Promoting content and language integrated learning in
gifted high schools in Vietnam: Challenges and impacts

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Abstract

Among responses to multilingualism and to the need of effective language education programmes, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been found to be efficient in different sociopolitical contexts. Recognising the benefits, Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) recently issued two CLIL declarations in an effort to reform the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system, firstly through piloting CLIL programmes in gifted high schools nationwide. This paper aims to discuss some challenges and impacts of promoting CLIL programmes in Vietnam, centering around MOET’s recent policies for gifted high schools. The first section reflects on the context for and the significance of MOET’s declarations in 2008 and 2010, which officially articulated CLIL implementation. Then the issue is investigated from sociolinguistic and linguistic perspectives by the author problematising the enactment of such policy pertaining to its impacts on key stakeholders. Finally, some recommendations for policy makers and practitioners are offered for further implementation of CLIL in the aforementioned setting. This paper would offer a practical view of CLIL practices to inform Vietnamese policy makers and educators in the improvement of foreign language education. It also hopes to contribute to a more pluralistic perspective to the current research field of CLIL internationally.

Key words: CLIL, challenges, impacts

Introduction

The growing trend towards globalisation has consequently increased the pressure on language education to equip learners with language proficiency to better suit the needs of international communication. Being promoted as a response to multilingualism and to the need of effective language education programmes, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been found to be efficient in different sociopolitical contexts. CLIL refers to any educational activity in which “a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and the subject have a joint role” (Marsh, 2002, p. 58). According to Coyle (2007), the dual focus on both the content and language aspects has been proved to help learners acquire new knowledge and skills as well as progressing in a language in a way which is relevant to their needs and experience. For the language area, one benefit of CLIL programmes is the great exposure and the rich input of the target language, and realistic situations for the language to be acquired naturally. CLIL’s core principles as to advance learners’ cognitive, communicative and intercultural awareness development has also enabled this approach to be flexibly applicable. That is the reason why among European nations, this approach is officially supported due to its compatibility with the European ideology of languages, which values economic cohesion, mobility and cultural and ethnic diversity (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). For many countries in South America and Africa, CLIL has been a cost-effective option to provide language instruction in large classes, and also a means of reducing social and ethnic inequalities (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008).

Recognising the benefits above, Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) recently issued two declarations in an effort to reform the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the national education system, firstly through piloting CLIL programs in gifted high schools nationwide (MOET, 2008, 2010). CLIL is hardly a new practice in Vietnam. In fact, different French bilingual programmes...
have been implemented since 1970, when Vietnam became a member of Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique (Agency of Cultural and Technical Cooperation) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). However, in the context of the English language gaining global recognition and Vietnam’s open-door policies attaching the country’s development to English proficiency, the promotion of CLIL has never so strongly and publicly confirmed the premier place of the English language.

This paper aims to discuss some challenges and impacts of promoting CLIL programmes in Vietnam, centring around MOET’s recent policies for gifted high schools. The first section reflects on the context for and the significance of MOET’s declarations in 2008 and 2010 which officially articulated CLIL implementation. Then the issue is investigated from sociolinguistic and linguistic perspectives by the author problematising the enactment of such policy pertaining to its impacts on key stake-holders. Finally, some recommendations for policy makers and practitioners are offered for further implementation of CLIL in the aforementioned setting.

**Background**

To narrow the gap with Western education quality and to help local human resources achieve a marked improvement in foreign language competence, MOET has shown special interest in reforming language education, especially at high school level. As part of the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, Decision No. 1400/QĐ-TTg “Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages in the National Education System, Period 2008 to 2020” was issued in 2008 by the Prime Minister. The designated goal was to enable most Vietnamese students to use a foreign language confidently in their daily life communication, study and work in an integrated, multicultural and multilingual environment, serving the cause of industrialization and modernization for the country (MOET, 2008). Among initial steps, the decision enforced the use of English as a medium of instruction (MOI) in Mathematics classes in 30% of high schools in five major cities (MOET, 2008). From that, for every subsequent year, the same project would be expanded to 15-20% of schools in five other provinces and to other subjects. However, recognising the difficulty of implementing the project on such a large scale, MOET issued another decision in 2010 (Decision No. 959/QD-TTg – “Developing The Gifted High School System, Period 2010 to 2020”), narrowing the scope of the previous policy to gifted schools only. The reason given was that gifted schools should model the country’s modern facilities, qualified teaching staff and innovative educational activities (MOET, 2010). Accordingly, from school year 2011-2012, natural science subjects, including Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Computer Science, will be taught totally in English in piloted gifted schools. The remaining gifted schools will need to implement this by 2015.

MOET also details the measures to ensure the effectiveness of the policies. According to the project schedule, in phase 1 (2008 – 2010), new curriculums and text books for schools will be developed; teachers’ proficiency and their training needs evaluated; guidelines to facilitate frequent and effective use of foreign languages issued; and policies to attract overseas Vietnamese and volunteer teachers from abroad are developed (Nguyen, 2011). As an instance, an English proficiency framework will be developed as a basis for designing and developing curriculums, lesson planning and assessment criteria. This framework will specify the English proficiency requirements for 6 levels, compatible with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (MOET, 2008, 2010). New compulsory English programmes will also be introduced to reach the target of, by 2020, 50% of the learners achieving level 3 (equivalent to B1 in CEFR) of the framework. As part of MOET’s guidelines, different localities have conducted English tests, based on the First Certificate in English (FCE) test, to examine teachers’ language proficiency. Test-takers are assessed against 4 language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to MOET’s guidelines (MOET, 2008, 2010), to be considered “qualified”, teachers of English in high schools must achieve a grade of 80 out of 200 points. Those who fail to meet the standards are required to receive extra training in addition to their teaching hours.

**Context and Significance**

The promotion of CLIL in gifted schools takes place when traditional language education in Vietnam is experiencing quality problems. As Nguyen (2011), the executive manager of the National Foreign Languages 2020 Project, remarks, 98% of Vietnamese students study English for 7 years but are unable to use it in basic communication. On average, only those who major in the language can score 5 out of 10 in the National English Entrance Exams to university. After entering university, most have to restart at beginner level and face lots of difficulties undertaking English-for-Specific-Purposes courses.
As for gifted high school students, a vice minister of MOET explicitly states that English proficiency is currently a barrier for most of them, which disadvantages them from gaining high prizes in international competitions (Tran, 2011). If CLIL is successfully piloted in gifted schools, it will have major impacts nationwide. Besides enabling Vietnamese school-leavers to communicate and study competently in English, this implementation of CLIL will also redress a number of related issues such as empowering the teaching capacity of Vietnamese teachers. As planned by MOET, CLIL models will then be expanded to other high schools, and thus, will affect about 80,000 teachers and 20 million students all over the country, even long after the completion of the 10-year project (Nguyen, 2011). The country is then supposed to have more citizens who are capable of gaining access to international resources and working competently in multicultural and globally competitive environments.

The issue

There is not yet a definite answer about the effectiveness of the policy or its long-term impacts since key stakeholders are still at the very beginning of introducing and practising CLIL. However, lacking a clear pathway, such an implementation has raised concerns and posed great challenges to schools, teachers and students.

Challenges for schools and teachers

To comply with the two policies, the majority of gifted schools are struggling against the lack of qualified CLIL teachers and standardised curriculums.

The most considerable difficulty that gifted high schools nationwide are encountering is the shortage in teaching staff capable of delivering CLIL lessons. In different CLIL models around the world, an effective approach to CLIL involves both content and language teachers working together on joint curricular networks, sharing ideas and assisting one another with classroom activities. This provides mutual support between subject teachers who may not be familiar with second language acquisition theories and language teachers who may exceedingly emphasise linguistic forms over content learning (Coyle, 2007). However, in the context discussed, only subject teachers are assigned to be in charge of CLIL lessons with limited assistance in language aspects. The issue is that experienced subject teachers often possess very basic English skills while younger teaching staff with better command of the language are often less skillful in content delivery (VietnamNet Bridge, 2012). Even in schools with good reputation for teaching quality, very few teachers have both the professional and English language expertise to teach science subjects in English. At primary or secondary levels, content and language demands can be more easily dealt with, but in the context of CLIL at a high school level, especially in gifted high schools, these are often higher and more complex. Due to this, in 2011, only 3 out of 76 gifted high schools claimed to be ready to offer Mathematics lessons in English as required. Several instances include Le Quy Don Gifted High School in Danang City where only 6 out of 90 teachers could provide subject instruction in English; and Hanoi Gifted School, under Hanoi Pedagogical University, where 30% of subject teachers possess some level of English proficiency, yet none are confident to deliver subject content (Legal News, 2011).

There are a number of contradictions in MOET’s policies and measures in achieving its target. In the first place, MOET aims to survey and upgrade teaching staff’s English competence; whereas, its recent FCE tests are only conducted for teachers of English rather than for subject teachers. To be able to use English as an MOI in their class, subject teachers are required by MOET to achieve at least C1 in FCE tests (Le, 2012). What concerns insiders is that even teachers of English fail to reach that level: a survey by Da Nang University of Foreign Languages shows that in 2011, only 22 out of 1,996 teachers of the schools in the central region could achieve level C1. Besides, while MOET is supposed to complete English proficiency assessment in phase 1 of the project (2008-2010) and start its training programmes from phase 2 (2011-2015) to prepare schools for giving CLIL Mathematics from school year 2010-2011, most schools report not to have receive any specialised training courses (Dtinews, 2012). Among very few centres that train CLIL teachers for gifted high schools, Natural Science and English Training Center in Ho Chi Minh City states to have trained only 8 teachers to deliver Physics lessons in English (VietnamNet Bridge, 2012). Consequently, the question being raised is how schools can get enough CLIL teachers (the number of teachers in need being estimated to amount over some thousand) to run their programmes. Regarding a recent response from MOET, an agreement has been signed with ELC, an Australian organization that would provide volunteer native English teachers to teach in Vietnam, with approximately 300 to 500 teachers coming every year.
(VietnamNet Bridge, 2013). However, as MOET plans to pay a modest salary budget of less than USD300 a month to every foreign teacher, it is unlikely that this will be a reliable and sufficient source of CLIL staff in the next many years. The shortage in teaching staff will continue to be a long-term challenge as policies on recruiting, paying and promoting teachers are still completely dependent on government’s “allocation mechanism”.

Concerning CLIL curriculums and materials, each school has their own practice depending on their facilities and teachers’ experience. Although MOET promises to develop a set of standard curriculums and materials in English, this will not be completed before 2015 (MOET, 2010). Until then, schools have to either translate Vietnamese textbooks into English or depend completely on foreign-produced materials (Nguyen, 2010). In schools that have already piloted CLIL Mathematics since 2009, it is common for main coursebooks to be continuously changed or for CLIL contact hours to be dramatically reduced. Within only one year, Hanoi Gifted School has already changed the main coursebook twice, from the Further Pure Maths volume (used for A-level qualifications offered in the United Kingdom) to a collection of SAT (a standardised qualification for college admission in the United States) (Nguyen, 2010). In HUS Gifted School, teaching natural science subjects in English was initially compulsory in the curriculum. Then students complained about being overloaded and the school had to change all the CLIL subjects into extracurricular activities. The reason given is gifted schools should primarily focus on producing top students for national and international competitions (24h News, 2011). Schools fear that if too much attention is paid to CLIL curriculums, students will not succeed in competitions or university entrance exams which are still conducted in Vietnamese.

In addition to the lack of timely official guidance from MOET, the issue is also complicated by inconsistency in finding a common voice on curriculums within each locality. In a meeting held by Ho Chi Minh City’s Department of Education with representatives from 10 local high schools last year, Cambridge IGCSE Mathematics and Cambridge A/AS Level Mathematics were assigned to be use as “standard” CLIL Mathematics due to their parity with Vietnamese textbooks (VietnamNet Bridge, 2012). The challenge is, on preparing for MOET’s policies, most of these schools have already piloted CLIL Mathematics in some of their classes, using completely different sets of textbooks. Le Hong Phong Gifted High School compiles their materials by translating MOET’s textbooks into English; Lương The Vinh High School follows the curriculum of College Mathematics; and Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai High School imports some Australian curriculums and then tailors them to their students (Le, 2012). Among the 10 schools, only Bùi Thị Xuân High School will not have to change their teaching materials as they still have not yet implemented CLIL Mathematics. However, as this school has not worked with representatives from Cambridge International Examinations either, its management board is not definite about being able to start CLIL at the beginning of the second semester when currently school year 2012 has already gone by half (VietnamNet Bridge, 2012).

Challenges for learners

Firstly, the current implementation of CLIL in different schools can hardly guarantee learners’ cognitive and language development. From a psycholinguistic perspective, important theories including Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone Of Proximal Development, Krashen’s (1982) Comprehensible Input Hypothesis or Swain’s (1985) Comprehensible Output Hypothesis and relevant evidence-based research have shown that optimal language acquisition occurs when comprehensible input is provided just beyond students’ actual development level. Additionally, one guiding principle of the CLIL approach is that lessons should not be made less cognitively demanding and challenging (Mehisto, et al., 2008). Regarding CLIL educational activities in Vietnam, not only do lessons lack a rich input and exposure to the target language but the subject content has also been oversimplified. MOET chooses Mathematics and Science taught in English to initiate its foreign language education reform, judging the content language to be clear, concise and simple enough for Vietnamese students to learn English through real usage (Nguyen, 2010). Nevertheless, in practice, on frequently finding more than half of a class unable to follow even simple instructions, teachers tend to aim at introducing and familiarising students with key technical terms and definitions only (Tien Phong Online, 2011). In HUS Gifted School, students study the same subject content twice, in Vietnamese in morning lessons and in English in the afternoon. There, instead of cognitively and linguistically demanding tasks such as problem solving or high-order thinking in a language other than their own, students simply copy and repeat the content with no genuine context to enhance language learning or to develop their cognition. In Le Hong Phong Gifted High School, CLIL Mathematics is now considered merely an extracurricular activity; all end-of-term exams are still constructed in Vietnamese (Tien Phong Online, 2011). In short, rather than help-
ing students progress academically and linguistically, the new curriculum is demotivating learners with repetitive content and inevitably leaving them with more workload and pressure than ever.

Secondly, the gate-keeping role of the English language in CLIL curriculums can exclude many students from equally enjoying educational benefits. By definition, students need not necessarily possess a high level of the foreign language in CLIL classrooms (Coyle, et al., 2010). Through carefully scaffolded instructions and tasks, even low-level students are argued to be capable of making progress into truly subject-specific discourse. However, with the heavy workload in Vietnamese gifted schools and with MOET’s insistence on CLIL subjects being delivered totally in English, target language demands are often too high and students’ English skills become vital. Consequently, those who really have an aptitude for science subjects but lack the required English proficiency may lose a chance to receive the educational enrichment they deserve. Not a small number of gifted high schools in Hanoi City had to lower the pass mark in the English entrance exam to 2.5 out of 10 so that they will get enough students for school year 2010 (Viet Bao News, 2010). Conversely, if the English language is overemphasised, CLIL students will be disadvantaged in the national high school graduation exam and university entrance exams, which are still conducted only in Vietnamese. From many parents’ views, if their students do not wish to study abroad or follow advanced courses in English, using English as an MOI is unnecessary (Nguyet, 2011).

Impacts on wider society

Despite the two CLIL policies being cast as an important language enrichment measure, clear goals and objectives are generally missing or unsuccessfully communicated to key stake-holders, resulting in various interpretations of MOET’s purposes in adopting the approach. Several representatives from MOET regard CLIL as a step taken to remove the language barrier that has been disadvantaging Vietnamese gifted students in Mathematics Olympics and international competitions at high school level (Nguyet, 2011). Certain school management boards, meanwhile, believe conducting English-medium instruction of content courses is to help their gifted students receive scholarships in an English-speaking country (Tran, 2011). However, a lack of orientation is still the most perceived feeling among teaching staff. CLIL teachers wonder whether their lessons should serve as an introduction to academic materials in English only or should aim to assist learners in achieving any specific recognised international qualifications (Nguyen, 2012). The mismatch between MOET’s goals and the general public’s perception inevitably results in unintended negative feedback. The two policies are claimed to be top-down and prescribed without considering voices from those who really practise CLIL. School teachers contend targeting at better performance in English in Olympics and international competitions is a false claim and an unnecessary waste (Nguyen & Thanh, 2012) since candidates all provide their answers and reasoning in Vietnamese and a team leader will do the translation into English. Countering the argument that there is more chance for overseas scholarships via CLIL, some parents criticise policy makers and excessive workload for failing to consider their children’s practical needs of only aiming at attending a Vietnamese university (Nguyet, 2011). Also in line with teachers’ concern, the principal of Le Hong Phong Gifted High School confirms that the school’s CLIL programmes can only equip students with basic CLIL terms and knowledge; reaching any international qualifications including the Cambridge certificate is a too ambitious and impractical goal (Nguyen & Thanh, 2012).

Another reaction of the wider public is that MOET’s recent policies are only aimed at wealthier classes in the society. Apparently, to promote CLIL in gifted schools, a huge amount of human and financial resources will be allocated to building the infrastructure, upgrading facilities, training teachers and designing CLIL curriculums. MOET’s 2020 project is worth 2,312 billion VND (around 115 million USD), with 638,400 USD spent on upgrading teachers’ English proficiency (MOET, 2010). According to Professor Van Nhu Cuong – the principal of Luong The Vinh High school (Hong, 2010)

We spent more than 400 billion VND opening Amsterdam Gifted High School in Hanoi while many other schools still have to rent classrooms. And we are going to spend 2.3 trillion VND only to build a gifted school in each province, while with only one billion VND, we can build a very good school in remote areas. We are in great need of teachers for gifted schools, but we should not necessarily send 730 teachers abroad to learn how to teach science subjects in English. Why don’t we have policies to invest in trainee teachers from locally pedagogical universities?

Currently, gifted students account for 2% of the number of high school students. When the country is still poor and there are many groups of learners, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, to
care for, the specified policies are creating a greater social gap. For gifted students from lower-income backgrounds and their families, the cost for taking CLIL classes and extra courses in English is already prohibitive. The lack of teaching staff has caused schools to search for visiting teachers or pay double to those who deliver CLIL lessons, the consequence being a rise in tuition fees that can increase the economic burden on poorer parents (Vu, 2013). In Ho Chi Minh City, schools can only use Cambridge University’s CLIL curriculums and materials on paying an annual membership fee. This amount, which is several times higher than the normal school tuition fee, will be divided among students enrolled in CLIL subjects. Parents at a school express extreme dissatisfaction when each student is to pay 150USD a month (approximating the monthly salary of an office worker) for Cambridge CLIL lessons while the Vietnamese – American Association’s CLIL version previously provided at the school only costs a third and students are supplied with sufficient materials and learning facilities (Le, 2013). If CLIL continues to benefit only a minority of wealthier students rather than being equally accessible to students from all social backgrounds, socioeconomic inequality is an unavoidable consequence that follows.

Conclusion and recommendations

During the piloting of CLIL Mathematics and Science in Vietnamese gifted high schools, considerable challenges that have not been attended to suggest the impracticality of MOET’s specified policies in the near future. In the first place, the recent CLIL promotion has been deemed sudden and fails to consider the country’s specific conditions. The mismatch between schools’ capacity, teacher availability and MOET’s ambitious project may have caused arising difficulties to surpass what enthusiastic policy makers can envision. Although MOET aims to take a phased approach, it fails to accomplish tasks and measures as scheduled for each phase. Accordingly, within a short period of three years after the first CLIL decision was issued in 2008, with no substantial investment in large-scale teacher education, methodological research, facilities and curriculums, policy makers can hardly expect CLIL practitioners to yield any desired outcomes corresponding to the targeted goals. Secondly, despite being claimed to benefit key stakeholders, the policies have disregarded the voices and interests of related parties. School principals, teachers, students and parents have all been excluded from the formulation and development process of the CLIL policies, their performance being limited to simply at the implementation level. The inevitable result is that teachers and management boards increasingly doubt the effectiveness of the programmes; students suffer from an arduous burden of intense class hours; and not a small number of parents struggle against rising school fees and extra costs.

In the long run, the use of CLIL as an innovative and efficient form of delivery in Vietnamese classrooms should remain an aim in the country’s foreign language projects. However, rather than hastily establishing too ambitious goals, it is now wiser to gradually prepare all the necessary conditions from staff, facilities to materials for schools nationwide so that they become ready when CLIL is practised. MOET can also import the “Non-CLIL to CLIL” Model (Non-CLIL, Pre-CLIL, Partial CLIL language, Partial CLIL content, Adjunct CLIL, CLIL) with corresponding procedures suggested by Rasanen (2011). As discussed, as the lack of clarity and consensus between policy makers and practitioners is among the challenges, it is important that there be clarified and mutually accepted aims and measures at both governmental and individual level. Need analyses are then advisable. Schools should also be given more autonomy in recruiting staff and designing assessment criteria (such as introducing CLIL tests and reducing the heavy workload of tests in Vietnamese) to navigate learners away from traditionally passive and ineffective learning. Furthering this paper’s commentary, surveys concerning teachers and students’ perception of the CLIL approach can be conduced for voices from CLIL practitioners to be heard.

References


