

CoFocus: Enhancing dual focus in CLIL through teacher collaboration

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Rationale

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an educational approach in which non-language subjects are taught through a foreign language, aiming to foster both subject-specific learning and language development (Coyle et al., 2010). A central tenet of CLIL is its "dual focus", which necessitates the seamless integration of language and content objectives. However, achieving this integration can be particularly demanding when two separate professionals – a subject teacher (ST) and a language teacher (LT) – are involved. Tensions often emerge due to misaligned pedagogical goals, limited collaboration, and the need for shared vision and planning (Chopey-Paquet, 2015; Dalton-Puffer, 2007). To address these challenges, this project investigates how structured collaboration between STs and LTs can foster a more coherent dual focus in CLIL.

Theoretical framework

Highlighting the importance of disciplinary literacy and transdisciplinary collaboration, the pluriliteracies approach to teaching and learning (Coyle & Meyer, 2021) offers the conceptual basis for the intervention. The research draws upon the dual focus framework as conceptualised by Martens et al. (2023), which emphasises the need for explicit ST-LT collaboration to design and deliver CLIL instruction. In this context, the concept of "collaborative dual focus" (CoFocus) is introduced and further elaborated in the author's ongoing doctoral research. Furthermore, the collaborative efforts within the study's CLIL tandems were guided by insights from Vangrieken et al. (2015), who distinguish between process-related and outcome-related criteria for effective teacher collaboration.

Research design

The study is centred around the following research question: "How can STs and LTs in CLIL settings implement a CoFocus on content and language, what factors affect this CoFocus, and what are the perceived outcomes?". The research adopts a design-based approach conducted in three Flemish secondary schools. At the core of the project are five "teacher tandems" – STs and LTs working in a CLIL context, with the same students. These tandems engaged in a professional development trajectory, coached by the researcher, that included joint planning sessions, teaching experiments, classroom observations, and structured reflection. Data were collected through interviews, lesson artefacts, and classroom observations.

Results

Preliminary findings suggest that CoFocus develops gradually and is supported by time allocation, goodwill, and mutual curriculum awareness. Teachers noted that the professional development programme provided targeted guidance through co-planning sessions, scaffolding tools, and language-support strategies, along with time for reflection and clear task division. As collaboration progressed, tandems reported greater fluency in co-planning and increased attention to scaffolding strategies such as speaking and writing frames, visualisation, and student-centred tasks. Teachers experienced increased ownership, didactic awareness, and professional satisfaction. Perceived student gains comprised enhanced language output, motivation, and confidence. Constraints included time limitations and uncertainty about long-term structural support.

Conclusion

This study shows that, while extremely important in achieving CLIL's dual focus, teacher collaboration is far from self-evident and requires deliberate attention. In this context, structured