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From Training to Practice
Designing CLIL Units in Primary Education Lesson Planning as a Pedagogical Outcome

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Abstract This study explores a CLIL teacher training course at the University of Palermo, Italy, for preschool and primary educators. Using a qualitative approach, it analyses final teaching units to assess participants' understanding of CLIL. The analysis focused on integrating content and language objectives, scaffolding, learner autonomy, and inclusive practices. The study offers critical insight into how targeted, practice-based professional development can address systemic challenges to produce pedagogically sound and adaptable CLIL materials in resource-constrained, monolingual settings.

Keywords CLIL. Primary school. Lesson plan. EFL. Teachers' practices

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Theoretical Background. – 3 CLIL in Italy. – 4 Material and Methods. – 5 Results and Early Considerations. – 6 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

In the domain of second language acquisition, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL, Marsh 1994) offers a strategic pedagogical framework that promotes the simultaneous learning of subject content and an additional language, thereby challenging the traditional separation between content instruction and language teaching (Coyle et al. 2010). A distinctive strength of CLIL lies in its adaptability to students' needs (Mehisto et al. 2008) and its reliance on context-sensitive approaches (Cenoz et al. 2013) shaped by sociocultural and educational variables, that results in differing implementations across countries (Villabona, Cenoz, 2021). The methodology is both complex and learner-centred, characterised by extensive use of ICT and pedagogical strategies such as the flipped classroom and task-based learning (Porcedda, González-Martínez 2024, 49). CLIL is also recognised as an "innovative or alternative approach to communicative language teaching (CLT)" (Banegas 2012, 46) and has been widely adopted across Europe and beyond. Nonetheless, its dual objectives pose significant challenges, particularly for educators.

In response to these challenges, researchers have proposed various support models. Notably, Meyer (2010) introduced the Pyramid Model, which supports CLIL lesson planning through four key stages: curriculum-based topic selection, multimodal input to facilitate concept understanding, task design incorporating both higher-order and lower-order thinking skills, and a concluding CLIL workout phase. Another influential framework is the 4 Cs model, which focuses on content, communication, cognition, and culture. Within this model, language is addressed as the language *of* learning (disciplinary terminology), language for learning (language necessary for metacognitive development), and language through learning, which emerges during the learning process. CLIL, therefore, encourages the purposeful use of language to collaboratively build new knowledge.

It is important highlighting that one more tenet of CLIL is student agency, encouraging learners to make choices, engage in inquiry, and present their findings, often in public settings. In light of this, Thomas (2000) identifies five key characteristics of CLIL that support such aims: curriculum centrality, driving questions, constructive investigation, autonomy, and project realism. In this sense, technology plays a critical role, especially in fostering debate and discussion (Cinganotto 2019). Based on these premises, the term CLIL is understood as an umbrella term that includes a wide variety of different approaches that are based on sociocultural and educational factors, which implies that CLIL lessons may vary from country to country (Villabona, Cenoz 2021).

Across Europe, the adoption of CLIL has followed dual trajectories: one shaped by top-down educational policy mandates, and the other emerging organically in response to increasing linguistic and cultural diversity within the European Union. Nonetheless, widespread implementation continues to encounter obstacles, particularly at the level of teacher preparedness. Persistent concerns regarding educators' own linguistic competence and their confidence in planning integrated lessons have been well documented (Favilli, Maffei, Peroni, 2013). Banegas (2012) notes that many practitioners evaluate their pedagogical effectiveness primarily through the lens of subject and language mastery, a perspective that may inadvertently constrain methodological experimentation and innovation.

Despite such reservations, empirical evidence consistently points to the pedagogical value of CLIL, particularly in enhancing learners' motivation and language acquisition outcomes (Azpilicueta-Martínez, Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2023). Even so, the model's successful implementation is frequently described as demanding and contingent upon substantial professional development and classroom experience (Favilli, Maffei, Peroni 2013; Hidalgo, Villarreal, 2024). While numerous EU member states have formally integrated CLIL into national curricula, certain geographical and institutional contexts continue to receive limited attention within the broader discourse (Poveda-García-Noblejas, Antropova, 2024), underscoring the uneven nature of CLIL's diffusion across the European educational landscape. Challenges are further compounded by differing perceptions of CLIL's purpose. In Kazakhstan, for example, CLIL is seen as "merely teaching through another language" (Karabassova 2018, 1), a view that might resonate with teachers lacking adequate CLIL training in Italy, where balancing content and language in practice is a persistent difficulty (Villabona, Cenoz, 2021). Further concerns for the Italian context include limited access to ICT tools, appropriate pedagogical models, and a lack of materials (Porcedda, González-Martínez, 2024). Other discrepancies emerge, especially in secondary education where CLIL is compulsory, yet national exams remain content-focused, leading teachers to perceive CLIL as externally imposed (Aiello, Di Martino, Di Sabato, 2017). Additionally, studies indicate that low-intensity CLIL programmes offer limited gains in receptive skills, while increased exposure significantly improves performance (Hidalgo, Villarreal, 2024). Primary education, furthermore, faces distinct challenges, since English is often taught by non-specialist teachers (Ludbroke, 2008).

Yet, in areas such as southern Italy, CLIL practices remain underexplored. To address this gap, this study investigates a case study where both the implementation and outcomes of a local CLIL project in Palermo (Italy) are addressed.

The study aims to contribute to the broader literature and analysis of materials produced by the participating teachers. Combining questionnaire data and analysis of realia (lesson plans and materials), the analysis identifies best practices and context-specific challenges. Following a brief overview of CLIL (section 2) and its implementation in Italian primary schools, the study examines pedagogical foundations, teacher perceptions, and instructional outcomes (section 3), offering a structured discussion (sections 3 and 4) on the practical implications and results within a geographically underexplored educational context.

2 Theoretical Background

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) constitutes an educational framework wherein subject content is delivered through a foreign language, effectively transforming the target language into a vehicle for learning rather than the explicit focus of instruction. This approach is grounded in the principle that language, when employed in authentic, discipline-specific contexts, facilitates both deeper cognitive engagement and more meaningful language acquisition. Beyond its linguistic benefits, CLIL has been associated with the promotion of learner motivation, intercultural awareness, and readiness for transnational mobility within the European context (Marsh, Maljers 1994).

In contrast to traditional language instruction, which often privileges grammatical form and syntactic accuracy, CLIL emphasizes the functional use of language in real-world, content-driven settings. From a policy and pedagogical standpoint, it supports the European Union's broader objective of fostering multilingualism and preparing learners for participation in an increasingly interconnected and mobile society. Originally conceptualized by Marsh and Maljers (1994), CLIL is underpinned by dual learning aims: the simultaneous development of content knowledge and foreign language proficiency. As Coonan (2002) observes, the model allows for strategic and methodological flexibility, encouraging context-sensitive approaches to curricular integration.

Implementation relies on pedagogical practices aligned with both language learning and cognitive development. These include Total Physical Response (TPR), which links language input with physical activity; Visual, Auditory, and Kinaesthetic (VAK) strategies; Task-Based Learning (TBL); scaffolding techniques; and cooperative learning models. These learner-centred approaches are particularly suited to the developmental needs of young learners, fostering experiential and interactive modes of engagement. Langé (2001) underscores that CLIL does not prescribe a singular method;

rather, it synthesizes a range of pedagogies that promote active, contextualised learning – an orientation supported by findings in cognitive science that highlight the benefits of deeper processing for long-term retention.

Consequently, CLIL educators are required to develop a dual set of competencies: proficiency in the target language (including discipline-specific terminology and classroom interactional metalanguage) and expertise in curriculum design, classroom management, and the integration of language and content objectives. The effectiveness of CLIL depends on teachers' ability to concurrently plan linguistic and subject-based components, underscoring the complexity and demands of this approach in practice. Teachers must structure activities that simultaneously support content understanding and language acquisition, such as using visual aids for content and sentence stems for language scaffolding. Drawing from the social constructivist paradigm, the learner is positioned at the centre of the process, while the teacher acts as a facilitator in a learning environment designed to promote meaningful engagement. This approach encompasses three key phases: knowledge construction, creation of authentic contexts, and guided facilitation. Effective CLIL instruction, therefore, hinges on meticulous lesson planning. Every classroom activity must be designed to support both content and language outcomes. As Brown (2001, 149) notes, a lesson plan is "a set of activities which represent 'steps' in a curriculum", including preparation, execution, and reflection phases.

As detailed in the methodological section, this study adopted a qualitative and descriptive research framework to analyse the structure and components of CLIL lesson plans. To understand these lesson plans, however, a focus on the context in which they emerge is necessary.

3 CLIL in Italy

In the European context, characterized by its linguistic diversity, the integration of a second or additional language is increasingly seen as vital. This is closely tied to European Community policies on multilingualism and minority language rights, where linguistic communities are often defined not by demographic strength or cultural capital, but by political relevance. At a broader policy level, CLIL functions as an extension of language policy and a tool for promoting global citizenship (Hüttner et al. 2013). On an individual level, it is regarded as a means of enhancing students' future employability. The growing scholarly attention to CLIL, especially in secondary education, is largely attributed to policy-driven educational reforms (Poveda-Garcia-Noblejas, Antropova 2024). Research in this area is

most prevalent in countries with established multilingual policies such as Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria, though interest is also noted in nations like Switzerland and Malta.

For the Italian context, Catenaccio and Giglioni (2016) provide a detailed historical account of foreign language instruction and the implementation of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Their work traces the evolution from early pilot projects in the 1970s to more institutionalized policies by the 1990s. Italy, in fact, despite comparatively low English proficiency rates, stands out for making foreign language education a mandatory part of the primary curriculum (Catenaccio, Giglioni 2016, 198). CLIL implementation, however, presents regional disparities, as argued by Tommaso (2019), who investigated secondary teachers' attitudes toward CLIL-based training programs, finding significant variation in how regions adopt and support CLIL practices. These disparities mirror those previously identified by Catenaccio and Giglioni (2016), underscoring the influence of school infrastructure, teacher motivation and proficiency, and administrative support (Tommaso 2019, 656). Language proficiency, particularly of CLIL teachers, continues to be a central concern. As noted by Porcedda and González-Martínez (2024), insufficient language skills among educators represent a major obstacle to effective CLIL application. This is especially problematic given that CLIL demands not only pedagogical but also linguistic competence in integrating content and language learning.

Despite such challenges, CLIL has shown efficacy, especially in primary education. At this stage, the approach is used to equip young learners with tools for intercultural communication and European multilingual integration. Adami (2022) distinguishes CLIL from traditional English as a Foreign Language (EFL) approach by its cognitive orientation: language serves as a medium for acquiring disciplinary knowledge, rather than being the sole instructional focus. This aligns with earlier perspectives emphasizing content-based, learner-centred strategies that facilitate cognitive and linguistic development (Marsh, Langé, 2000; Coyle et al. 2010). An example of practical courses are European projects such as 4Cs-CLIL for Children,[1] funded under Erasmus+, underscore the value of CLIL in early education. This initiative emphasizes communication, fluency over accuracy, and experiential learning through creative engagement with real-world contexts. In fact, scholars such as Serra (2007) and Adami (2022) note that CLIL fosters not only language acquisition but also higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), encouraging learners to ask questions like "why?", "how?", and "what evidence is there?".

1 Please find it at: `http://www.clil4children.eu`.

Focusing on primary education, Catenaccio and Giglioni (2016) observe that CLIL remains optional and loosely regulated, whereas CLIL has been mandatory in upper secondary education since the early 2000s, following the 1999 Presidential Decree n. 275, which outlined school autonomy regulations. This regulation laid the groundwork for various experimental projects in both primary and secondary institutions, and even earlier in education. Age is, in fact, another critical factor in CLIL effectiveness. Younger learners tend to acquire second languages more naturally and with greater long-term success due to brain plasticity and fewer affective filters such as anxiety (Bylund et al. 2021). While older learners may initially progress more quickly due to developed cognitive strategies, young children often surpass them in the long run in terms of fluency and proficiency. Despite their inexperience, young learners benefit from immersive environments where language is integrated into meaningful subject learning. Based on this, Adami (2022) advocates for CLIL integration at the pre-primary level (Scuola dell'Infanzia), due to the natural learning inclinations of children aged 3-5, including high neural plasticity and emotional openness. These traits, according to Adami, render young children especially receptive to CLIL's holistic methods.

However, Italy has yet to implement systematic or structural CLIL initiatives in pre-primary education, indicating a missed opportunity to capitalize on early language acquisition potential.

In conclusion, while Italy has shown a strong institutional commitment to multilingual education through CLIL, its implementation varies significantly by region and educational level. While the approach has demonstrated clear benefits in fostering linguistic competence, cognitive development, and intercultural awareness, systemic challenges remain, particularly regarding teacher training, regional disparities, and early childhood education.

4 Material and Methods

This study focuses on a CLIL teacher training initiative conducted in Palermo, Sicily, a region often underrepresented in CLIL literature. The project was a collaboration between the University of Palermo and the Regional School Office (Ufficio Scolastico Regionale), targeting pre-primary and primary school teachers. The teaching team comprised academic specialists in English didactics, a CLIL-experienced teacher trainer, and a primary education expert. The course design reflected prior collaborations and emphasized collegiality. The curriculum consisted of four fundamental modules (48 hours each) and four advanced characterizing modules (80 hours each), combining in-person and online instruction with a 60:40 and 55:45 ratio, respectively.

Due to a limited number of applicants with adequate language proficiency, only a small cohort was admitted. The training, officially initiated by D.D. 1511 of 23/06/2022, was delivered in a blended format to accommodate geographical and logistical constraints. Sessions were held at the Department of Humanities, University of Palermo, and remotely via Google Meet. A shared Google Drive folder housed course materials and updates.

Seven teachers participated, one from preschool (male) and six from primary schools (female), aged 38 to 58, with English proficiency ranging from B2 to C1. Only one had prior CLIL experience, while two of them expressed scepticism, particularly regarding its applicability to early childhood education. During the initial meeting, participants completed a language proficiency test assessing receptive and grammatical skills. Only two met the threshold, while others committed to improving their proficiency independently or over the following three years.

To address the varied language competencies, the course was conducted entirely in English, maximizing exposure. The modules were tailored to educational levels, focusing on designing and managing CLIL lessons, selecting and adapting materials, and integrating pedagogical strategies suitable for young learners. Module 1 addressed material selection, early childhood pedagogy, and CLIL design, while Module 2 focused on assessment strategies, self-evaluation, and threshold objectives. Instruction was supplemented by resources on the Moodle platform.

Practical application was central to the course. Trainees observed, discussed, and delivered CLIL lessons using a SWOT framework. Final assessments required each participant to develop a complete CLIL teaching unit, including a detailed lesson plan. These lesson plans were the basis of the current qualitative study, which aims to (1) identify preferred content areas, (2) determine pedagogical emphases, and (3) evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of trainee-created materials.

Although no universal format exists, lesson plans typically include goals, objectives, activities, media, and assessment tools. Goals provide a general vision of the lesson's purpose, while objectives specify measurable student outcomes. Activities form the core instructional sequence; they may include the use of media to engage learners and support skills development. Finally, assessments measure learning, experience, and challenges. The analysis of lesson plan reveals the ways in which CLIL teachers adapt instruction to meet the diverse needs of learners, accommodating varying language levels, learning styles, and cognitive abilities.

The study adopts a descriptive, phenomenological approach, analysing lesson plans as pedagogical documents. The first analytic step was to examine stated goals and objectives, ensuring the

integration of both content and language aims, a hallmark of effective CLIL instruction. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learning is mediated through interaction and scaffolding. The second analytical step involved evaluating how lesson plans supported language development. Effective CLIL lessons pre-teach key vocabulary, employ scaffolds (visuals, prompts), encourage structured and unstructured language practice (e.g., role-plays, discussions), and offer opportunities for language production. Third, the content delivery was assessed for cognitive engagement. Lesson plans were examined for activities promoting critical thinking and real-world relevance, in line with communicative language teaching (CLT) and Bloom's taxonomy, which advocates the progression from lower-order to higher-order thinking skills. Assessment strategies formed the fourth area of analysis. CLIL requires both formative and summative assessment to measure language and content learning. Plans were reviewed for evidence of these methods, as well as for teacher self-assessment components.

5 Results and Early Considerations

The following analysis examines similarities and differences across seven CLIL lesson plans, created by teachers at Italian primary schools, particularly in terms of structure, teacher strategies, pedagogical preferences, and underlying instructional goals. The analysis focuses on the cover sheet, class profiling, the lesson plan, the self-evaluation.

5.1 The Cover Sheet

A cover sheet (CS) is the first page of a CLIL lesson plan. It provides a quick overview of the most important information about the lesson and includes what the subject of the lesson is about, the topic, the content goals, the language goals, the skills the students will develop, who the lesson is for, and data about time (when and how long the lesson is). It helps organize the lesson and make sure it connects content and language learning, which is the heart of CLIL.

The selected cover sheets represent a diverse range of educational levels, from preschool to upper primary, and encompass various content areas, including science, environmental studies, physical education, and literacy. Despite the variation in subject matter, all lesson plans demonstrate a consistent commitment to integrating linguistic and subject-specific content, in alignment with CLIL principles. The standardized template employed across submissions

includes key metadata (e.g., teacher name, date, lesson number, educational level), as well as structured sections detailing lesson objectives, required materials, personal teaching aims, underlying assumptions, anticipated challenges, and proposed solutions.

While the format remains consistent, notable variation emerges in the level of detail and specificity provided by individual teachers. For instance, cover sheets CS2 and CS7 offer extensive elaboration in the 'Content', 'Functions', and 'Cognition' sections, indicating a strong grasp of CLIL's cognitive-linguistic integration. In contrast, CS1 presents a more concise formulation, with limited detail on content objectives and cognitive engagement. Additionally, certain teachers, particularly those responsible for CS3 and CS4, explicitly include broader socio-emotional objectives, such as fostering empathy, environmental awareness, and inclusive communication. These elements are frequently situated under the "Citizenship" category, reinforcing CLIL's orientation toward holistic learner development, encompassing not only linguistic and cognitive growth but also civic education.

A recurring methodological feature across the lesson plans is the strategic use of multimedia resources, including videos, songs, and interactive whiteboards, to facilitate both language acquisition and conceptual understanding. This reflects a shared pedagogical awareness of the value of multimodal scaffolding, particularly in early language learning contexts. The integration of music, as observed in CS3 and CS6, is intended to support pronunciation, memorization, and learner motivation, further illustrating the multisensory, student-centred ethos underpinning the CLIL approach.

Another widely used strategy is pair and group work, intended to foster student-student interaction and reduce teacher talk time (TTT). Teachers such as CS1 and CS5 explicitly mention the goal of increasing student collaboration, while SC7 structured 'pair' and 'open-pair' speaking tasks. Group work is not only seen as a means of language practice but also as a tool to promote peer support, especially for students with learning difficulties or socio-emotional challenges. Additionally, several teachers mention differentiation strategies to manage mixed-ability classrooms. CS5, for example, anticipates difficulties related to language comprehension and plans multiple scaffolded video viewings. CS3 and CS4 mention the support of special needs assistants and the use of visual agendas or arts-based tasks as inclusive methods.

Across the cover sheets, there is a clear balance between content aims (subject knowledge) and language aims (vocabulary, sentence structures, pronunciation). For instance, CS1 focuses on naming the phases of the water cycle, while CS2 emphasizes understanding the differences between living and non-living things. In both cases, content and language objectives are interdependent and explicitly stated.

In terms of personal teaching goals, several teachers aim to reduce their teacher talk time, improve instruction clarity in L2, and cultivate a positive, engaging learning environment. CS3's personal aims notably include using praise ("I will always say: Great job!") to build student confidence, while CS7 seeks to promote life skills like self-awareness and critical thinking through health-related discussions.

All cover sheets engage with both LOTS (Lower Order Thinking Skills) and HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills). Tasks range from classification and identification (LOTS) to evaluation, analysis and comparison (HOTS). For example, CS5's lesson includes a culturally reflective task comparing British and Italian hobbies, a clear example of cross-cultural thinking and evaluation. The citizenship component is particularly strong in lesson plans that address environmental or health topics. CS3 and CS4 embed sustainability and eco-awareness, while CS7 and CS6 focus on health and personal well-being. These CLIL lessons transcend academic goals, cultivating values aligned with global citizenship and twenty-first-century competencies.

As for anticipated problems, teachers often foresee noise, distraction, or social conflict and pre-emptively design groupings or support mechanisms to address these. For instance, CS2 adjusts seating plans to separate disruptive students, while CS6 supports a hesitant child by placing her next to a familiar peer. Solution often involves pairing high-ability with lower-ability students, multimodal input, and teacher modelling. These responses reveal an emphasis on classroom ecology and inclusive practices.

Finally, these cover sheets reveal a community of practice committed to student-centred, inclusive, and multimodal pedagogy. While each teacher brings a unique voice and level of detail to their planning, the collective focus on scaffolding, collaborative learning, and intercultural or civic education is striking. The covers sheets demonstrate how CLIL, beyond integrating content and language, also supports affective development, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

5.2 The Class Profile

The class profile (CP) serves as a foundational descriptive tool for understanding the characteristics of young learners. It informs pedagogical decisions regarding content selection and activity design, ensuring that instruction is linguistically accessible, cognitively appropriate, and pedagogically engaging for the specific group. Across the dataset, teachers consistently demonstrate awareness of learner heterogeneity, particularly in relation to

language proficiency, cognitive development, and the presence of special educational needs (SEN).

Numerous CPs illustrate this inclusive orientation. For example, CP1 references the presence of BES (Bisogni Educativi Speciali) students and highlights the active participation of a learner with special needs. Similarly, CP4 and CP5 identify learners diagnosed with dyslexia, dyscalculia, and behavioural disorders. These observations reflect a shared commitment to inclusive educational practices, aligning with the broader principles of CLIL, which emphasize equity and learner-centred instruction.

Language proficiency levels are generally situated at A1 or below, based on CEFR descriptors. Teachers often juxtapose the class average with specific learner outliers, such as CP5's bilingual pupil or a cognitively advanced student characterized as a 'gamer', underscoring the need for differentiated instructional strategies. Several teachers (e.g., CP3, CP5, CP7) report using peer tutoring by more proficient learners as a means of scaffolding and promoting collaborative learning.

A recurring theme across profiles is the learners' tendency to revert to their L1 (Italian), especially during cognitively demanding tasks or in oral production. While often framed as a pedagogical challenge, this behaviour is also interpreted as diagnostic of areas where additional support is needed. Most teachers adopt a pragmatic approach, viewing L1 use as part of a gradual progression toward increased L2 engagement.

Despite challenges such as attention difficulties and classroom management concerns (evident e.g., in CP6's depiction of a noisy preschool environment or CP5's reference to a group of disruptive learners), the general classroom atmosphere is characterized as positive, cooperative, and conducive to learning.

5.3 The Lesson Plan

The analysis identifies recurring didactic strategies, preferred instructional strategies, common educational goals, and recurring or unique challenges. In particular, the lesson plans (LP) were examined for explicit and implicit representation of the 4Cs and the cognitive depth achieved according to Meyer's Pyramid. Each LP was assessed based on the extent to which it addressed each of the 4Cs, as noted in Table 1.

Table 1 Representation of the 4Cs across LP

Lesson Plan	Content	Communication	Cognition	Culture
1	High (core scientific concepts like evaporation, condensation)	Moderate (pair work, structured speaking)	Low (basic recall, limited higher-order thinking)	Low (minimal cultural context)
2	High (clear focus on biological concepts)	Moderate (group discussion, labelling)	Moderate (Sorting game, reasoning)	Low (no explicit cultural component)
3	Moderate (environmental awareness)	High (Games, dialogues, group activities)	Moderate (prediction, critical thinking)	Moderate (context of going green)
4	High (marine biology content)	High (Pair work, speaking activities)	Moderate (critical thinking through follow-up activities)	Moderate (environmental awareness)
5	Moderate (personal interests, daily life)	High (Peer interactions, guided conversations)	Moderate (comparison, self-expression)	High (cross-cultural reflection)
6	High (anatomical vocabulary)	High (Pair work, songs)	Moderate (motor skills, hands-on activities)	Low (limited cultural integration)
7	High (health education)	High (Group work, dialogues)	High (reflective discussion)	High (cross-cultural comparisons)

Table 1 reveals that all lesson plans (LPs) successfully address the 'Content' component, demonstrating a clear emphasis on disciplinary subject matter. In contrast, the 'Culture' dimension receives comparatively limited attention; in some instances, such as LP1 and LP2, explicit cultural references are entirely absent. This imbalance likely reflects a tendency to prioritize content and language acquisition, often at the expense of the intercultural dimension, which is nevertheless a core component of the CLIL framework. The marginalization of cultural learning underscores the need for greater awareness of its pedagogical value in fostering global competence and contextual language use.

Analysed through Meyer's Pyramid of cognitive processing, most LPs emphasize lower-order cognitive tasks, such as vocabulary recall and basic comprehension, while offering fewer opportunities for higher-order thinking, including problem-solving, evaluation, and real-world application. This surface-level orientation may limit both the depth of content learning and the sustainability of language acquisition.

As discussed in the analysis of cover sheets, the lesson plans consistently integrate multimodal instruction, collaborative learning, guided elicitation, and task-based methodologies. These strategies align with core CLIL principles by promoting cognitive engagement and linguistic development. All LPs incorporate multimodal inputs, such as videos, interactive whiteboards, flashcards, dramatizations, and worksheets, which reflect the tenets of dual coding theory. This theoretical model posits that information presented through both verbal and non-verbal channels enhances memory retention and comprehension, particularly valuable in CLIL contexts where learners must simultaneously process content and language.

Examples such as LP1 ('The Water Cycle') and LP6 ('Body and Health') effectively use visual and kinaesthetic resources to connect abstract terminology to tangible concepts. Moreover, the frequent use of group and pair work demonstrates an application of sociocultural theory, which views language development as fundamentally social. LP7, for instance, includes a column-table collaborative activity that supports peer scaffolding and co-construction of knowledge. However, in several cases, such interactions are insufficiently supported by targeted linguistic scaffolds, thus limiting opportunities for sustained and meaningful L2 use.

Several LPs (i.e., LP1, LP3, and LP5) adopt a structured listening strategy encompassing prediction, gist, and detailed listening stages. This tripartite approach effectively scaffolds listening comprehension and integrates it with content learning. The subject areas represented span science (LP1, LP2, LP4, LP6), environmental education (LP3), and physical education (LP7), each paired with English language objectives. For instance, LP2 integrates a categorization task with vocabulary-building through oral discussion.

Nevertheless, the articulation of language aims remains inconsistent. While vocabulary development is widely addressed, communicative functions such as describing, classifying, and reporting are often underdeveloped and insufficiently scaffolded. The lack of supporting tools, such as sentence frames, word banks, or visual organizers, undermines the communicative efficacy of instruction, thereby constraining one of CLIL's central objectives: functional language use within disciplinary contexts.

Cognitive strategies like categorization (LP2), problem-solving (LP4), and data handling (LP7) promote higher-order thinking within a language learning context, as does metacognitive reflection in LP3 and 5. These also foster cultural awareness and identity building, all of which are key CLIL goals.

Despite these strengths, the plans exhibit weaknesses in scaffolding, assessment, and productive language use. Feedback tends to be superficial, with little affective or formative assessment. While Lesson 5 includes reflective questions, most others focus on

error correction. Productive output is also uneven; some lessons (e.g., LP2) end with passive tasks, while others (e.g., LP7) include rich speaking opportunities.

5.4 The Self-Evaluation

Within the framework of lesson planning, the self-evaluation component functions as a critical space for reflective practice, allowing educators to assess their instructional performance, the efficacy of the lesson, and student learning outcomes. This section examines the self-evaluation forms, with the aim of identifying recurring themes and notable divergences in perceived competencies, professional challenges, and developmental aspirations.

One prominent trend observed across the dataset is the consistently high level of self-reported competence in foundational CLIL principles. The majority (5/7) of participating teachers assign themselves scores of 5 or 6 (on a 6-point scale) when evaluating their ability to articulate key CLIL concepts and to communicate its pedagogical advantages. Teachers also express confidence in mentoring peers, for instance through statements such as "I can help other teachers understand CLIL", and in drawing insights from both their own classroom experiences and those of colleagues. This points to a shared culture of professional collaboration and reflective engagement, values that are deeply embedded in the CLIL teaching community.

However, while general confidence is high, the data also reveal specific areas where self-perceived competence varies significantly. One such area is lesson planning that successfully integrates content and language objectives. Here, responses range from high proficiency (ratings of 5 or 6) to much lower scores, with some teachers indicating a lack of clarity or experience. For example, one participant (Teacher 3) assigns a score of 2 to this item and similarly reports lower confidence in related areas such as scaffolding strategies and instructional materials design. These responses suggest that certain individuals may still be navigating early stages in their professional growth as CLIL practitioners.

Another domain of concern is spontaneous interaction during lessons, particularly in situations in which teachers must respond to student questions without prior preparation. This aspect of classroom discourse tends to receive some of the lowest self-assessments across the group. The discomfort may stem from linguistic insecurities or from the challenges of improvisational teaching in a second language. Teachers 1 and 3, for instance, provide ratings between 3 and 4 and raise concerns about their ability to manage the unpredictability of live classroom exchanges in English.

The ability to maintain instructional quality in English equivalent to that in the teachers' first language (Italian) also emerges as a divisive issue. Teachers with a solid foundation in English language instruction tend to report greater confidence in implementing CLIL strategies, particularly in relation to language-mediated content delivery. In contrast, educators with less linguistic training often express reservations, primarily linked to students' limited English proficiency. As noted by Teacher 5: "It very much depends on the students' level of English. If their level is too low, it won't be easy to maintain their interest". This statement encapsulates a central tension in CLIL pedagogy: the need to maintain cognitive challenge while ensuring linguistic accessibility.

Despite these concerns, many participants report high levels of self-efficacy in key pedagogical areas. Most notably, respondents express confidence in diagnosing learners' needs, adapting or creating instructional materials, and fostering classroom engagement. Several teachers describe themselves as capable of producing original or adapted resources in English, calibrated to the proficiency levels of their students – an indicator of pedagogical flexibility and responsiveness, both of which are essential for effective CLIL practice. Similarly, the evaluation of learners' performance in English – across both oral and written modalities – is generally viewed positively, especially among teachers with extensive experience in language teaching.

Confidence levels are particularly high when working with younger learners. Participants rated themselves at the upper end of the scale (5 or 6) for their ability to prepare age-appropriate materials and design developmentally suitable activities. Teacher 5, for example, draws on considerable experience with children aged 3-6 and emphasizes the integration of cognitive and motor development considerations into instructional planning. Such responses reflect a nuanced understanding of early childhood education and second language acquisition, highlighting the importance of aligning CLIL methodology with learners' developmental stages.

6 Conclusion

The European Union's commitment to fostering language proficiency is evident in its policy frameworks, most notably the Barcelona Objective, which set out in 2002 the aim of introducing "at least two foreign languages from a very early age" (Barcelona European Council 2002). This policy emphasis provides a clear mandate for early multilingual education, yet the operationalization of such goals at the classroom level remains fraught with challenges. In Italy, Catenaccio and Giglioni (2016), for instance, identify persistent mismatches between academic CLIL theory and the practical needs of in-service teachers, particularly when working with very young learners. They observe that the task of integrating language and content instruction for this age group requires advanced competences in foreign language teaching, alongside a solid grounding in subject knowledge and age-appropriate pedagogy.

The findings emerging from this CLIL teacher education initiative in Sicily provide a multifaceted account of pedagogical transformation, professional learning, and the persistent challenges associated with implementing Content and Language Integrated Learning at the primary level. Although many participants initially reported limited confidence in their linguistic competence and minimal familiarity with CLIL-specific methodologies, the course fostered a reflective and collaborative learning environment in which teachers designed lesson plans marked by creativity, multimodality, and civic engagement. These outcomes indicate that even a short-term intervention, when underpinned by sound pedagogical design, interdisciplinary scaffolding, and sustained mentorship, can engender meaningful shifts in instructional practice.

Crucially, the programme facilitated opportunities for collaborative knowledge construction, curricular adaptation to diverse learner needs, and iterative refinement of teaching strategies. From an analytical perspective, the submitted lesson plans and accompanying reflective commentaries signal a significant epistemological shift. Rather than construing CLIL as a prescriptive methodology, participants increasingly framed it as a flexible pedagogical stance – one that values translingual practices, promotes learner agency, and situates cognition within socially mediated activity. Over time, many teachers began to reposition themselves not as custodians of linguistic accuracy, but as mediators of multilingual meaning-making. This reorientation was often enacted through the strategic use of visual, gestural, and interactive modalities aimed at attenuating linguistic asymmetries in the classroom. Such practices align with sociocultural theories of language learning and underscore CLIL's capacity to function as a pedagogical interface between disciplinary knowledge and learners' lived realities.

Nevertheless, the data also reveal several tensions that complicate the adoption of CLIL as an inclusive and equitable pedagogical model in the particular context of Palermo. Teachers' language proficiency levels varied considerably, as did their comfort with spontaneous classroom interaction, a key component of communicative teaching. These disparities prompt critical reflection on the equitable distribution of CLIL's pedagogical benefits. In particular, the underrepresentation of productive language skills, especially oral communication, within several lesson plans signals a persistent misalignment between content instruction and the development of communicative competence. Similarly, assessment practices frequently prioritized task completion over formative, metacognitive, or affective dimensions, underscoring the need for more integrated and holistic evaluation frameworks within CLIL pedagogies. This disconnect may be symptomatic of broader structural dynamics within the Italian educational system, where CLIL is frequently introduced through top-down directives that emphasize certification and procedural compliance. Such an approach risks reducing CLIL to a technical instrument, obscuring the iterative, context-sensitive processes required to enact it as a pedagogical ethos grounded in multilingual meaning-making and inclusive education.

Several pedagogical implications follow. First, CLIL training programmes must move beyond general methodological overviews to include explicit modelling of linguistic scaffolds and adaptive assessment tools that promote authentic interaction. Second, ongoing language development for teachers (particularly in relation to spontaneous, interactive discourse) must be prioritised, as this remains a site of vulnerability. Third, CLIL professional development should be reimagined as participation in a discourse community, where language, content, identity, and inclusion converge to shape a shared epistemology of practice.

Ultimately, this study affirms that when CLIL is embedded within reflective, context-responsive pedagogical frameworks, it offers substantial potential for enhancing both linguistic and disciplinary learning in Italian primary education. Beyond supporting bilingual competence, it can foster intercultural awareness, critical thinking, and civic responsibility, which are capabilities closely aligned with the broader aims of twenty-first-century education. Yet to move from isolated innovation to systemic change, CLIL must become part of an institutionalized dialogue that connects educational policy, teacher development, and classroom practice. Only through such sustained integration can CLIL be realized not as an externally imposed model, but as a locally grounded, discursively enriched approach to teaching and learning.

Among the most frequently cited needs are improved teacher language proficiency, the availability of developmentally suitable

materials, and pedagogical resources tailored to the interests and to cognitive stages of young learners. These needs were echoed in the self-assessment data collected during the project, where teachers reflected on their knowledge of CLIL concepts, their classroom practices, and their engagement with the unique demands of teaching young children. These reflections provide a rich lens through which to examine how teachers negotiate professional identities, respond to pedagogical challenges, and grapple with the dual focus of CLIL, i.e. content and language integration.

From a broader analytical standpoint, the wide implementation of CLIL across Europe reflects a growing commitment to pedagogical models that transcend the traditional subject–language divide. At its core, CLIL positions itself as a transformative approach in the landscape of multilingual education, yet it remains a demanding practice. Implementing CLIL at the primary level requires educators to merge subject-matter expertise with principles of language pedagogy, while simultaneously responding to heterogeneous learner profiles and managing the fluid dynamics of classroom interaction. These demands are further compounded in contexts marked by limited institutional support or incoherent policy frameworks.

Nevertheless, primary education remains a fertile ground for CLIL innovation. Young learners' cognitive malleability, receptiveness to additional languages, and intrinsic motivation for experiential learning align well with CLIL's pedagogical ethos. Yet, structural barriers (such as insufficient pre-service and in-service teacher training, a dearth of contextually relevant instructional materials, and fragmented language education policies) continue to constrain its broader implementation. Pedagogical models such as Meyer's CLIL Pyramid and Coyle's 4Cs framework provide conceptual scaffolding, but their efficacy hinges on sustained investment in professional development, curricular coherence, and cross-institutional collaboration.

Admittedly, the present study is limited by its localized scope, drawing on a small cohort of primary educators in Sicily, and thus does not claim generalisability across diverse educational systems. However, the findings affirm that CLIL should be understood not as a static methodology, but as a dynamic pedagogical discourse, one that embodies broader educational commitments to multilingualism, intercultural competence, and learner autonomy. Realizing these aims will necessitate systemic engagement: robust teacher preparation, pedagogical innovation, and flexible, context-sensitive policy support. Only through such sustained engagement can the full potential of CLIL be realized as both a means and a model for inclusive, future-oriented education.

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