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Learner perceptions of a national CLIL innovation in foreign languages in the Republic of Ireland (5474)

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This paper describes a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) curriculum innovation to improve motivation in language learning undertaken in the Republic of Ireland through a national pilot in transition year (TY) in 2021–2023 for learners aged 15–16. Here we extract data from part of an empirical evaluation study focussing on the research question, what are learner perceptions of learning through CLIL approaches in a national pilot module? A CLIL module on the theme of Fair Trade based on geographical and mathematical skills and content was taught through either French, German, Italian or Spanish. Models varied between schools—most undertook the module by teaching two to three lessons per week within a six-eight week period. A minority taught through this approach throughout the year. Results are presented from learner focus groups in three diverse school contexts and an online learner questionnaire drawn from all participating learners in these schools. Group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was undertaken based on the Process Motivation Model for investigating CLIL in the classroom (PMM). Analysis and discussion include the positive impact on a large majority of learners and practical implications around the nature of learning a linear school subject in TY. Lessons learned include the need to extend this innovation to the wider curriculum, and the need for further professional learning for teachers. Constraints due to the nature of TY year and the module are acknowledged.

KEYWORDS

CLIL, learner perceptions, foreign languages, Republic of Ireland national pilot, transition year secondary education

1 Introduction

Interest in the potential of CLIL, “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language” (Coyle et al., 2010:1), has grown in predominantly anglophone contexts in the face of declining numbers studying foreign languages and an increase of migrant learners arriving with little or no English (Lanvers et al., 2021). Alternative approaches such as CLIL are emerging because learner engagement and gains have been shown to increase where language development is occurring in the context of learning meaningful age-relevant

curricular content through CLIL (e.g., Tedick, 2020, xiv). Significant learner gains have been reported in established CLIL projects in other predominantly Anglophone contexts such as the UK contexts e.g., (Bower, 2019a; Bower, 2019b; Coyle, 2011) and in Australia (Cross and Gearson, 2013) in the face of high attrition of language learners (Lo Bianco and Slaughter, 2009). In the Republic of Ireland CLIL does not yet form part of the national curriculum and no specific teaching qualification is required (Leavy et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is included in both the *Action Plan 2018–2022* of the Government's *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030* (Government of Ireland, 2010), and in *Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017–2026* (Languages Connect) (Department of Education and Skills, 2017). Although there have been calls for the implementation of CLIL within Irish medium education to maximise the language learning outcomes of students in Irish e.g., Mac Gearailt et al. (2023), these are yet to be widely addressed.

In Ireland, Irish is a compulsory subject throughout primary and secondary education, and although not mandatory, 80% of learners study a foreign language in the first three years of secondary education and 76% in the final two years. From 2025, all children will learn a foreign language in primary school (Bruen, 2023). In the Irish context, CLIL is defined in Languages Connect as “the teaching of non-language content through the medium of a second or subsequent language—for example, teaching maths through Irish or physical education through French” (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 23) and features as an action under Goal 1, “Creating a more engaging learning environment.” Here, objectives include “[exploring] the potential of using Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to support and reinforce language learning” (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 9). Merits of the CLIL approach noted include “greater exposure to the target language without overloading the curriculum” and “to supplement the formal teaching of languages and to provide students with effective opportunities to practise their new language skills outside the language classroom” (ibid). Key actions related to CLIL in Languages Connect are being delivered by Post-Primary Languages Ireland (PPLI), a unit of the Department of Education providing expertise and support for foreign languages in Ireland.

The pilot curriculum innovation described and evaluated in this paper, is part of PPLI's delivery of these key actions.

Citing a National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) paper (Little, 2003), “Languages in the Post-Primary Curriculum: a discussion paper,” the Languages Connect Strategy questions the level of “communicative proficiency” Irish students have at the end of their schooling in both Irish and foreign languages. It indicates employers' satisfaction rates of graduates' language skills ranged from 28 to 46% in the National Employers Survey (Insight Statistical Consulting, 2015). The quality of teaching and learning of foreign languages is highlighted as a “critical success factor” for foreign languages in education (Department of Education and Skills, 2017, p. 20). CLIL is featured in key actions of the strategy as one solution to address these shortcomings. However, in common with other predominantly anglophone secondary classrooms contexts, such as England, the issue of lack of target language competence by content teachers is identified by e.g., Coyle et al. (2023, p. 1034), who note that, despite “constant innovative, pioneering work by teachers, educators, and researchers,” conditions for developing CLIL are limited partly due

to the “paucity of linguistic competence amongst subject teachers in [languages other than English].”

For this initial pilot, recognising that a relatively small cohort of teachers in Ireland possess both foreign language and content subject expertise, PPLI brought both foreign language and subject teachers together to design a CLIL module appropriate for all language teachers—those with and those without a content subject discipline specialism. The Fair Trade theme relates to both the education for sustainable development (ESD) content, relevant to all teachers, and to Ireland's “ESD to 2030 Implementation Plan” (Government of Ireland, 2022). This includes building capacity of educators across the education system for “systematic and comprehensive ESD” and to action 3.1i to “incorporate ESD themes into PPLI CPD for MFL teachers” (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 12). Hence, developing a module on Fair Trade allowed for the incorporation of meaningful and universally applicable content that aligns with national educational priorities while also being accessible to language teachers who may not have expertise in specific content subjects. This approach has the advantage of supporting the broader implementation of CLIL for foreign languages whilst also enhancing the relevance and engagement for both teachers and students by connecting language learning with globally significant themes.

1.1 Transition year (TY)

The government's foreign language strategy dictates transition year (TY), an optional one-year school programme for learners aged 15–16, following national assessment of the first three years of secondary education in Ireland, as the location for the CLIL pilot. The year is usually designed around giving students life skills, incorporating a work experience programme. There are also many activities and local and foreign trips available to the students, aimed at giving a more experiential aspect to learning. All schools have the option of offering TY and designing their own programme to suit the needs of its students. In the 98% of schools who currently offer the TY programme, uptake from students is around 74% (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022). This flexible curriculum provides space in which to try out innovative approaches to learning such as CLIL. The Fair Trade module therefore respects the TY curriculum principle of “interdisciplinary work” helping “to create that unified perspective which is lacking in the traditional compartmentalised teaching of individual subjects” and allowing “teachers of different subjects [to] collaborate in the development of a very stimulating learning experience for pupils” (Department of Education and Skills, 1993, p. 4).

1.2 The CLIL Fair Trade module

A flexible 6-week CLIL module on Fair Trade, with content links to geography and maths, was designed by content and language specialists together with PPLI for implementation in TY.¹ Students build geographical, mathematical and linguistic skills

¹ <https://ppli.ie/teaching-and-learning/clil-resources/>

through learning about equitable practice in the banana trade and its impact on producers' lives in a range of countries. They work toward writing and presenting a case study about a Fair Trade product and producer in a country of their choice via six units: an introduction to CLIL; breakfast habits and preferences; the origins of food items; bananas; Fair Trade and a research project. Adaptable, detailed online resources including teacher support documents, student worksheets, and PowerPoint presentations, were made available (ppli.ie/teaching-and-learning/clil-resources) in the main curricular foreign languages taught in secondary schools: French, Spanish, German, and Italian ([Post-Primary Languages Ireland, 2020](#)). Videos of experts teaching key mathematical and geographical concepts were available for non-specialist language teachers. PPLI provided professional learning for teachers, in the form of a one day in person training event and three online evening sessions, comprising an introduction to CLIL pedagogical approaches, to the 6 units of the module and to available resources. 26 teachers from 24 post-primary self-selecting schools took part in this training. 100% of participants had no prior training in CLIL and 87% no CLIL teaching experience. Models varied between schools—most undertook the module by teaching two-three lessons per week within a six-eight week period. A minority taught through this approach throughout the year. Inevitably, the nature of the TY content led to some revision of prior learning of key concepts in maths and geography. Where these sections of the content were not new to learners, repetition of learning may have affected their views.

1.3 Evaluation aims and scope

The aim of the wider evaluation study undertaken by Sheffield Hallam University at the end of the 2-year pilot 2021/22 and 22/23 was to explore the potential of CLIL to create a more engaging learning environment to motivate learners and thereby reduce attrition ([Bower and Rutgers, 2023](#)). The amount of CLIL undertaken during the pilot module and teachers' prior knowledge varied. One school had been implementing CLIL prior to the pilot and continued throughout TY, others had as little as six lessons of CLIL in the module. This paper reports findings from a case study consisting of learner focus groups and an online learner questionnaire in three diverse school contexts drawn from 12 participating schools who were implementing the pilot module during the second half of 22/23 to explore the research question: "what are learner perceptions of learning through CLIL approaches in a national pilot module?" Teachers' perspectives from the full sample of schools, including the challenges they faced, will be reported elsewhere.

2 Methodology

Researchers visited a lesson to contextualise focus group interviews and subsequently undertook focus groups of 6–8 students in a purposive sample of three schools selected by PPLI to reflect the range of contexts specified by the researchers, including different socioeconomic settings, teacher prior knowledge of CLIL and module duration. School 1 had implemented CLIL throughout

the year; schools 2 and 3 were undertaking a 6–8 week module. Group discussions were recorded and transcribed. An online survey of 18 open questions was completed by 56 students across these 3 schools, representing the students involved in the lessons, and analysed through Qualtrics. Data were collected during the final 7 days of the school year when regular timetables tend to be disrupted. End of year activities and accessibility therefore also contributed to the selection of the students participating in the onsite evaluation activities.

Semi-structured focus group and survey schedules were drawn from themes in the Process Motivation Model framework for investigating CLIL (PMM) ([Bower, 2017](#)). The questions were set out in themes of learning environment, learner engagement and learner identity. Instruments had been informed and tested in other contexts [e.g., [Bower \(2019a\)](#)] and questions adapted for relevance to, and ease of comprehension in, this Irish context, before being reviewed by expert peers. To support timely survey completion, where appropriate, common responses were itemised and included an "other" category, allowing students to tick relevant options if they wished.

Findings were analysed against the themes of learning environment, learner engagement and learner identity drawn from the PMM framework, with other themes and sub-themes added as they emerged during the analysis. Descriptive statistics from the questionnaire were treated as case study data and incorporated into the thematic, interpretive analysis applied to the overall data sets from the three schools. The analysis was supported by repeated reading of the data and reviewed by expert peers. The Ethical regulations with the requisite safeguarding procedures were followed ([British Educational Research Council, 2018](#)).

3 Key results and analysis

Data from the interviews are presented and analysed under the three themes of learning environment, learner engagement and learner identity.

3.1 Learning environment

The data analysis revealed that 80% of learners found CLIL very or mostly enjoyable. Students from the three case study schools perceived the CLIL learning environment as both fun and facilitative to their learning, emphasising several key features associated with integrated learning that fostered positive emotions and supported students' engagement and perceptions of their learning. These are summarised in [Figure 1](#), which presents the results to the survey item "What do you like about being in the CLIL Fairtrade module?" and provide insight into the particular aspects of the CLIL lesson that underpinned students' positive experiences with CLIL in the three case study schools.

This figure highlights, that a large majority of students feel learning through CLIL is "fun," (second largest response). Students seemed to enjoy learning language in an integrated way, opportunities "to speak the language" and "to learn more about target language countries," more than they enjoyed the challenge of learning subject content through a second language.

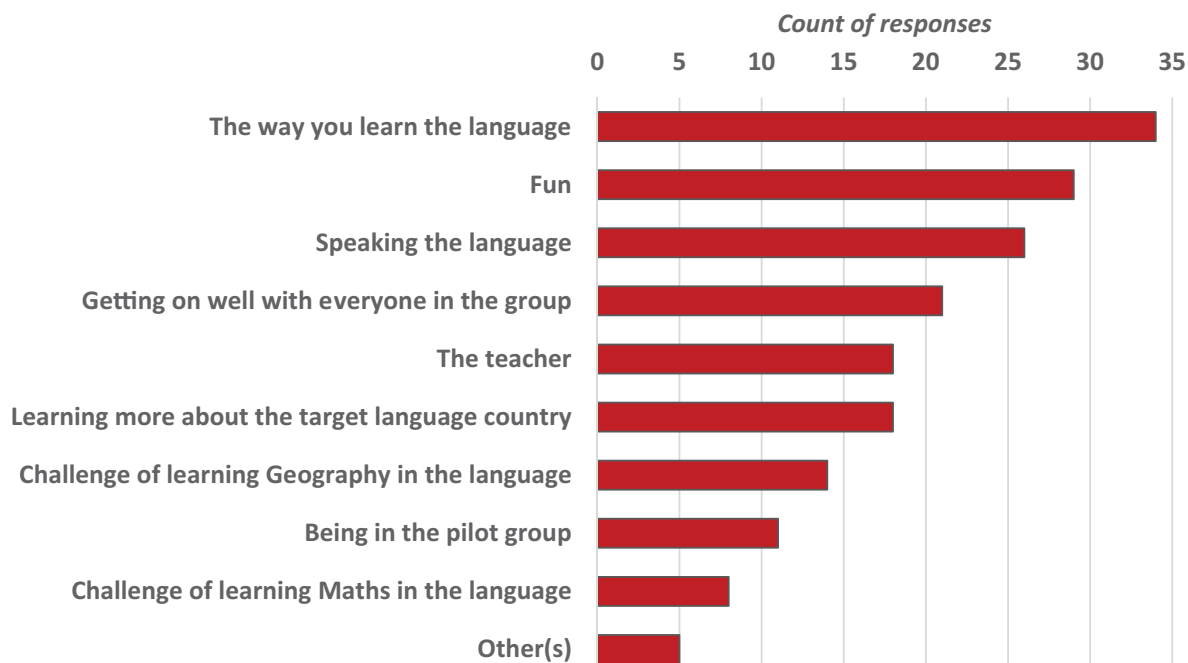
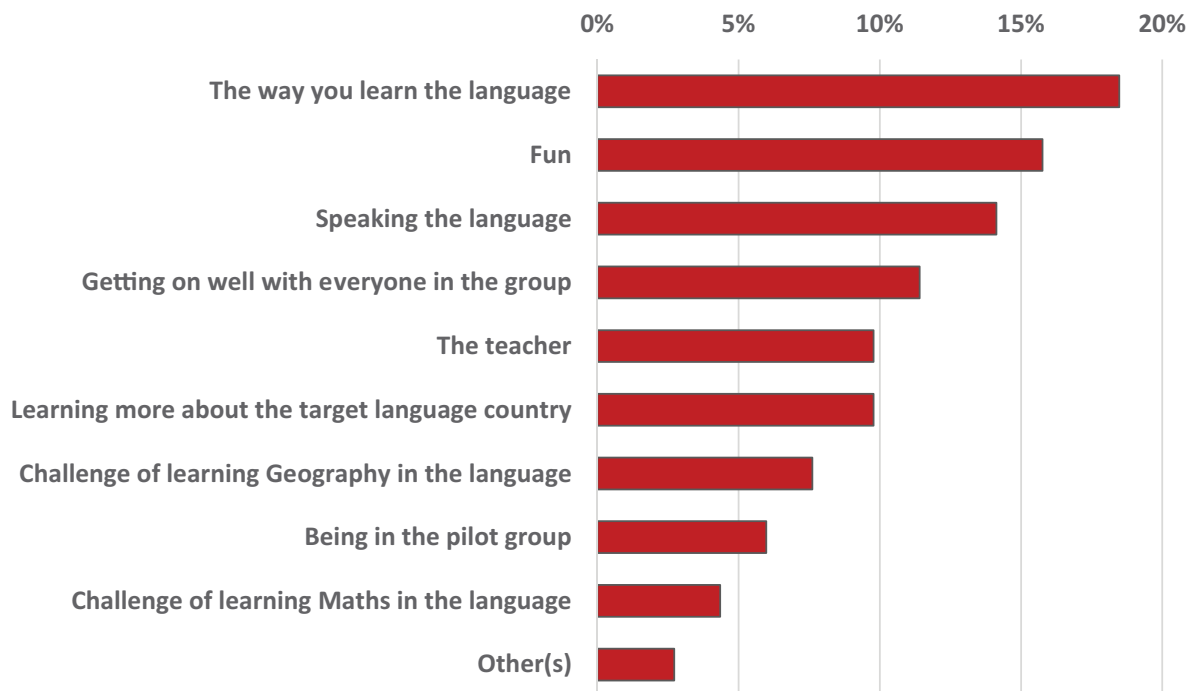


FIGURE 1 Students' (n = 56) responses to survey item "What do you like about being in the CLIL Fair Trade module?"

Students' responses also suggest that students' enjoyment of CLIL lessons is influenced by the nature of interaction within the group, which promotes co-operative learning. Data from the focus groups indicate that the emphasis that students place on "getting on well with everyone" within their enjoyment of the CLIL lessons correlates with the higher levels of meaningful interaction and

hands-on learning associated with CLIL lessons as compared to students' normal lessons, both for foreign language and for maths and geography.

Findings from the student focus groups and responses to the open questions on the survey, confirmed these patterns. Students consistently described the language learning process as "different,"

“more fun,” and “easier.” When asked what they didn’t like and if, for example, it seemed too much, students responded

“No, I wouldn’t say so [it feels too much], because it’s like a really different way of learning that doesn’t feel just like [usual] French classes, because it’s a really different way of learning, so it doesn’t really even feel like a proper class even, because it’s so different than sitting there listening to a regular class. It’s like actually doing a lot of stuff, so it doesn’t even feel like another class” (Student, FG, school 1).

“I don’t really think that there is anything I don’t like. It’s just learning a language but you just feel more in depth with it I guess, like you get more absorbed.” (Student, FG, school 2).

The students describe an absence of “pressure” when learning language through CLIL, even though they perceive they are still learning:

“No, like it feels different. It feels more relaxed I think. But like there is no pressure to actually learn stuff off, but you’re still learning. It’s like learning but you’re not really realising in a way” (Student FG, school 1).

The reasons for this were found to relate to CLIL approaches as compared to those experienced in their normal FL lessons:

“R1: Like if you do it the normal way it is more hard, more pressure on you, but this way you can learn like a freer way and not for everyone to stress whether they are right or anything. It is just like more free that way.

Q: Okay, so you’re not being corrected as much?

R2: Yeah.

R3: Yeah

Q: Would you normally get corrected in French?

R1: Yes.

R2: Yes, a lot.

R3: A lot

R4: It is more of a relaxed environment, which is better” (Student FG, school 2).

Q: How hard do you think that you work in CLIL Fair Trade lessons?

R1: Probably not as hard as we should!

R2: Not as hard as if it was an actual grammar lesson.

R1: I feel like you’re not writing down as much.

R1: It’s not as much thinking as like a regular grammar lesson where you’re taking down loads of notes and you are trying to remember it all.

R3: I would say that it was less demanding.

R4: Yeah.

R3: It all kind of comes together in your head because you’re watching a video and you have the worksheet and it is all helpful. But in the regular lesson you’re on your own, kind of thing. But when you’re working in a group and stuff, so I

would say it was less, but it’s just kind of with others and stuff (Student FG, school 3).

These extracts demonstrate that the correction of errors in the target language and the focus on grammar is different in a CLIL learning environment compared to a FL learning environment. It also foregrounds an apparent contradiction: less insistence on correct target language use in the CLIL context results in greater gains in language learning. Although the study did not test for improvements in students’ language skills, the study provides strong evidence for an improvement in students’ perceptions of their language skills. The extracts also strongly suggest that much of students’ improved confidence in their language learning skills relates to the ease of learning associated with the CLIL approach, where “it all kind of comes together in their heads.”

However, it should be noted that students’ perceptions of the CLIL learning environment as “less pressured” were likely affected by the fact that the CLIL module took place during transition year, which students describe as not having “as many exams and tests” (Student Focus Group, school 3) and in contrast to a normal school year where grades are paramount.

Learners raised concerns around the location of CLIL in TY. Students who missed lessons due to other TY activities found it difficult to make progress and those able to attend all lessons found additional repetition to support absentees equally frustrating, demonstrating the unsuitability of TY year for CLIL progression in CLIL school subjects such as languages and maths that are taught in a linear way. In their recommendations for other schools for the development of CLIL students recommended moving CLIL to a different school year “because (in TY) we are just having so many breaks and stuff” and “[in TY] you are not as focused on education and school.” I feel like you would learn more from it if you were doing it in a more education-based year (student FG, school 2).

3.2 Learner engagement

The overall positive learning environment that CLIL provided to the case study students was found to strongly influence students’ engagement in the dual learning task. The data analysis revealed different underlying motivations for students’ engagement in the CLIL lessons, all of which interacted with the CLIL approach in a reinforcing way. Firstly, the data confirmed that students were willing to work hard in the CLIL lessons, with the majority of students stating that they put in good or maximum effort for the CLIL Fairtrade lessons, both in class and at home (see [Figure 2](#)).

While it is clear not all students professed to working hard, the focus group data found evidence that, for those students who did, their levels of effort appeared to be related to CLIL approaches:

Q: Do you work harder in CLIL than in other lessons?

R1: I don’t work hard in lessons, period.

R2: Well yes, because you have to research it and then translate it, so it is definitely working harder (Student FG, school 2).

R1: Geography. I feel like in geography, and I’m not going to lie, I did geography for the junior cycle [age 14–15] and I was really bad at it, I was really bad at it, but I feel like learning about it through French kind of helped me focus more actually on the

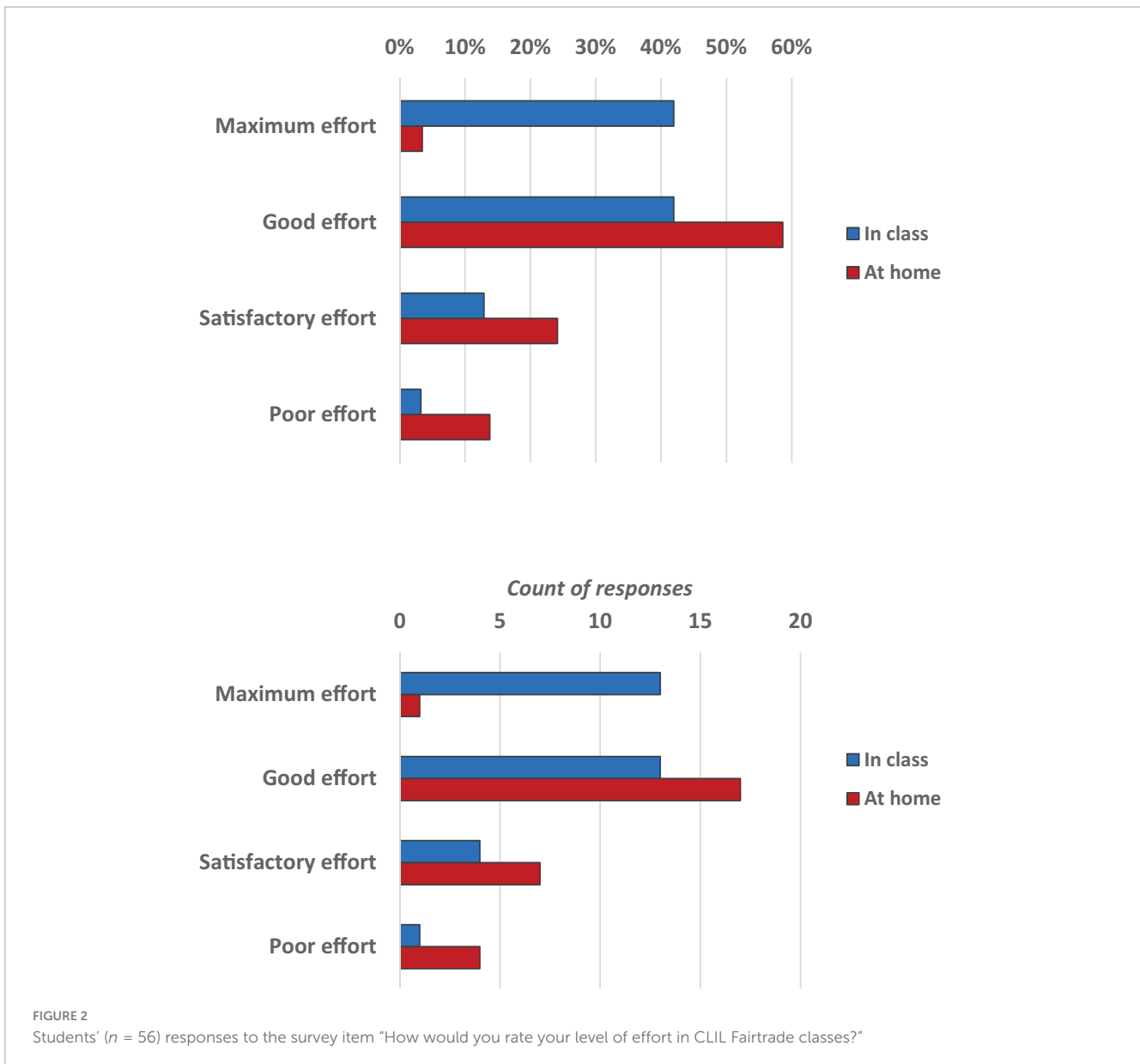


FIGURE 2 Students' (n = 56) responses to the survey item "How would you rate your level of effort in CLIL Fairtrade classes?"

geography because I feel like in geography class I was bored and we were doing the same thing, but I feel like using French to combat that boredom kind of helped.

Q: So why was it boring, was it just too easy, not sufficiently challenging?

R2: I didn't feel like really challenged and I felt that all the stuff was very repetitive but I feel like learning through French you are doing both things. You are trying to understand the French but also understand the geography, which I think kind of helps with that, because I was understanding more, because I was actually interested. I was like "What does that mean?" instead of it just being like this is here and that is there and rocks (Student FG, school 1).

These extracts show how the integrated learning activity and dual learning task require students to work harder, while simultaneously keeping them more focused. When placing these statements alongside their views that the CLIL environment was

more relaxed and different from "sitting down and learning stuff off," it seems that students do not need to make the effort to motivate themselves to work hard, but rather that the integrated learning activities simply require this and more naturally engages students in their learning. The extra challenge provides the right stimulation for students to stay on task and appears to deepen their learning for both language and content.

In contrast, students from all schools surveyed spontaneously compared learning language through CLIL approaches to the traditional language teaching in both foreign languages and Irish. They perceive the focus in foreign language to be on learning vocabulary and grammar in preparation for exams. Students regret not being able to speak Irish, particularly after so many years of learning it. Asked what they thought about learning Irish, students responded:

R1: I like it. I wish I loved Irish but I don't.

R2: I don't love Irish.

- R3: No, but I wish I was really good at it to have a conversation but instead we're learning poetry. [student FG, school 2]
- R4: A lot of people in Ireland think how Irish, the language, is taught is bad. . . I feel like even though we live in Ireland, and we should be able to speak our native language, we only understand it and there is no real help to understand it (student FG, school 1).

3.3 Learner identities

Students demonstrated awareness of the development of both their self-concept and mastery of the language. The findings already foregrounded that the students felt CLIL lessons offered “having a different way to learn stuff” (student survey), which was perceived as “easy to remember” (Student FG, school 1). While some students described this in relation to the learning of CLIL French being different and easier, for others, learning through French helped them to concentrate and engage with the subject matter. Beyond students' enjoyment and engagement in learning through CLIL, the analysis also found evidence to say that the CLIL approach, and this different way of learning, affects students' understanding of themselves as learners more broadly.

A salient theme within students' statements on their learning through CLIL, was that of developing a confidence and ability to learn from context:

- Q: And anybody else, the skills that you think that you're learning?
- R: Trying to translate from context. Like instead of having or knowing everything we can break down sentences like we did in the class and try to understand them even though we might not be the best at it.
- Q: So understanding key words.
- R: Yeah, and then putting like the rest of the sentence together through context, stuff like that (student FG, school 2).
- Q: And do you think that having learnt this way will be of any benefit in the future?
- R1: I think that it's good for comprehensions, like picking up key words and stuff, like sustainable development.
- R2: Helps you remember the words.
- Q: Helps you remember the words.
- R3: Yeah, having a context around them.
- R1: Having to figure it out yourself (student FG, school 3).
- Q: What kind of skills do you think that you're learning by using French to learn? What kind of learning strategies? You talked about working in groups but what sort of learning strategies do you think you're using?
- R1: Like key words, like definitely picking out words.
- R2: Yeah, making sense of the sentence, even just from a word or just from the whole paragraph, kind of thing.
- R3: Yes, that was kind of what I was going to say
- Q: You were going to say the same, making sense of things.
- R1: Yes. It is helping you understand, like if you don't understand a full sentence, but you only understand some words, you pick up the context clues and it is kind of using your brain

a lot more to pick up the context and learn the new words by knowing the other words (Student FG, school 3).

While most of these extracts relate to students describing learning vocabulary and other aspects of language from context, there is a strong sense that they have developed a broader transferable skill of “listening out for learning” and “having to figure it out yourself” as life-long learning strategies.

Despite a relatively short period of learning through CLIL, students reported a strong sense of achievement, with an underlying feeling of being capable of mastering a second language:

“I think like everyone's fluency has probably improved this year, and especially for me I think listening. Like I can definitely understand what the teacher is saying and when we went to the Alliance [Francais], and . . . they were speaking to us in French and I could actually understand for the most part what they were saying” (Student FG, school 1).

- Q: What do you think that you've achieved through being in the Fair Trade module? Is there an example of something that you're proud of?

R: Being able to speak French (student FG, school 3).

Both these extracts foreground the students' experience of developing particularly strong oral language skills (listening and speaking), this being intertwined with a sense of having developed “meaningful” French that can actually be used in conversation, as previously mentioned. At the same time, these extracts also reveal a strong sense of accomplishment in relation to language, which these learners do not appear to have experienced before. Data from the student survey, in turn, indicate that the students also felt they had made good progress in reading and writing in French as a result of participating in the CLIL module, although these outcomes were less frequently mentioned in the focus group interviews. These findings foreground that students discovered a new-found confidence in their language learning abilities through participating in the CLIL module.

Asked how students might advise other schools about trying CLIL one student responded,

“If they are on the fence then they should definitely do it because the best way to learn a language, I think, is by immersing yourself in the language and the culture and speaking it. Not just learning it from a whiteboard. So I feel that is how we learn in Irish . . . but CLIL is so much different and you just pick up so much more and you enjoy it” (student FG, school 1).

3.4 Learner needs

Despite emphasising the advantages over the disadvantages, students' reporting on their experiences with the CLIL Fairtrade module also showed clear awareness of several key challenges that students face when learning content and language simultaneously:

- R1 “Students might not know all the words and it takes time to get used to speaking a language” (student survey).
- R2 “We don’t get the language structure which is important” (Student survey).
- R3 “You would need to do easier topics and questions than in English” (student survey).

Students foreground that, because of the dual learning task, the pace of CLIL lessons needs to be different to that of content lessons taught in English. It takes time for students to become familiar and comfortable with the high levels of interaction in the additional language. There are also higher levels of new vocabulary and language structures that students require for understanding and to participate in content learning, particularly at the start of a new unit or topic. This can pose threats to understanding that need to be monitored and addressed from the beginning to ensure all students can continue and follow along in the learning. Students also indicated that they need support in establishing understanding AND support in understanding language structure. The greatest risk to good quality CLIL is that there is an urge to decrease the cognitive challenge by “doing easier topics” or “easier questions” to support language learning. Dumbing down or simply repeating the curriculum in the foreign language needs to be avoided and can be overcome by increased scaffolding and planning.

4 Discussion

In contrast to the prevailing demotivation in FL learning in contexts where the target language is not global English (Bower, 2023), overall, student perspectives toward the CLIL Fair Trade module were overwhelmingly positive. This corresponds with findings from other qualitative studies of CLIL in the UK and other predominantly anglophone contexts such as Australia (Cross and Gearson, 2013). However, the context of TY where the curriculum is more flexible and there is an objective to innovate should be taken into consideration. A further factor in its success is the nature of a national pilot. Here a wide range of resources and support were provided by experts and schools. As teachers self-selected to opt in, they may have been more enthusiastic and therefore a potentially unrepresentative sample. That said, 80% of learners found CLIL very or mostly enjoyable, resonating with those from the UK based Italic Study (Coyle, 2011) where positive attitudes toward CLIL experiences were reported by approximately two thirds of learners, and 84% preferred CLIL lessons to FL lessons. Findings also demonstrate that pilot students understood CLIL, benefitted from the approach and were able to articulate significant learner gains. The depth of student perspective is particularly striking in the two schools in which learners were coming toward the end of the shorter 6–8 week module. Although not assessed here, elsewhere large quantitative studies demonstrate the potential of CLIL for equitable outcomes e.g., Lorenzo et al.’s (2021) study shows CLIL students seem to obtain equally high results regardless of their socioeconomic status in contrast to non-CLIL peers. Furthermore, Coyle et al.’s (2023) and Rutgers et al. (2020) studies illustrate how approaches such as CLIL have the potential to support those who need to learn English as an Additional Language

(EAL) in order to access the curriculum—particularly pertinent in Ireland, given issues for migrant learners as well as wider society created by the rapid growth of migrants to Ireland (e.g., Darmody et al., 2016).

A large majority of learners welcomed the CLIL approaches they experienced. Learners spontaneously compared CLIL approaches to teaching and learning “the normal way” that is, to the more traditional grammar/vocabulary approaches they experience in FL and Irish. However, the location of TY for CLIL was questioned and students were keen for the approach to be extended across the curriculum and particularly to foreign languages and to Irish. Practical implications around the nature of teaching a linear subject, where progression is particularly negatively impacted by absence from lessons, would also support the imperative of such a move. Students emphatically demonstrated a desire to learn languages but found it difficult to engage with traditional approaches and perceived themselves to be less engaged and to make a disappointing lack of progress in subjects where these approaches were employed. Such a move would raise professional learning issues for teachers. The teacher in school 1 had previous experience of CLIL, but for teachers in the other two sample schools this Fair Trade module represented their initial encounters with teaching through CLIL approaches. Whilst experimenting with CLIL through a pre-prepared unit may be a practical solution, it does take planning and design away from the individual teacher for their specific learners. If learning is to be designed by teachers (Paniagua and Istance, 2018), Coyle et al. (2023) demonstrate, that developing understanding, skills and expertise in planning, designing and teaching through CLIL approaches takes time as well as external support. For CLIL to be further developed in the Irish context, there is a need for further professional learning so that teachers are empowered to develop CLIL approaches in new curriculum content, relevant and age-appropriate to their own learners and context. This is true even within the context of the TY year.

In Ireland, there are synergies with Australia in the way in which CLIL approaches are emerging. Unlike England, where CLIL evolved from the bottom up—led by language teachers but where government support for CLIL stopped short of policy (Bower, 2021), in Victoria Australia, there is clear government policy linked to schools, teacher education, teacher associations and professional learning (Cross and Gearson, 2013). Similarly, in Ireland, CLIL has been actioned by PPLI, a unit of the department of education, in line with national policy. In common with Australia, in these initial phases at least, it is also predominantly being grown by language teachers and with governmental support. The systemic approach to the introduction of CLIL adopted in Australia beginning in primary school (progressing to secondary) has enabled CLIL to develop relatively quickly with a common understanding of key touch stones and principles (Cross and Bower, 2018; Bower et al., 2020). In Ireland, the heritage languages of the New Irish and the introduction of FL into the primary curriculum from 2025 present further possibilities for developing CLIL. These include the potential to grow CLIL from primary years upward into the secondary phase following aspects of the Australian model and thereby ensure positive learning experiences and engagement from the outset.

5 Conclusion

The Irish context, in common with other predominantly anglophone contexts where the target language is predominantly a foreign language other than English (LOTE), presents distinctive challenges for bilingual approaches including demotivation, leading to a consequential attrition in FLs uptake post compulsory age e.g., Lanvers et al. (2021); Mills and Tinsley (2020). However, given existing governmental policy and support, these encouraging learner perceptions of the innovation of the initial national pilot, indicate that Ireland has unique opportunities for further developing and expanding CLIL to enrich learning even beyond FLs, across the curriculum.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Sheffield Hallam Institute of Education Ethics Committee. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

KB: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project

administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. DR: Data curation, Formal analysis, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. LQ: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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