzis & Cope, 2006; Kramsch, 2002; Kramsch, 1998; Mercer, 2012; Mewald, 2019).

Bilingual education, and content-based language instruction (CBI) which became one of its key methods and philosophies (Stryker & L., 1997), seemed to provide the necessary theoretical and practical foundation for recovering what had been lost between natural ways of language acquisition in pre-educational contexts and how modern education changed it into a formal process. CBI claims that by placing FL into the real world of the learners, it provides the natural environment necessary for successful FL acquisition, and at the same time, it supports the cultural agenda of language learning mentioned above.

Looking back, evaluating the present, and thinking about the future of language learning in primary schools is described in the following sections. Thus, the paper will look at the “history” of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in Austrian primary schools in general, and in Lower Austria in particular (Mewald, 2004). It will then move on to past and present practice (Buchholz, 2006; Buchholz, Mewald, & Schneidhofer, 2007; Buchholz, 2014) of CLIL in Austrian primary schools, as well as current ideas about language learning and the notion of language competence in the context of the action-oriented approach (Piccardo & North, The Action-oriented Approach A Dynamic Vision of Language Education, 2019). The paper will close with thoughts about the future of CLIL in Austrian primary schools.

2 Looking back

In Lower Austria, a pilot called “Englisch als Arbeitssrpache” (English across the curriculum, EAC) was first introduced in the academic year of 1996/97, in one class at one urban secondary school in the industrial sector of Lower Austria. By the beginning of the academic year 2003/04, the pilot had reached 538 classes and 68 schools, which were evenly spread throughout the federal state (see Fig.1).

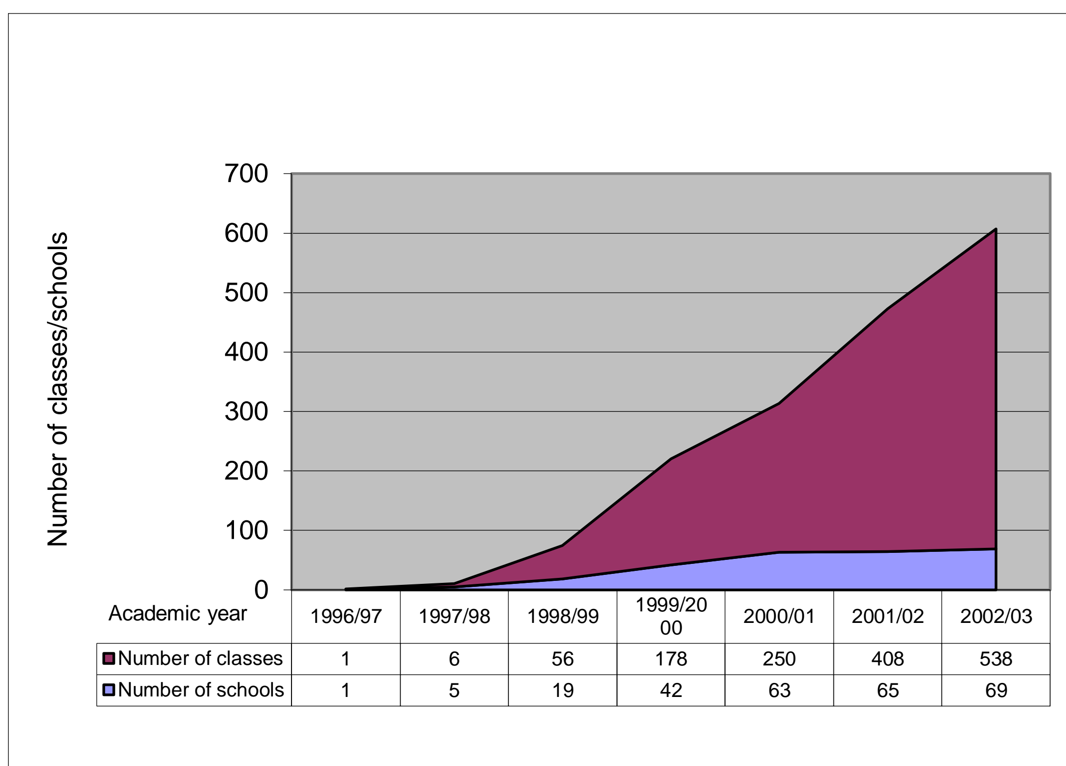

Fig. 1: Demographic development of the school pilot "Englisch als Arbeitssprache" in Lower Austria (Mewald, 2014, p. 26)

The obvious popularity of the pilot program shows in the increase of participating schools and classes as well as in the decrease of the funding per school; in the initial phase, each class received 6-8 additional teacher lessons per week. In the academic year 1998/99, the funding was reduced to 4-6 teacher lessons per class per week, and in 2003/04 schools only received 2 additional teacher lessons per class per week.

In this project, teachers were free to choose methods, materials, and content of EAC lessons, and assessment had to be based on performances in German language. As suggested by the LEPP Initiative, “[t]he drawbacks of open access to this type of teaching could be seen in the optional, noncommittal nature of recommended framework conditions,” which not only left the quality of teaching hard to evaluate, but resulted in a laid-back use of teaching time and personnel resources.

With the growing interest in the pilot, however, the administrative guidelines became more restrictive. As of 2000/01, EAC could only be implemented consecutively beginning with year 1 of primary or secondary school, and new pilots had to include all pupils of a school. In each class, EAC had to be implemented in 4-6 lessons per week, but the length of the English sequences was not defined. With the increasing number of participating secondary schools, the pilot was closed for primary schools. Only schools already in the programme could carry on. Funding for additional lessons was usually used to engage native speaker teachers (NS) by contract. NS were people whose first language was English, or non-native speakers who had acquired high FL proficiency through having lived/studied in English speaking countries. Feedback about the pilot was created by unpublished reports delivered by the schools. Between 1999 and 2004, a longitudinal study evaluated the effect of EAC in the piloting schools (Mewald, 2004).

2.1 English in Austrian primary schools

Austria was one of the first European countries to initiate language education in primary schools. As early as 1983, a school pilot to offer foreign languages from year 3 was established, with FL specialists coming to primary schools to deliver the FL programme. This pilot was monitored from 1994 on, and the notion of content-based language instruction (Inhaltsintegratives Fremdsprachenlernen) beginning with year 1 was implemented.

In the school year of 1998/99 this approach became compulsory, and after a five-year period of transition, all primary schools were expected to implement a FL from year 1, which began with the school year 2003/04.

"The Austrian curriculum offers a variety of languages for this first encounter, at primary school: however, English is chosen almost exclusively. This is partly due to a lack of teachers trained in other languages; partly to the fact that most secondary schools hardly offer any alternatives to English – which is itself due to parental choice, among other factors." (Carnevale, de Cillia, Krumm & Schlocker, 2008, p. 59)

Curricular goals for FL education in primary school foster a positive attitude towards language learning, language awareness through the use of multiple languages, and tolerance, cultural awareness, and cultural understanding of foreign speakers.

Although the curriculum has clear guidelines for the implementation of FL in primary schools, research suggests that the sequences of integration, as well as the FL lesson in years 3 and 4, are more frequently skipped than taught (Böhler-Wüstner, 2004) and that only 20.3% of all teachers implement the FL lesson in years 3 and 4. Even fewer teachers implement CLIL in years 1 and 2 (Buchholz, 2006, p. 173). The consequence of the insufficient input and opportunities to learn a FL in nearly 80% of the researched schools results in divergent and frequently deficient language competence in the pupils (Buchholz, 2006, p. 306). This observation was confirmed by another study, which suggests that only schools with an additional focus on CLIL, (mostly piloting schools within the above-mentioned EAC project), are able to fulfil curricular goals (Buchholz, Mewald, & Schneidhofer, 2007, p. 84).

Meanwhile, Austria has lost its European "pole position" (Carnevale, de Cillia, Krumm, & Schlocker, 2008, p. 59) in early FL education. All other European countries have taken up FL in primary schools and frequently with more classroom time invested. Austria is second to last in the contact time for FL instruction all over Europe (Buchholz, 2006; Eurydice Focus, 2000).

3 The present

To increase commitment in FL education and harmonise these diverse outcomes, the performance descriptors of the "Grundkompetenzen 4" (GK4) were formulated (Felberbauer, Fuchs, Gritsch, & Zebisch, 2012) and supplemented by the "GK 2" (ÖSZ, 2017), a set of requirements for the first two years of primary school. Both collections are aligned with the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), which not only provides scales for diagnosis, feedback and assessment, but also a useful description of communicative competence on the basis of theory and practice. Its carefully researched construct was supplemented by the "Companion Volume" (Council of Europe, 2018), whose new descriptions of language levels are relevant for primary FL education in two ways: First, a new level, pre-A1, was added to the "Basic User" levels and second, the description of A1 was elaborated in light of the wide age range found using the CEFR. Originally focussing on teenage and adult learners, the CEFR is now embracing all learners, including the younger ones. Additionally, its new emphasis on mediation with more elaborate scales (Council of Europe, 2018, pp. 99-125) and concepts, supplemented by the same for plurilingual and pluricultural competence (ibid., pp. 143-147) established a forward-looking framework for multilingual classrooms and 21st century transversal skill development by blending language, content, culture, and identity-building concepts (Mewald, 2019).

By walking backwards into the present, the new companion volume to the CEFR has not only propagated new descriptions, definitions and concepts of language learning and use that are no longer monolingual and oriented on the native speaker ideal (which has ceased to exist with the international use of many languages), but done so primarily with that of English as an international language (Seidlhofer, 2011). More importantly, it is reiterating its emphasis on an action-oriented approach, which supplements the communicative approach with work of competence and authenticity.

As mentioned in section 1, for too many years the focus of FL instruction was on language as the object of learning, rather than the learners themselves and their acquisition of languages. From the 1970s, language teaching began to change, but slowly. The concept that supported this change was communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) and real-life language use. Communicative competence, as suggested by Hymes, emphasizes language as a means of communication, and the goal of FL education is to prepare learners to be able to communicate in a new language in real-life. The notion of language needs, which can be defined as the gap between an existing and a desired level of competence, "contends that language teaching must be closely linked to the learner for whom it is intended and to the context in which it is delivered" (Piccardo E. , 2014, p. 9).

This focus on the learners and their ability to become active in a new language emphasises the CEFR's notion of ability rather than deficit as it "describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively." (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1)

This concept is more than just old wine in a new bottle. It is the first example of walking backwards into the future while looking forward into the past in that "[t]he CEFR incorporates the advances that were made with the communicative approach and takes them to the next level, proposing a fuller and more thorough vision capable of linking teaching and learning, objectives and evaluation, the individual and the social, the classroom and the world beyond." (Piccardo E. , 2014, p. 13)

Thus, we are now taking language learning outside of the classroom and placing it in the real world with the learners as the primary agents, working to incorporate their individual perspective and social world.

"The approach adopted here, generally speaking, is an action oriented one in so far as it views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents', i.e. members of society who have tasks (not exclusively language-related) to accomplish in a given set of circumstances, in a specific environment and within a particular field of action. While acts of speech occur within language activities, these activities form part of a wider social context, which alone is able to give them their full meaning. We speak of 'tasks' in so far as the actions are performed by one or more individuals strategically using their own specific competences to achieve a given result. The action-based approach therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and the full range of abilities specific to and applied by the individual as a social agent." (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 9)

Where learners are seen as agents in authentic tasks rather than learners of a language, CLIL, CBI or EAC and the action-oriented approach meet.

3.1 Past and present understandings of CLIL

Lower Austria has a long history of CLIL in primary and secondary education, which is demonstrated by the school pilot in section 2. When this pilot ended, it needed to be replaced by another one. In the school year 2008/2009, the pilot "Neue Mittelschule" started throughout Austria, mainly at existing general secondary schools (§ 7a Schulorganisationsgesetz - SchOG). Only a small number of "bilingual schools", whicht had been part of the project from the beginning and/or particularly committed and effective in their learners' competence development, were permitted to keep native speakers in co-teaching scenarios.

The school pilot EAC and its evaluation, however, created professional knowledge and skill as well as theoretical foundations for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) aligned with an action-oriented approach (AoA):

CLIL/CBI (Mewald, 2004, pp. 289-290)	AoA (Council of Europe, 2001) (Piccardo E. , 2014)
EAC is a motivating way of achieving improved oral FL skills, fluency, and lexical range through increasing opportunities for communication and using the FL naturally […] in content lessons.	The extent to which the observed context provides the mental context for the communicative event is further determined by considerations of relevance in the light of the user's: […] - needs, drives, motivations, interests, which lead to a decision to act. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 50) With the communicative approach, the vision of vocabulary and vocabulary teaching/learning changes as well. There is a shift away from memorizing lists of words and toward the context in which the communication is taking place. (Piccardo E. , 2014, p. 12)
Relying on innovative, interesting, creative, pleasant, and varied methods and strategies it helps the learners acquire the FL subconsciously, faster, and more efficiently than through English tuition alone.	Does one learn a language through conditioning and by mechanically repeating a model? Or, conversely, is learning a language a creative form of cognitive development? (Piccardo, 2014, p. 10)

Additionally, it reduces their inhibitions of speaking and feelings of fear by promoting a low anxiety level and a relaxed atmosphere free from the pressure of assessment and over-emphasised structural accuracy.	As students now understand that they are not starting from scratch and that they will be using their prior knowledge of various languages to learn a new language, they feel acknowledged and supported in what they can do and in what they have the potential to accomplish. Instead of being seen as additional obstacles, the other languages that learners bring to their learning experiences are now seen as potential resources. (Piccardo, 2014, p. 35)
Implementing content and language simultaneously, EAC creates opportunities for authentic and active language use, thus supporting a better understanding of the language and its meaning rather than its structure.	The underlying approach is still fairly linear; the focus is on the learner who, through exposure to authentic situations and documents, and with the support of the language resources provided, succeeds in mastering the speech acts needed to perform the task. The goal, of course, is to enable the learner to increase his or her communicative competence. (Piccardo, 2014, p. 17)
Showing consideration for the learners' language skills, the integration of the FL into content lessons often results in concentrating on the basics, both in the language as well as in the content.	Not all tasks are equivalent. Some are very simple, while others are more complex. In other words, some tasks will involve what can be referred to as sub-tasks, or steps, that make it possible for the learner to achieve the objective. (Piccardo, 2014, p. 27)
Emphasising revision and the links between subjects EAC supports the learners' understanding of linguistic and subject matter concepts, as well as their self-confidence and independence through the intentional development of metacognitive and social skills.	Learners' self-esteem, involvement, motivation, states and attitudes towards a task are all affective factors which play a role in task performance. (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz, & Pamula, 2011, p. 39)
EAC functions most successfully if all teachers network across the curriculum and if it makes frequent use of team teaching, ideally involving a NS. As a result, EAC delivers a valuable contribution to intercultural learning, the European dimension, and multilingualism.	In reminding us that the learner is a social agent, the CEFR emphasizes the contextual and situated nature of tasks and the importance of strategy and co-operation in the use of language and, a fortiori, in the learning of language. According to the CEFR, it must be remembered at all times that this social agent, this user/learner, this individual, is not a neutral being. (Piccardo, 2014, p. 18)

The common ground between CLIL/CBI are the following key strategies to be considered in a future use of CLIL in the light of new developments:

- The learners' needs, drives, motivations, and interests determine their willingness to act and are therefore important factors in designing CLIL activities.
- Vocabulary teaching and learning focus on the development of language skills, fluency, and lexical range through increasing opportunities for communication.
- Language learning is a creative form of cognitive development dependent which can be supported by innovative, interesting, creative, pleasant, and varied methods and strategies.
- Emphasising the learners' language potential supports a low anxiety level and a relaxed atmosphere, which support learners' competence development.
- Exposure to authentic situations and materials creates opportunities for authentic and active language use, thus supporting a better understanding.
- For the learner to achieve language and content goals, tasks need to be split up into as sub-tasks, or steps, and the learners' language skills have to be taken in consideration in task selection.
- Supporting learners' self-esteem, involvement, motivation, states, and attitudes towards a task are affective factors which play a role in task performance.
- Networking and co-operation support social agency and intercultural learning if tasks emphasise real-world contexts and authentic situations.

4 Looking forward into the past

CBI and CLIL have a long history, and in the context of bilingual programmes or immersion, the divergent use of these terms often caused confusion, even though they share a dual focus on content and language learning. Although controversial interpretations of the similarity, difference, or overlap of the terms immersion, CBI (including content based language instruction or teaching) and CLIL are existent and pervasive, some authors argue that CLIL represents an umbrella term that can be used to represent various approaches, while others argue their differences (Dalton-Puffer, Llinares, Lorenzo, & Nikula, 2014).

The differences and similarities in terminology argued by researchers are, however, far removed from the needs and worries teachers identify in their practice. Looking at their feedback about the implementation of CLIL in Lower Austrian classrooms one could observe that educational change is possible within the entities of schools or even individual classrooms. But this is not a big success, when considering the costs and investment made. To carry this change further and to transfer it in the primary school, where only a very small number of piloting schools were situated, the approach will now have to be developed and disseminated in a way that it can embrace an even larger population than those represented in the former pilot schools.

It seems that bringing about general educational change through CLIL will have to focus on the wider concept of the action-oriented approach, and the notion of communicative competence. In primary schools, this will require adapting CLIL to the target group by resolving problem areas such as the lack of personal resources as well as through applying innovative potentials to a broader spectrum of educational topics in the real word.

A successful implementation of CLIL in primary school will require clear curricular goals and action-oriented performance descriptors as well as defined content areas to exemplify them. This seems important because the absence of curricular goals prevents publishers from producing adequate teaching materials, and it also hampers the organised exchange of teacher-made materials.

Even if teachers find ways of “walking backwards into the future while looking forward into the past”, may of them do not find the “promised land” of language learning very easily because of its context and affordability. Instead, drawing on the insights from the past, future language learning scenarios should rely on authentic approaches of implementation and learning opportunities that help learners experience or at least feel the real world: to broaden their knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and to help them adapt to the requirements of the future (Delors, 1998) as social change makers, thus recognising the journey as the reward (Mewald, 2004, p.542). in concrete terms, social agency will include the social competence to be polite, to hold real conventions with peers, teachers, family and friends, to explain aspects of their cultural heritage, and compare their newly gained language with the language of schooling and their own family languages and dialects (Piccardo, Berchoud, Cignatta, Mentz, & Pamula, 2011, p. 35).

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