

# CLIL Research at Universidad de La Sabana in Colombia

## Investigación del programa CLIL en la Universidad de La Sabana en Colombia

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### **Abstract**

*As the number of content-area course offerings has increased at the University of La Sabana, the need for support of teachers and students has also increased in demand. Through multiple applications of an action research process, this research seeks to identify effective instructional strategies, thus leading to an applicable instructional model. This article describes the proposal put forth and its research objectives and methodology.*

**Key Words:** CLIL (Content & Language Integrated Learning); learning strategies; action research.

### **Resumen**

*Con el incremento en el número de cursos de contenido ofrecidos por la Universidad de la Sabana ha surgido una creciente necesidad de ofrecer apoyo a profesores y alumnos. Con la realización de múltiples aplicaciones en un proceso de investigación-acción, esta investigación busca identificar estrategias de instrucción efectivas que conduzcan a un modelo de instrucción aplicable. El artículo describe esta propuesta, sus objetivos de investigación y metodología.*

**Palabras Claves:** Programa CLIL (Content & Language Integrated Learning); estrategias de aprendizaje; investigación-acción.

### **PROJECT SUMMARY**

The research planned seeks to answer the question: Which learning strategies can teachers of content courses use to deliver content in another language in order to successfully impact student learning? Research will consist of observing classes, interviewing teachers and students in order to identify instructional strategies, and implementing and evaluating various strategies.

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

#### **Background**

To enhance the competitiveness of students and research in an increasingly globalizing world, bilingual or even multilingual instruction has become an essential component of the formative process. The use of a *lingua franca*, or widely spoken language, in this process has gained worldwide acceptance in the multilingual instruction process. In most cases, English is considered to be an integral medium for the process as Nieuwenhuijzen Kruseman notes, “it is the language of science” (Van Leeuwen and Wilkinson, 2003).

This guarantees the student a broader access to written material and more geographic flexibility, which naturally enhances learning opportunities. Furthermore, academic production in the form of books, journals, conferences, and seminars is enriched as the multilingual context naturally increases international participation.

Effective content teaching requires pedagogical considerations distinct from those used in native language instruction, as there are new challenges in the process of delivery of content material such as the production and assimilation of information and the ability to communicate with the language in another context outside of the classroom. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on contingently overcoming all potential language barriers that arise throughout the process. Otherwise, rather than being an asset, the use of the foreign language impedes content delivery and learning and, in the end, places it far from achieving its objective.

The previous research project, entitled *English Content-Based Learning and Instructional Strategies*, sought to solve the problem that content was not completely delivered and assimilated due to language difficulties. The project was centered around an interdisciplinary seminar on English content teaching that began in the second semester of 2003. The seminar involved content-area instructors from Administration, Nursing, Psychology, Law, and the Humanities and was initially a forum for sharing experiences, problems, and possible strategies for content teaching. As the seminar progressed, it increasingly became apparent that there were several common strategies that had been successfully implemented with a student-centered approach. While the courses were varied in nature, interdisciplinary discussions showed that there existed content-based teaching (CBT) strategies that were similar or even identical.

Based on the above-mentioned points, Universidad de La Sabana has emphasized the importance of developing methodologies and learning strategies for content courses in the development plan for the Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures. The plan states that one of the tasks is to collaborate with professors of content courses to establish a forum for brainstorming and determining appropriate learning strategies for teaching content courses. Bilingual education has been part of the international projection of the university and requires constant support. The development plan proposes this by stating the following:

- Develop strategies through the collection of data based on content teaching experiences.
- Develop and implement a teaching model for English-based content teaching.
- Establish national and international partnerships which enhance the teaching of content through institutional visits, particularly universities.
- Participate in forums and publications (printed and electronic journals).
- Publish a handbook series on content-based teaching strategies addressed to all academic disciplines and educational levels.

Initial research was carried out between 2003 and 2006 with university professors.

### **Past research results**

Through the seminars carried out in the previous research project, it became increasingly evident on the part of researchers and participants that courses taught in English are successful if certain issues in lesson planning are resolved. The issues discussed in the seminar revolved around moving the English content-based courses towards student-centred ones as the following problems had been identified:

1. Students expected the instructor to provide all the information.

2. Classes that were teacher-centred generally were evaluated poorly as students expected “didactic activities” in class.
3. Attitudinal problems were identified on the part of students in student-centred courses.
4. Students expected the instructor to provide all the information in regards to content, leading them to evaluate the course based only on the instructor’s ability to lecture in English.
5. Written assignments were poor and did not meet the expectations.

Additionally, long-term problems associated with teacher-centred courses were identified:

1. Lecture-based teaching affects the delivery of content as comprehension skills are varied resulting in students requesting the delivery of content in Spanish.
2. The absence of student support in writing and speaking in the foreign language would result in lack of language acquisition.
3. Managing heterogeneous language groups throughout the semester without strategies benefits just a few students who are not challenged by language.
4. Inability to maintain continuity in the English content-based courses in order not to lose content (teacher attrition).
5. Inability to develop a positive attitude towards learning in a foreign language and the language itself with some students.

The previous research conducted on learning strategies for English content-based teaching and learning has shown that considering learning strategies geared towards content delivery with the student being the center of the learning and teaching process simultaneously enhances the delivery of content and the acquisition of skills in a foreign language. Instructors found that student-centered strategies tend to have more success with their courses. In conclusion, the list of strategies below resulted from this research project:

1. Support from Foreign Language Department
2. Bi-monthly seminars for English content professors
3. Sheltered Teaching to support students
4. Coaching students in writing and oral production
5. Socio-affective strategies
6. Focus groups
7. Sharing of results

### **Current research plan**

As Universidad de La Sabana has been increasing the number of courses taught in English throughout the faculties, there is a growing need on the part of professors to search for specific CLIL instructional strategies that enable the language to enhance content rather than diminish it and to ensure academic success through the use of English. Furthermore, as the university embarks upon new consultancies with Pre-K-11 schools around the country, there is a great need to support these teachers in learning and implementing successful CLIL instructional strategies. Van Leewen and Wilkinson (2003) note that while a foreign language is advantageous to intercultural communication and academic growth, not considering the influence of medium instruction could reduce the quality of content. Therefore, this research seeks to identify CLIL instructional strategies that enable instruction in English content teaching. As the focus of the initial research was placed on identifying any approaches that would foster or general issues that would inhibit success in content courses taught in English, this second research project seeks to

answer the question: Which learning strategies can teachers of content courses use to deliver content in another language in order to successfully impact student learning? Sub-questions of this research are as follows:

1. How different are the CLIL instructional strategies across learner groups?
2. How do we define *successful CLIL instructional strategies*?
3. To what degree are the identified CLIL instructional strategies successful?

The theoretical framework will cover the concept of CLIL, the definition of *instructional strategies*, and the delineation of student-centered teaching for autonomous learning. The research will be guided by the following objectives:

- *General objective*: This research seeks to discover the CLIL instructional strategies that teachers use in order to deliver content in another language.
- *Specific objectives*:
  - a. To identify differences in the CLIL instructional strategies used across learner groups.
  - b. To define *successful CLIL instructional strategies*.
  - c. To define to what degree the CLIL instructional strategies used in the learner groups are successful.

Furthermore, the methodology used in this research will be that of action research. The goal of this kind of research is to “discover phenomena such as patterns of second language behavior not previously described and to understand those phenomena” (Seliger 1990), but in this case we will look to discover patterns of effective strategies leading us to model of instruction. Three groups will be tapped in order to conduct the research and produce results:

1. University content-area teachers as co-researchers.
2. Master in English Language Teaching students as co-researchers.
3. CLIL Community at Universidad de La Sabana.

### Expected products & impacts

Expected products out of this research are:

- Bank of CLIL instructional strategies for university and K-11/12 school-level teachers leading to an instructional model.
- Training opportunities.
- Publications and presentations at the national and international level.

Additionally, we hope to impact:

- Student level of success in content-area courses.
- Level of teacher skill in content-area courses.
- International community.

### CONCLUSION

In addition to the planned products and impacts expected as a result of research, we hope to impact the student level of success in content-area courses. We also plan to support further development in teacher skills in the content-area courses, as we know these two factors are undeniably linked. Lastly, we hope to impact the international community by providing insight to content-area instruction and the application of effective instructional strategies in these courses.

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## BIODATA

**Betsy A. Otálora** holds a B.A. in English and a M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction both from the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities. Ms. Otálora has taught in the public schools in Minneapolis, MN and worked as an educational support specialist and a Director of Development at a national educational software company. Her research interests are CLIL, instructional design, learner autonomy, and learning strategies. Currently, she is an instructor and researcher at the University of La Sabana in Colombia.