

# 'I am lost': mainstream school teachers and CLIL

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The successful implementation of new policies and reforms usually depends highly on the context. This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the strengths and limitations of CLIL implementation within the Kazakhstani mainstream school context, drawing upon both global and local perspectives. Through this analysis, the paper identifies the specific challenges that hinder effective CLIL implementation in Kazakhstan. Based on the discussion, this paper identifies the emergent problem of the disconnect between theoretical tenets and practical realities of CLIL implementation in Kazakhstan. It concludes by offering a series of evaluative recommendations specifically designed to bridge this gap and enhance the effectiveness of CLIL within the Kazakhstani context.

## Introduction

Kazakhstan's language education policy is a unique case of how a multilingual and multicultural country can balance the competing demands of language preservation and globalization. After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan embarked on a process of Kazakh language revitalization while retaining Russian as a language of inter-ethnic communication. As a result, Kazakhstan has offered Kazakh- and Russian-medium education, emphasizing the importance of both languages. In 2008, Kazakhstan adopted a trilingual education policy based on evidence from European and Asian contexts. This policy mandates the integration of Kazakh, Russian, and English as compulsory subjects and employs them as languages of instruction for certain disciplines (Fierman, 2013). It is a unique response to the global spread of English-medium instruction (EMI) and the Kazakh government's desire to improve the quality of education and promote global competitiveness (Karabassova, 2020)

To mitigate the process of EMI implementation, Kazakhstan has introduced Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) as a scaffolding strategy in secondary schools.

According to Coyle et al. (2010), CLIL is a pedagogical approach that incorporates two educational goals: learning a foreign language (English) and using that language in learning content in the same classroom lesson. Thus, since 2008, CLIL has been implemented in the curriculum of STEM classes, such as biology, chemistry, physics, and computer science (Karabassova, 2022). Initially, the trilingual education model was piloted in experimental schools, including

20 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools (NIS). Further, in 2018, without evaluating the results from the experimental schools, the Ministry of Education and Science decided to implement the policy across all mainstream schools, effective from the 2018-2019 academic year (Irsaliyev et al., 2017).

Thus, as the implementation of CLIL in Kazakhstani mainstream schools is considered an under-researched field, this paper seeks to fill this gap. It analyzes the overall strengths and weaknesses of CLIL within this context, with particular attention to the challenges faced by mainstream schools. Additionally, the paper aims to develop contextually suitable proposals for improving CLIL implementation in the mainstream school context.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of the CLIL Implementation in Kazakhstan

During these years, a number of qualitative studies have attempted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of CLIL implementation in the Kazakhstani context. Existing studies revealed three main strengths of teaching through the CLIL scaffolding strategy. Firstly, CLIL can positively impact cognition because students simultaneously focus on content and language (Mehisto et al., 2023). Secondly, CLIL can boost language learning progress as it aims 'to ensure more learners are motivated to learn and use other languages in the future' (Coyle, 2013, p. 245). The third strength is that within the employment of CLIL, teachers are becoming more flexible and modifying their teaching techniques, "taking initial steps of transitioning from traditional didactic approaches to a constructivist perspective" (Bedeker et al., 2023, p. 12).

However, it is essential to note that the implementation of CLIL in Kazakhstani mainstream schools was a mandated change, which is often characterized by a lack of resources and a rapid pace (Clement, 2014). Thus, due to a lack of preparedness and rapid implementation, CLIL has shown more weaknesses than strengths in the Kazakhstani context. The main weaknesses associated with CLIL implementation in the Kazakhstani contexts are teacher training and expertise, teaching materials, teachers' and students' language proficiency, curriculum cultural sensitivity, and poor communication between policymakers and teachers.

Regarding teaching training and expertise, implement-

ing a trilingual policy in Kazakhstan has created a pressing need for science teachers who can teach in English. In response, several in-service teacher training centers and programs, such as Orley and Ustaz, have been established with the collaboration of NIS. However, these professional developmental programs have been found ineffective for several reasons. Firstly, these teacher training programs last for a short period of time (Karabassova, 2020). Karabassova (2020), who qualitatively explored CLIL teachers' professional development in the Kazakhstani context, presents statistics given by the Ministry of Education and Science. According to the statistical data, between 2016 and 2020, 5,922 Kazakhstani teachers completed short-term teacher training programs. However, only 818 of them could teach STEM disciplines in English. Later, Konyssova et al. (2022) reported that more than 8,500 in-service teachers had completed these courses in the previous three years. This suggests that the focus of these short-term courses is on quantity rather than quality. Secondly, a number of qualitative studies revealed that these teacher training programs do not provide teachers with appropriate methodologies on how to teach CLIL lessons. For example, Shabdenova (2021) revealed that these programs only focus on teaching English in order to improve teachers' language proficiency without paying attention to methodological support. As a result, teachers have faced challenges in balancing teaching a content subject and integrating English as a language medium of instruction (Mehisto et al., 2023). Moreover, these courses overlap with teachers' work at school, which causes teachers' emotional burnout (Shabdenova, 2021). Based on these facts, it can be concluded that many teachers do not know how to integrate language and content into their lessons effectively. It can lead to difficulties in planning and implementing CLIL lessons and providing appropriate scaffolding and support for students.

The second weakness is a lack of teaching materials and methodological support designed for CLIL classes, considering the Kazakhstani context's unique historical background. It is important to note that Kazakhstan is one of the postcolonial countries where a series of educational reforms have shaped teachers' ideologies and pedagogical methods. After gaining independence, due to the implementation of Renewed Content of Education (RCE) there was a shift from academic scholar to more learner-centered curriculum ideology (Yakavets et al., 2022). It took the teachers a decent amount of time to get used to these educational changes. However, this change was followed by another change, the implementation of CLIL in STEM classes. Thus, to deal with such changes, teachers tried to upgrade their teaching methodology and design new

lesson plans by combining their former funds of knowledge with the knowledge and skills required by a new policy (Bedeker et al., 2023; Karabassova & Orazbayeva, 2023). Thus, all these challenges caused a new phenomenon, innovation overload, when teachers were not given enough time to process new changes and felt exhausted by different new policies.

Low language proficiency is the third weakness that appeared due to the urgent implementation of CLIL and insufficient time for English proficiency improvement. Teachers took compulsory language courses based on Basic English (Karabassova & San Isidro, 2020). Consequently, due to low language proficiency, teachers inevitably started to use L1 alongside English. In addition, teachers' insufficient English proficiency has caused an extra workload, as they have to learn new words with two or more meanings and deal with a massive flow of information (Mehisto et al., 2023). As a result, these difficulties detrimentally affect teachers' emotional statements, quality of work, and classroom practice of CLIL.

Fourthly, the current curriculum does not adequately address the needs of students with multilingual backgrounds. Kazakhstan's diverse population includes individuals with varying proficiency levels in Kazakh, Russian, and English. The current CLIL approach often assumes a monolingual environment, failing to provide adequate support for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Therefore, it is evident that a lack of cultural sensitivity in designing and developing a language curriculum for secondary education is another weakness.

The last weakness is ineffective communication between policymakers and teachers. In Manan et al.'s study (2023), some teachers mentioned that "One educational authority visits and says one thing, another one visits and says something completely different. There was not one standard developed; we all acted in a way we thought was correct" (Manan et al., 2023, p.13). It is clearly seen that there is a failed communication between educational stakeholders. One of the consequences of this poor communication is that Kazakhstani mainstream school teachers still do not understand the primary purpose of integrating CLIL into the secondary school curriculum. As a result, most teachers perceive CLIL as a teaching approach requiring them to use students' L2 and L3 (Karabassova, 2018) and do not pay enough attention to students' language progress.

### **The Disconnect Between Theory and Practice**

The weaknesses presented above indicate the disconnect between theory and practice, which is the main problem in Kazakhstani secondary education. While the Kazakhstani education system has embraced CLIL in principle, translating these principles into effective classroom practices remains a significant challenge. One of the primary factors contributing to this disconnect is the inadequate preparation and support provided to teachers. Teachers often lack the requisite pedagogical knowledge and skills to integrate CLIL methodologies into their daily routines seamlessly. This deficiency is further exacerbated by the scarcity of CLIL-specific resources and materials, making it challenging for teachers to locate suitable and engaging content for their students.

Furthermore, language proficiency issues pose a persistent hurdle, as teachers may not have the fluency necessary to deliver instruction in the target language effectively. Additionally, the curriculum's lack of cultural sensitivity can hinder the meaningful integration of CLIL practices, as it fails to represent the diverse backgrounds and experiences of Kazakhstani students adequately. Finally, the ineffective communication between policymakers and teachers impedes the development of cohesive and effective CLIL strategies. Without clear guidance and support from policymakers, teachers are left to navigate the implementation of CLIL with limited resources and expertise.

### Recommendations

To effectively address the complex issues of CLIL classroom practice in Kazakhstan, firstly, we would like to introduce and explain the approaches that were taken into consideration from the following studies (Bedeker & Kerimkulova, 2023; Clement, 2014; Fullan, 2001; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Manan et al., 2023) and then give some recommendations.

The first approach emphasizes considering teachers' existing knowledge (Bedeker et al., 2023), experience, and beliefs before implementing CLIL, as it impacts teaching in CLIL classrooms. The second approach highlights the importance of involving teachers in introducing educational changes, as they will implement the new policy in the classroom (Fullan, 2001). The third approach emphasizes considering teachers' funds of knowledge (Bedeker & Kerimkulova, 2023) in introducing educational reform, as borrowed policies may not work in all contexts. The fourth approach stresses the significance of research and research-based evidence (Manan et al., 2023). The fifth approach suggests providing teachers with development time, and supporting them with professional development programs (Clement, 2014). The last approach

recommends giving teachers authority support and reducing their workload (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

Based on the approaches from the studies mentioned above and other existing studies (De Backer et al., 2017; Graves, 2006; Heugh et al., 2017; Mynbayeva & Pogosyan, 2014; Raud & Orehova, 2022; Wedin, 2010), we would like to offer the following recommendations. Firstly, we suggest developing well-designed training to help teachers balance language and content knowledge. This training should include several components, namely inclusive language teaching methods (Kazakh, Russian, English, and minority languages), cultural and local sensitivity training, teacher-supportive and collaborative workshops, multicultural education, multilingual education, pedagogical translanguaging, and inclusive pedagogy. Secondly, we propose developing good-qualified language courses and language immersion workshops to improve teachers' language proficiency. The courses should focus on scientific translanguaging and on language that is related to STEM subjects. Thirdly, we would like to propose the local context integration courses focusing on teacher ideologies and cultural competence. This course should include sessions on a smooth transition to new ideologies and developing a stable and well-defined framework that minimizes the frequency of changes.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of CLIL implementation in the Kazakhstani context, exploring mainstream schools in depth. Additionally, this paper identified the main issue hindering the successful implementation of CLIL in mainstream schools: the disconnect between theory and practice. More importantly, this paper presented some recommendations to address the revealed issues in CLIL implementation.

CLIL originated in 1994 and was announced by the European Commission to promote a new form of language and content education (Coyle et al., 2010). Nowadays, CLIL is implemented globally in different contexts, and Kazakhstan is no exception. This critical review has shed light on both the potential strengths and notable weaknesses of the implementation of CLIL in the Kazakhstani context.

Although CLIL has been embraced as an effective method to improve language skills and content knowledge in other contexts simultaneously, its employment in Kazakhstan has experienced numerous challenges. In this paper, we indicated several strengths, such as positive impact on cognition, im-

provement of language skills, motivation to learn new languages, and teachers' re-evaluation of their teaching methods. However, the dominance of weaknesses, including lack of resources, inappropriate methodologies presented to teachers, and workload, made implementing CLIL difficult and unsuccessful. The analysis of CLIL implementation in Kazakhstani mainstream schools, with a focus on its strengths and weaknesses, revealed a crucial disconnect between theoretical frameworks and practical application. This disconnect underscores a pervasive challenge for all educational stakeholders: while Kazakhstan strives to emulate global educational trends and expedite internationalization efforts, it yet struggles to establish adequate conditions for implementing new policies and reforms.

Based on the findings from previous studies, we proposed recommendations that may help address the challenges and weaknesses. Firstly, teacher training should be developed, considering language teaching inclusivity, cultural and local sensitivity, collaborative workshops, and scientific-pedagogical translanguaging. Secondly, great attention should be given to language learning courses and their quality so teachers will feel more confident in their language skills. Thirdly, there should be adequate and smooth transitions from one approach to another, minimizing the frequency of changes.

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