PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS ON CONTENT AND LANGUAGE INTEGRATED LEARNING (CLIL) IN A VOCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING INSTITUTE

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Abstract - This study reports on students' perceptions of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in a Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) Institute. Students' perspectives in the use of first language (L1) or second language (L2) in content lessons are explored. The findings reveal that students generally agreed that English competence is essential for further studies and employment, nevertheless, students preferred L1 to L2 as the Medium of Instruction (MOI) in content lessons and they preferred mixed code learning and teaching materials. As for the question on whether learning content subjects through English could enhance student learning, differences in perceptions are found. Drawing on the findings in this study, the pedagogical implications for integrating content learning and English language learning are also discussed.

Index Terms - Content language integrated learning (CLIL), Medium of Instruction (MOI), Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET).

I. INTRODUCTION

Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is an umbrella term which refers to "any dual-focussed educational context in which an additional language, thus not usually the first foreign language of the learners involved, is used as a medium in the teaching and learning of non-language content" [17]. Under this approach, "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" [5]. The emphasis of CLIL is that, content subjects are taught with and through a foreign language, not only taught in that foreign language[9]. The focus of teaching is the content subject, not the language [21]. The CLIL lessons are usually scheduled as content lessons and taught by content teachers, whereas the foreign language lessons normally continues as a subject in its own and taught by language specialists [6].

According to Coyle (2002), another distinctive feature of CLIL is its emphasis on the integration of both content learning and language learning in the same lesson, which aims at an equal development of proficiency in both content subjects and the language in which students are taught [4].In order to provide more effective integration of content and language,effective collaboration of content and language teachers is recommended[16].

Positive impacts of CLIL are found in various studies including increased English exposure, increased motivation and learner self-esteem [3], [5], [7], [13]-[15], [20]. Successful CLIL implementation can provide students with ample opportunities to use a foreign language by increasing their exposure to that foreign language. They will also be given motivating contexts of their own content subjects to use the foreign language. Although positive impact of CLIL on student learning has been indicated in various studies, there are other studies report contrary evidence [1], [2],[19]. For example, in Seikkula's study (2007), CLIL students demonstrated a low self-concept in foreign languages although they had a strong motivation to learn [19]. In Kong's study (2008), two longitudinal quantitative studies of late immersion in Hong Kong which indicated negative learning outcomes were cited[12].

CLIL has become a very much discussed topic and there are a number of publications pertaining to the field, however, the use of CLIL in the context of the Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) is yet to be fully explored.

This study reports on students' perceptions of CLIL in a VPET Institute. It looks into the perceptions of students in learning trade-specific content through English. Perspectives of students in using first language (L1) or second language (L2) in content lessons are explored. Understanding students' perspectives is important as it allows teachers to better understand students' needs and the challenges they faced in the learning process [14], [18]. It may provide the opportunityto explore the reasons for both positive and negative perceptions of CLIL. Drawing on the findings in this study, the pedagogical implications for integrating content learning and English language learning are also discussed.

II. METHOD

The data for this study was collected from a VPET institute in Hong Kong. The 30 participants were students from three diploma programmes (S1-S30). All of them have Cantonese as their first language (L1) and were new to CLIL. Before implementation of CLIL, the teaching and learning materials of the trade lessons (content lessons) were written in Chinese and the content lessons were delivered in Cantonese.

Students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a 6-point Likert scale questionnaire

before semi-structured interviews. The measurement of percentage showed the typical perceptions of students.

The semi-structured interviews were used to gain insight into the experiences and views of students on learning content subjects through English. Open-ended questions were used in the interviews to explore perceptions in detail and allow the statistical data be supported with qualitative responses. Representative quotes from interviews were extracted as supporting information.

Classroom observations were conducted to observe the implementation of learning activities in the content lessons.The classroom observations served to provide supplementary information about implementation of CLIL and triangulating data collected from the interviews.

III. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

According to the final report of the language education review issued by the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research (SCOLAR), students' low level of English proficiency seriously affected learning in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions [22]. In the workplace sector, there is also an increasing demand for English proficiency from the workforce in Hong Kong [11].

The institute in this study offers vocational and professional education and training for youths above Secondary Three to acquire generic and trade-specific knowledge and skills for further studies and employment.

To enhance students' English competency for further studies and employment, the institute piloted an initiative aimed to provide students with an opportunity to experience how English could be meaningfully applied through trade contents and to enable students to articulate common trade-related problems in simple English and apply the skills in learning trade content.

One of the deliverables of the initiative is to develop teaching and learning materials with reference to the CLIL approach and implemented in selected trade lessons (the content lessons).

The subject content teachers, language teachers and instructional designers teamed up to develop the teaching and learning materials. English teaching and learning materials were developed for selected topics in the vocational modules. In the process of lesson planning, both content learning and language learning aspect of the topics were considered to incorporate trade-related terminology and sentence pattern in English as appropriate. On the other hand, the English language lessons were also tailored to prepare students for the kinds of specialised written and oral English language used in content subjects.

A pilot implementation was carried out in the Diploma in Vocational Education programmes. Feedback collected from students regarding learning content subjects through English is used for refining development and implementation in the next stage.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data yielded from semi-structured interviews and questionnaire survey were set for analyses to provide insight on students' perceptions of CLIL and the pedagogical implications.

Most of the students (70%) reported that they understood the CLILlessons alright. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. How well do you understand the content lessons teaching through English?

	Don't understand at allUnderstand totally					
Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of students	2	4	3	13	5	3
Percentage (%)	7%	13%	10%	43%	17%	10%

1 = Don't understand at all and 6 = Understand totally

All of the students preferred Cantonese to English as the MOI in lesson and they all preferred mixed code learning and teaching materials. Referring to students' comments, the inclination of Cantonese instruction in the lessonscould be caused by the additional cognitive demand of learning content subjects through English:

- Many engineering concepts are very difficult and abstract. It is very difficult to understand even the content is taught in Cantonese. It is even more difficult to comprehend the meaning in English. (S13)
- I can better understand the theory when the content is taught in Cantonese. (S14)

Language anxiety is another factor affecting students' preference on Cantonese instruction. According to Hood cited in Coyle(2010), students may experience language anxiety, especially in early stages of CLIL [5]. Wegner (2012) found that students may avoid discussing complex topics when interacting with peers or asking questions in the lessonsbecause of inadequate language proficiency [24].

Similar challenge was pointed out by students in the interviews:

- Classmates were more quite in the lesson if it was conducted in English. I would be afraid to discuss with my peers or response to teacher's question. The learning atmosphere was not as good as in Cantonese-medium lessons. (S4)
- I would feel free to ask question in Cantonese if I don't understand but I would be afraid to ask question in English. (S21)

As for the perceptions on whether learning content subjects through English could enhance student learning, differences in perceptions were found. Half of the students agreed that learning content subjects through English could enhance their learning while the other half disagreed. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Learning content subjectsthrough English enhance your learning.

	Strongly disagreeStrongly agree					
Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of students	5	8	2	10	5	0
Percentage (%)	17%	27%	7%	33%	17%	0%

1 = Strongly disagree and 6 = Strongly agree

However, when taking into consideration the learning and teaching strategies employed in the lessons, significant differences in students' perceptions were found. For lessons with more interactive activities and group works, a majority of students (85%) agreed that learning content subjects through English could enhance their learning. The results areshown in Table 3. Whereas for lessons with less interactive activities and without group work, only a small number of students (19%) reported that they considered learning content subjects through English could enhance their learning. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 3. Learningcontent subjects through English enhance your learning (Lessons with interactive activities and group works[1])

	Strongly disagreeStrongly agree					
Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of students	0	1	1	9	3	0
Percentage (%)	0%	7%	7%	64%	21%	0%

1 = Strongly disagreeand 6 = Strongly agree

[1]Learning and teaching activities used include lecture,teacher's demonstration, spelling game, group word matching game, group practice and group class assignment.

Table 4. Learningcontent subjects through English enhance your learning (Lessons with less interactive activity and without group work[2])

	Strongly disagree Strongly agree					
Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6
No. of students	5	7	1	1	2	0
Percentage (%)	31%	44%	6%	6%	13%	0%

1 = Strongly disagree and 6 = Strongly agree

[2]Learning and teaching activities used include lecture, teacher's demonstration andindividual practice. Various studies have shown that successful CLIL often included interactive activities and group work [8], [10]. [14], [23]. Our findings are generally consonant with the findings of these studies.

In this study, lessons in which students have positive perception of CLIL, have in common a more interactive and collaborative approach in learning and teaching. Students considered interactive activities and group work useful for their learning in the CLIL lessons and might helped to ease their language anxiety. Two of the students shared their views:

- I can ask myclassmates for help when working on group activities if there were English terms that I didn't know or I didn't know how to answer the questions. (S11)
- The games and group activities were motivated. Even though my English was not good, they made me more eager to answer questions and more engage in the learning. (S8)

According to a review conducted by Scott and Beadle (2014), the greatest gain for CLIL learners is that they possess larger vocabularies of technical and semi-technical terms [20].Most of the students in this study also acknowledged the benefit of CLIL in leaning and using trade-related vocabularies relevant to their fields of specialisation.

Two of the students provided the following illustrations in the interviews:

- Many IT terms and software interface are English. It would enhance my learning if the content lessons were delivered through English. (S29)
- Many Manufacturer Manual are written in English. Learning and using trade-related vocabularies are useful for my study and future employment. (S12)

Apart from increased exposure to English-using environment and expansion of trade-related vocabulary, a majority of students (80%) in this study agreed that English competence is important for further studies and employment.Two of the students shared their views in the interviews:

- Learning trade-related content through English helped toprepare me for further study in Higher Diploma programme. I believe I would adapt to the study more easily if I have developed the

English competence before embarking on Higher Diploma study. (S30)

- I may not need to use English in the workplace right away, but English is important to get better jobs and promotion. (S14)

The perceived benefits of CLIL in preparing for further studies and employment were recognised by students.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to look into students' perceptions of CLIL. All of the students in this study preferred Cantonese to English as the MOI in the lessons and they all preferred mixed code learning and teaching materials. Despite these preferences, different perceptions of CLIL were found in this study. Some students experienced challenges in the CLIL lessons and have negative perception of CLIL, whereas other students agreed that learning content subjects through English could enhance their learning. They saw the value of CLIL in terms of learning and using trade-related English vocabularies in application context of their programmes of study and perceived benefits of developing English competency needed for further studies and employment. The positive perception of CLIL was especially high if the lessons included more interactive and collaborative activities. The findings reveal that pedagogical considerations including cognitive demands of the content subjects, language anxiety of students, the use of interactive and collaborative activities in the lessons, and connection to the application contexts to students' programmes of study are crucial in successful implementation of CLIL.

The findings presented in this paper are based on the views of a sample of 30 students from three diploma programmes in a VPET institute. There are limitations on the small sample size. The present study only briefly looked into the perceptions of students. Further study on how well students perform in the CLIL subjects is essential for evaluating CLIL outcomes. However, it is hoped that the findings of this study would provide insights to teachers by expanding their current understanding of CLIL in the VPET context in Hong Kong.

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