CHAPTER THREE

CLIL IN ENGLISH IN SWEDEN:
WHY, HOW AND WHAT?
STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

It could be argued that it has become increasingly important to ask students what they think about their learning processes (Vigmo 2014). Indeed, students are supposed to be active agents in the processes of their own learning (Skolverket 2011). For the instructor, it is important to cater for, and observe, what the student does (Biggs and Tang 2007), but it can also be of interest to find out what the student thinks (Wegner 2012), as this can highlight issues of interest for research and teaching. In the present study, fifteen CLIL students were asked about their motivations, practices and reflections with regard to studying content through the medium of English as part of two CLIL study programmes, the Natural Sciences Programme and the Social Sciences Programme at three upper secondary schools in Sweden. Surprisingly, despite the difference in lines of study and school environments, student views varied little across the interview data as interpreted by the researcher. After a presentation of the background to the study, a detailing of the aim of the study and a brief account of the theory ensemble and a more detailed account of the research design, the results of the study will be presented, analysed and discussed. The article concludes with a few remarks and indications of potential implications.

Background

As suggested by Kress and Selander (2010), interactional design in teaching and learning has much to offer participants, since it builds on the
collective knowledge base in the classroom. This is more important than ever since teenagers in many parts of the world have grown up with computer games and on-line games of different kinds where, among other things, collaborate practices are common (ibid.). Adolescents are used to being active participants in meaningful communication in different settings and might in many ways find English classrooms not challenging enough (Skolverket 2008). As a result of experience with using English as a lingua franca out of school, the students may have much linguistic competence to bring to the English classroom, but their potential skills are not always being put to use in the English lower secondary classroom (Berggren 2013; Skolverket 2012).

Researchers in multimodal design of learning environments (Kress and Selander 2010) argue that student agency (Jewitt 2009) needs to be taken into consideration. Current researchers in ICT in education see such efforts as a way of bridging the gap between students’ experiences and knowledge acquired outside school and the goals and demands of the curriculum (Vigmo 2014). When teachers aim to find out about students’ cognitions and experiences of the social realities of their learning environments, there is potential for productive learning (Kluge, Krange, and Ludvigsen 2014).

Seemingly, these current theoretical viewpoints could be of interest in a CLIL study design environment.

Aim of study, theoretical framework and research design

The aim of this study is to describe and interpret student perspectives on CLIL study programmes as offered at three Swedish upper secondary schools. More specifically, the focus of the study lies in the following three topic areas: 1) students’ motivation for choosing the CLIL study programme, 2) students’ reported practices in the CLIL programme, 3) students’ reflections on their current studies in the CLIL programme. These areas are to be found among the topics of the interview guide (Appendix). The research questions were formulated in the following way:

1. Why did the students choose to study their 3-year programme in English?
2. How do the students account for their practices studying content through the medium of English?
3. What are the students’ reflections on their studying in the CLIL programme?
The theoretical framework of the present study is a combination of educational theory, language acquisition theory and cognitive theory. This combination of theory from different disciplines is necessary, due to the socio-cognitive nature of the study. First of all, the interview data collected can be viewed and interpreted as learner-cognition data representative of student thinking processes, both as part of different communities of practice (Wenger 1998) and as individuals with their own biographies and trajectories (Vigmo 2014). Moreover, as the students are studying content through a foreign/second language (see Hyltenstam 2004; Josephson 2004; Salö 2010; and Yoxsimer Paulsrud 2014 for further information on the role of English in the Swedish educational context), henceforth FL/L2 (Sylvén and Ohlander 2014), their contributions in the interviews are studied from CLIL (Coyle, Hood, and Marsh 2010; Dalton-Puffer 2011; Llinares, Morton, and Whitaker 2012) and Second Language Acquisition (Doughty and Long 2005; Garcia 2009; Ortega 2009) perspectives. Furthermore, since the students are pursuing their studies in the upper secondary school, studying several different school subjects through the medium of English, each of which is invested with differing importance and values according to the two study programmes chosen, namely, the Natural Sciences Programme and the Social Sciences Programme, subject-didactics is a theoretical field that needs to be attended to to obtain more of an in-depth understanding of the student perspectives (Schüllerqvist and Osbeck 2009; Schüllerqvist 2012). Finally, a multimodal interaction design perspective, allowing for holistic and specific attention, is of interest to the present study. An overview of the theoretical perspectives forming the foundation for this study can be found in Figure 3-1 below.

**Figure 3-1 Overview of theoretical viewpoints: Learner Cognition (LC), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Subject-Didactics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Multimodal design**
The research design of this qualitative, two-year longitudinal study was composed by means of a combination of two major research tools for data collection: focus group interview and semi-structured interview.

As part of the focus group semi-structured interview, an interview guide was used (Richards 2009). Data analysis proceeded by means of qualitative content analysis, in several steps, by means of inter-scorer procedures and a recursive movement between data and theory (Bryman 2013). In the following, in line with Borg’s (2012) recommendations for greater transparency in the descriptions of qualitative research design procedures, the data collection tools, the analysis procedures, and importantly, the participants of the study, the CLIL students, will be introduced and commented on in a fairly detailed manner.

The focus group data collection tool was chosen for two reasons. First of all, the focus group was a way to collect a more representative sample of data. Indeed, the fifteen students interviewed in this study were selected from a student body of altogether ninety students (three different school classes). Secondly, participants’ interactions as part of a group conversation would enable more perspectives and viewpoints than with only one student being interviewed at a time. This decision proved to be both practical and useful. However, since the interviews were not video-recorded, but audio-recorded, not more than five students could be part of the interviews, otherwise the researcher would not have been able to distinguish between different students’ voices. Hence, the small focus group format of 3–5 students was used (Gladman and Freeman 2012).

A semi-structured interview format was chosen for two reasons. First of all, it allowed for flexibility, making it possible for the participants to elaborate further on topics of their interest, or to address other topics than those chosen by the researcher. Secondly, a core structure would make comparison between interviews possible (Bryman 2013).

An interview guide was constructed for use in the semi-structured interview (Richards 2009). It consisted of two parts: direct questions posed in part A serving as background questions and “ice breakers,” and topics in part B requiring more thought and reflection from the participants (see Appendix). For use at the interviews, the interview guide was printed on A4-paper or was presented on a small screen placed in the middle of the table around which all participants were sitting, visible to everybody in the focus group.

The focus group participants consisted of fifteen first- and second-year CLIL students at three upper secondary schools in Sweden. The interviews took place while the students were in their first and second years of upper secondary school, during the first year, Autumn term (school A), and
during the first year, Spring term (school C) and in the second year, Spring term (School B). All students involved studied at community-run schools in three major cities located in different parts of the country. Here, the schools are being referred to as schools A, B and C. Four students were interviewed at school A, six students at school B and five students at school C (see Table 3-1 for an overview of participants). The students were following three different study programmes, which they had applied for and chosen according to their interests, as is the common procedure in the Swedish education system. In contrast to the comprehensive school (which encompasses year 1 to 6 of the primary school and year 7 to year 9 of the secondary school), which is compulsory for all children in Sweden, the upper secondary school, years 10 to 12, is not mandatory. However, about 98% of 9th grade students choose to study at upper secondary school (Skolverket 2012).

The focus group interviews were recorded using an mp3 player and were transcribed into Word files. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, the longest interview being the one in which five students participated.

Table 3-1 Overview of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>4 students</td>
<td>6 students</td>
<td>5 students</td>
</tr>
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</table>

With regard to CLIL language use, there is similarity in schools A and B on the one hand, and a different set-up at school C. At schools A and B about 50% English and 50% Swedish is used in curriculum study throughout the three years of study. In school environment C, more English than Swedish is used in curriculum study.

At schools A and C the students who were interviewed were enrolled in the CLIL Natural Sciences programme. At school B the students were enrolled in two different Social Science-oriented study programmes: the CLIL Civics-Social Sciences programme and the CLIL Economics-Social Sciences programme.

For the purpose of selecting the students, a gatekeeper was identified at each school. It was either the programme coordinator at the school or a teacher. The reason for choosing to place the selection of participating students in the hands of the subject teacher/class mentor/contact person at the school was to cater for an interview situation where students could feel at ease, not feel hurried and also to avoid interference with school work. Consequently, at school A, the students could choose to participate in the interview after a lesson in physics. At school B, the students volunteered
to be interviewed in a focus group after a lesson in economics, and at school C the students could volunteer to participate in the interview after a lesson in history.

The interview material was analysed using qualitative content analysis (Bryman 2013). Throughout the transcription procedure, the interview material was studied intensively and repeatedly, interview after interview, resulting in an overview of the entire material and deep familiarity with each single topic. In the process, connections to theory were made, and also, as it turned out, further theory was called for, as new ways to describe the phenomena that appeared became necessary. In this way, over a long period of time there was an on-going movement between close contact with the material, re-reading of theory previously studied and browsing for new theory. As the material for the present study is part of a somewhat larger study conducted by the same researcher, and as that study is part of a large-scale research venture, investigating Content and Language Integration in Swedish Schools, the CLISS project (see Sylvén and Ohlander 2014 for a more detailed description), data collection and data analysis have been strengthened to some extent by the presence of ongoing analysis of the closely-related research studies of the larger project.

**Results and discussion**

In the following, the results of the analysis are reported with reference to the three research questions.

First of all, with regard to the “Why?” question, students’ reasons mentioned in the interview material collected at the three schools were very similar. The three main reasons for choosing the CLIL study programme in English, instead of the typical Swedish-medium study programme, were: 1) positive attitude to, and interest in, English, 2) perceived usefulness of English for future studies and work in an international setting and 3) view of English as a natural part of daily life, in leisure time activities of different kinds. These results with examples from the student interviews are presented in Table 3-2.
## Table 3-2 “Why?” Overview of students’ motivations for studying content in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group participant data—examples</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| “I chose English because it has always been my favourite school subject” (B3)  
“I am basically in love with English” (C3)  
“Studying in English makes everything more interesting” (B3)  
“I was thinking that I would learn to speak English fluently” (B4) | – positive attitude to English  
– potential interest in CLIL |
| “It's good to start already now to prepare for the future” (C5)  
“I want to work abroad” (B6)  
“I want to work in an international context” (C3) | – tertiary education  
– international career |
| “I use English also out of school, very much. I kind of communicate with people from where I come from. If I can't remember a word in my first language, I use English instead” (B1)  
“I use it [English] very much on a daily basis” (B2) | – English as a lingua franca in on-line settings  
– extra-mural English |
| “It’s a good thing to know as many languages as possible” (B3)  
“Having Swedish, and then having another language in which you are also fluent, is just a bonus” (C3) | – multilingualism  
– multilingual benefits |
| “I chose this line of study because I had heard it would provide the toughest study environment after the natural science programme” (B4) | – study challenge/  
– intellectual challenge |

The above results, in many ways, correlate with the findings regarding choosing the CLIL option as discussed and presented by Lim Falk (2008) and by Yoxsimer Paulsrud (2014).

In Lim Falk’s (2002, 258) student-interview data from the Swedish upper secondary school context in the early 2000s, students speak of choosing CLIL in English to prepare for future studies of Mathematics in Swedish tertiary education, studies that would take place only in English. Similar to Yoxsimer Paulsrud’s results is the finding that students did not talk about learning English; instead they mentioned that their goal—with studying content in English was to “learn English better” (Yoxsimer Paulsrud 2014, 119, original italics).

In addition, the results are in line with research on Extra-Mural English in the Swedish school context (Sundqvist 2009) as well as with reports from the National Agency of Education on Swedish students and their perceptions of studying English in the Swedish school system (Skolverket 2011) in a situation where the daily use of English out of school by
Swedish teenagers and its impact on proficiency with regard to oral and vocabulary skills has been studied. Berggren (2013) addresses the challenge that this continuous contact with out-of-school English poses for EFL teachers in Sweden.

Indeed, in a report by the National Agency of Education (2008), it is shown that one fourth of the pupils in the ninth grade of the comprehensive school feel that they do not have the opportunity to show their English language skills in school (Skolverket 2008).

Moreover, one further reason for students’ choosing to study content through English concerns multilingualism. The students speak of the notion of being multilingual, of the benefits of being able to speak more than one language well. Efforts made by authorities to encourage and facilitate plurilingualism in European society (European Commission 1995, 2003, 2008) and multilingualism in education (García 2009; Hyltenstam and Lindberg 2013) can be interpreted as being mirrored in the student responses.

In line with Yoxsimer Paulsrud’s (2014, 1) findings, where students were decisive that being proficient in Swedish only would not be sufficient, students in the present study (e.g., C3 in Table 3-2 above) express interest in a more advanced multilingual competence.

Furthermore, a motivational factor mentioned by one of the students at school B is the high challenge posed: “I chose this line of study [Social Sciences programme: editor’s note] because I had heard it would provide the toughest study environment after the Natural Sciences programme” (B4). This student refers to the notion of the Natural Sciences programme as challenging, known to the student to be a line of study for those who want to put a lot of time and effort into their studying. However, since this student is primarily interested in Social Science subjects rather than Natural Science subjects, the CLIL Social Science programme emerged as a potential choice.

To conclude the first set of findings, the students’ reasons for choosing the CLIL study programme in English show that the students think in terms of usability of the language, both in the short-term perspective—communication through English in various social media here and now, and in a long-term perspective—preparing for future studies and jobs in an international context.

A few students refer to the multilingual nature of the programme as a motivational factor, or the highly challenging study environment, as a reason for their choice of study programme.

With regard to the “How?” and the “What?” questions, the students’ reports on their practices, and their reflections on their studying in the
CLIL programme, are mostly related to positive aspects of learning. English is referred to as a facilitator, as a scaffolding resource. These results, with examples from the interviews, can be found in Table 3-3, below.

Table 3-3 “How? What?” Overview of students’ practices and reflections with regards to studying content in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group participant data—examples</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Oh, ... we are listening so carefully” (A1)</td>
<td>– receptive skills in English are experienced to be highly functional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It is easier to concentrate when it is in English” (A2)</td>
<td>– English as scaffolding resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“when it is in Swedish you can get lost because you are forgetting that you are listening” (A3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“On the Internet there are more available sources in English than there are in Swedish. Because it is like everybody from the whole world is writing, but those who write on the Swedish site are only Swedish” (C3)</td>
<td>– access to Internet sources in English as part of the study programme are experienced to be positive—both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[When it is] only English, it can be difficult at times” (A1)</td>
<td>– curriculum study in a 100% English study mode is found to be challenging, especially with regard to students’ own production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“[When you are being asked] to reflect and such. Then it is more complicated in English” (A2)</td>
<td>– reflective tasks are challenging in English, especially when students are asked to interact spontaneously</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Firstly, the students reflect on their listening (carefully as instruction is carried out in English). The students report that they find it easier to listen and concentrate when the lesson takes place in English. They emphasize that they listen in a more focused and attentive way. This is especially the case when students refer to listening to Mathematics instruction. Compared to listening to a lecture in Swedish, they account for listening in English as a more conscious process. Clearly, for these students, English as a mediating tool is highly functional.

Another area mentioned by the students has to do with use of sources on the Internet. Students acknowledge that studying through CLIL provides them with access to wider study input. The comments by students about the increase in use of materials on the Internet may be linked to the
History syllabus for the upper secondary school where critical literacy—the student being able to take a critical stance and make informed choices with regard to materials from different sources—is a major learning goal (Skolverket 2011). By studying in a programme where sources in English are used on a regular basis, the students report that they get better opportunities to gain diverse perspectives on areas of study and they also speak of the greater challenge of having to apply a critical perspective on materials also from less familiar contexts.

The third main area reported by students has to do with the students’ productive competences in English. The students report that, whereas listening in English is perceived to be easy and even facilitative of studying, compared to studying in Swedish, those situations where students have to use English to express their views, to reflect on matters being studied, especially in spontaneous situations in the classroom, are perceived to be highly challenging. These comments are made by all students in all the interviews, irrespective of year of study, study programme or school. When students in their first year at upper secondary school refer to instruction, and active participation, in the Social Sciences, they more often than not speak of the difficulties, especially in classrooms of areas of content, where 100% English is being used.

When relating these results to research carried out in the field of second language acquisition over the years, there is a clear correlation. Interaction, especially in second language classrooms, has long been defined as highly challenging, calling for additional effort on the part of the designers of such learning environments in order to ensure success in the learning of content subjects (Burns 2012; Doughty and Long 2005; Gibbons 2009; Schleppergrell 2004). Consequently, in school subjects, such as history, religion and social studies, where student activities have much to do with analysis and reflection, with expressing opinions, discussing and exchanging ideas on complex content concepts, the challenge can be particularly high (Schüllerqvist 2012; Magnusson 2011), something that the students report and reflect on in the interviews.

**Summary**

The findings of the present study encompassed topics such as students’ motivations for choosing to study their upper secondary programme in a CLIL context as well as their reflections regarding their on-going experience studying through the medium of English. Interestingly, the interpretation of the material collected from fifteen students at three different schools, A, B and C, showed very similar results.
First of all, the students’ reasons for choosing the CLIL programme were related to their positive attitude and deep interest in English, and the possibility offered to be able to improve their competence in the target language. Long-term planning for future studies—in Sweden or abroad—and for a future career in an international environment also figured among the motivational factors. A few students referred to the multilingual qualities of the programme or the high challenge involved in studying content in an FL/L2 as their motivation for choosing the CLIL programme. All in all, the results regarding the students’ motivation to study in a CLIL environment show much resemblance across interviews. Thus, with regard to student motivation for studying content through the medium of English, the picture that emerges is fairly homogeneous.

Concerning the students’ on-going CLIL experiences, interestingly, students at school A refer to English as a scaffolding resource for learning. They say that “it is easier to concentrate when it is in English” (A2) and that their listening to curriculum content mediated through English makes it easier to be attentive and “listen carefully” (A3). These findings differ from those presented in Lim Falk’s research study from the early 2000s, where, on the whole, students described their CLIL experience as a difficult and problematic practice rather than a facilitating approach to learning (Lim Falk 2008). Could it be that the English language proficiency of both students and teachers has developed considerably throughout this past decade (taking into consideration the increased exposure to English via digital tools)?

There are, however, also dilemmas experienced by the students with regard to studying content in English that are partly connected with the types of tasks that require students to analyse and discuss as part of classroom interaction. Especially difficult are those situations where spontaneous output by students is requested, in particular when this is supposed to occur in a whole-class format. In this respect, curriculum documents, such as the new syllabi for upper secondary school 2011, could play a role, since there is more of a demand for students to be able to actively make use of, and act as representatives of, the disciplinary discourses in their learning pursuits, e.g. history literacy is part of the syllabus for History (Skolverket 2011).

Research on interaction in FL/L2 educational settings reports on such complexities and also offers guidelines for planning and realizing lessons (e.g., through planning for active participation) through preparing and practicing turn-taking in a conversation, through means for keeping a conversation going and building on the content of the previous speaker.
Other ways to meet the challenges of content study in a second/foreign language can be by means of a genre pedagogic approach.

As more and more empirical research studies are undertaken, there will be further instances of research against which the results of this study can be compared and interpreted. Hopefully, these results can be useful to students, teachers, parents, researchers, politicians or school authorities in similar content-and-language integrated learning environments.

**Conclusion**

This study has reported on CLIL students perspectives of studying content through the medium of English at upper secondary school: their motivations for choosing the programme in the first place (“why?”) and some initial experiences and reflections on practices (“how and what?”).

The present analysis of results has only briefly looked into the perspective of the student voices. The student perspective will be explored more extensively and thoroughly as part of further publications related to the CLISS project (see Sylvén and Ohlander 2014 for more detailed information). A possible implication of the present study could be an interest in, and a positive view of, involving students in the design of CLIL study programmes, possibly both at lesson and programme level.

Although generalisations cannot be made, the purpose of this small investigation has been to provide some insight into the views and experiences of a selection of upper secondary CLIL students. Hopefully, the study can be inspirational in some way, with regard to methods, or provide a thought-provoking impulse to be taken into consideration while planning and designing CLIL.

**References**


Appendix

Interview guide.
Semi-structured focus group interview with students (the topics in italics were addressed in the present study).

Part A: Background questions

1. *What study programme have you chosen?*
2. How many schools have you previously studied at?
3. Have you got previous experience from studying content through the medium of English?
4. *Why did you choose to study your study programme through the medium of English?*

Part B: Topics

- *Studying content through the medium of English – possibilities and constraints.*
- National Curriculum for Swedish Upper Secondary School, Gy11
- *Organisation of studies.*
- *Encountering and dealing with school-related complexities/challenges.*
- Study of languages other than English.
- *Study technique/Strategies.*
- Other topics related to current studies?