

Content and Language Integrated Learning as a Strategy for Enhancing Speaking Skills: A Narrative Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for foreign language learners, who often understand written and spoken texts but struggle to communicate fluently and accurately. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has been introduced as an instructional approach that combines subject learning with the use of the target language, creating authentic opportunities for oral production and interaction. This narrative review examines how CLIL contributes to speaking development, drawing on empirical studies conducted across different educational levels and contexts. Findings from the reviewed research show that CLIL consistently enhances fluency and vocabulary. Learners in CLIL programs tend to produce longer stretches of speech with fewer pauses and demonstrate broader lexical repertoires, particularly in academic vocabulary. Evidence on grammatical accuracy and pronunciation is more mixed: while learners often achieve intelligibility and communicative effectiveness, errors persist without explicit language support. Communicative competence emerges as a strong area of growth, as CLIL classrooms provide space for negotiation of meaning, turn-taking, and pragmatic use of language. The review also underscores the importance of implementation factors. Scaffolding, feedback, teacher training, and assessment practices significantly influence outcomes, while program intensity, duration, and learner motivation further shape the development of speaking skills. Although results vary across contexts, the overall evidence indicates that CLIL provides a productive environment for developing oral proficiency, offering learners both the need and the opportunity to use language meaningfully in the pursuit of content learning.

Keywords: *CLIL, oral proficiency, speaking skills, fluency, communicative competence*

INTRODUCTION

Developing oral communicative competence has long been a challenge in foreign language education. Learners often acquire receptive knowledge through reading and listening but continue to struggle with speaking fluently and accurately in real communicative contexts (Lee et al., 2023). Traditional EFL instruction tends to emphasize form and comprehension over production, leaving students with limited opportunities to engage in extended spoken interaction. As a result, many learners can understand English but remain hesitant or inaccurate when required to speak.

CLIL has been introduced as a response to this challenge by combining subject content learning with the use of a foreign language. Instead of treating language as an isolated subject,

CLIL engages learners in using the target language to access knowledge, solve problems, and communicate ideas. This integrated approach creates natural opportunities for oral production and interactive communication (Lai, 2024a). The expansion of CLIL across diverse contexts in Europe, Asia, and Latin America has shown its potential to enhance language skills alongside content learning, and research has documented this expansion, supported by studies of implementation and teacher development (Nguyen et al., 2024; Querol-Julián, 2025).

Empirical research indicates that CLIL benefits speaking development in multiple ways. Meta-analytic and review studies indicate that productive oral skills improve more under CLIL than in conventional language classes (Lee et al., 2025; Pittas & Tompkins, 2024). Learners in CLIL settings often demonstrate greater fluency, with smoother, more sustained oral production than their non-CLIL peers (del Puerto & Lacabex, 2017; Martínez Agudo, 2019). Lexical development is also a consistent outcome, as exposure to academic content in English provides access to subject-specific vocabulary and promotes richer lexical choices (Olsson, 2025). While gains in grammatical accuracy and pronunciation are less consistent and often depend on the intensity of exposure or the presence of explicit language instruction (Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2024; Rallo Fabra & Jacob, 2015), improvements in communicative competence are widely reported (Martínez Agudo, 2020; Villabona & Cenoz, 2022). These findings suggest that CLIL fosters not only linguistic development but also the ability to use language effectively in academic and interactive contexts.

The purpose of this narrative literature review is to synthesize empirical findings on how CLIL supports the development of speaking skills. By drawing on recent studies employing a range of research designs—including meta-analyses, longitudinal studies, and classroom-based investigations—this review highlights the potential of CLIL to promote fluency, lexical growth, interactional competence, and overall communicative effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

METHOD

This narrative review is based on published research examining the relationship between CLIL and speaking skills. The focus is on empirical studies reporting oral outcomes, such as fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, and communicative competence. Sources were identified through searches in major academic databases, including ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect, using combinations of terms such as “CLIL,” “English Medium Instruction,” “oral proficiency,” “speaking skills,” and “communicative competence.”

Studies were included if they investigated CLIL or EMI programs and reported results on learners’ spoken performance. A variety of designs were considered, including experimental and

quasi-experimental studies, longitudinal research, comparative analyses of CLIL and non-CLIL groups, and classroom-based investigations of implementation practices. Reviews and meta-analyses that synthesized findings across contexts were also consulted.

The analysis was conducted narratively rather than statistically. Findings from individual studies were grouped thematically, with attention to the types of oral skills measured, the assessment tools employed, and the reported outcomes. This approach enables comparisons of evidence across diverse contexts and highlights patterns in fluency, accuracy, lexical development, pronunciation, and communicative competence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This review draws on studies conducted in primary, secondary, and higher education settings. Although the educational stages differ, the evidence is synthesized around common themes in speaking development—fluency, accuracy, vocabulary, pronunciation, communicative competence, and implementation factors—allowing patterns to be observed across contexts.

Fluency and Vocabulary

Research consistently shows that CLIL offers learners more opportunities for extended oral practice, which often leads to gains in fluency. In studies comparing CLIL and non-CLIL groups, students in CLIL classrooms tended to produce longer stretches of speech with fewer pauses or hesitations (del Puerto & Lacabex, 2017; Martínez Agudo, 2019). These findings are echoed in large-scale reviews, which report that fluency is one of the skills most likely to benefit from CLIL settings (Lee et al., 2025; Pittas & Tompkins, 2024). The emphasis on meaning-focused communication and the need to discuss subject matter seem to provide conditions that encourage more natural and sustained oral production.

Vocabulary development has also been highlighted as a recurring outcome of CLIL instruction. Learners are exposed not only to everyday language but also to subject-specific terminology, which enriches their lexical repertoire. Studies in upper secondary education demonstrate that CLIL learners acquire a broader range of academic vocabulary than peers in traditional EFL programs (Olsson, 2025). Similar evidence has been found in primary contexts, where exposure to content-driven tasks contributed to more diverse word use and greater lexical sophistication in learners' oral output (Lai, 2024a, 2024b). These results underline that CLIL provides access to language that might not typically be encountered in regular language classrooms.

However, improvements in vocabulary are not limited to size alone; they also involve the flexibility with which learners use words in oral communication. Comparative research shows that

CLIL students tend to employ vocabulary more effectively in discourse, making their speech more precise and contextually appropriate (Martínez Agudo, 2020). This suggests that lexical growth in CLIL is not only quantitative but also qualitative, reflecting deeper engagement with language through content learning. In addition, sustained exposure over time appears to consolidate lexical gains, pointing to the importance of program duration and intensity (Lázaro- Ibarrola, 2025; Merino & Lasagabaster, 2018).

Taken together, the evidence indicates that fluency and vocabulary are two areas of speaking ability that benefit most reliably from CLIL instruction. The combination of meaningful practice, authentic communicative needs, and exposure to academic discourse creates conditions where learners can both speak more fluidly and expand their lexical range. While the extent of these benefits varies with factors such as program intensity and instructional design, the trend across diverse contexts is clear: CLIL provides consistent advantages, helping learners speak with greater ease and richer vocabulary.

Accuracy and Pronunciation

Findings on grammatical accuracy in CLIL contexts are less uniform than those on fluency or vocabulary. Some longitudinal studies suggest that while CLIL provides more opportunities to use the language, this does not automatically translate into more accurate speech (Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2024; Martínez Agudo, 2019). Learners often communicate successfully but still display recurring grammatical errors, particularly in verb forms and morphosyntactic structures. This indicates that CLIL's focus on meaning and content, while valuable for communication, may not adequately address form to ensure accuracy.

Comparative studies support this observation. For example, research on Spanish CLIL learners shows that although they gain in fluency, their grammatical accuracy does not always surpass that of non-CLIL peers (Lázaro- Ibarrola, 2025; Merino & Lasagabaster, 2018). One explanation is that CLIL classrooms tend to prioritize content understanding and communicative effectiveness, with limited explicit correction of grammatical errors. This creates conditions where learners can be understood but continue to produce non-target-like structures over extended periods.

Pronunciation outcomes in CLIL are also mixed. Studies examining Spanish-Catalan learners, for instance, report that while CLIL improves intelligibility, it does not necessarily reduce foreign accent or lead to more native-like pronunciation (Rallo Fabra & Jacob, 2015). Azpilicueta-Martínez (2024) similarly finds that additional CLIL exposure helps learners perform oral tasks more confidently, but it does not eliminate pronunciation difficulties. These results suggest that

without targeted instruction or phonetic training, gains in pronunciation remain limited, even in CLIL environments.

Evidence indicates that CLIL supports communicative effectiveness rather than error-free speech. Learners often convey meaning successfully, but improvements in accuracy and pronunciation depend on complementary pedagogical strategies, such as explicit focus on form, corrective feedback, or phonological training (Ballinger, 2021; Milla & García Mayo, 2021). In this sense, CLIL alone is not a guarantee of grammatical precision or native-like pronunciation. However, it provides a platform for developing such skills when supported by appropriate instructional practices.

Communicative Competence

One of the most consistent findings in CLIL research is its contribution to the broader notion of communicative competence. Because learners are expected to use the target language to understand and discuss subject content, they are placed in situations that require negotiation of meaning, turn-taking, and pragmatic skills. Several studies confirm that students in CLIL settings develop stronger interactive abilities than peers in traditional EFL classrooms (Martínez Agudo, 2020; Villabona & Cenoz, 2022). These gains are not limited to linguistic accuracy but extend to how effectively learners use language to manage interaction.

Evidence from classroom-based research shows that CLIL promotes discourse functions that are often underrepresented in regular language classes. Learners participate in group discussions, ask for clarification, and justify opinions, which mirrors authentic communication practices (Mahan, 2022; Sato & Hemmi, 2022). These interactional features give learners the chance to apply language in purposeful contexts, moving beyond rehearsed dialogues or isolated grammar tasks. In this sense, CLIL creates conditions that more closely resemble real-world communication.

At the same time, the development of communicative competence depends on the type of support teachers provide. Studies point to the importance of scaffolding strategies, corrective feedback, and opportunities for peer collaboration (Ballinger, 2021; Milla & García Mayo, 2021). When teachers provide structured support, learners not only communicate more but also refine their language use during interaction. Conversely, when support is limited, learners may resort to basic language, which limits their communicative growth.

The literature suggests that CLIL strengthens learners' ability to engage in meaningful communication. The emphasis on content provides a natural reason to use the language, while classroom interaction gives learners practice in managing real exchanges. Although accuracy and

pronunciation remain variable, learners consistently show improved competence in using language for communication, which is arguably one of the main goals of foreign language learning.

Implementation Factors and Contextual Variation

The effectiveness of CLIL in supporting speaking development depends on how programs are implemented. Teacher practices such as scaffolding, feedback, and task design play a central role in shaping outcomes. Studies show that when teachers provide structured opportunities for oral interaction and guide learners through corrective feedback, students are more likely to refine their spoken performance (Ballinger, 2021; Milla & García Mayo, 2021). In contrast, when lessons emphasize content delivery without space for negotiation of meaning, oral gains are less pronounced. Mahan (2022) emphasizes that scaffolding is especially critical in CLIL classrooms, where teachers must balance content delivery with language support. Effective scaffolding enables learners to access subject knowledge while gradually improving their spoken English.

Teacher training also emerges as a key factor. Professional development programs that address the dual demands of teaching content and language help teachers integrate language support into subject teaching. Research from diverse contexts demonstrates that teachers who receive CLIL-focused training are more confident in managing linguistic scaffolding and in creating space for oral practice (Banegas, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2024; Querol-Julián, 2025). This suggests that CLIL's success is not only about exposure but also about equipping teachers with strategies to foster speaking skills.

Another dimension concerns learner motivation. Motivation can be both a driver and a product of CLIL participation. Studies in Europe and Asia report that learners in CLIL settings often express a greater willingness to communicate and greater engagement with tasks than peers in traditional classrooms (Bakken & Brevik, 2023; Mearns et al., 2020; Somers & Llinares, 2021). However, motivational benefits are not automatic; they tend to emerge when programs are well-structured and learners feel supported in managing linguistic challenges (Lo, 2025). In addition to motivation, assessment practices shape how learners approach speaking tasks. Research in STEM-based CLIL contexts shows that when teachers use assessment methods aligned with language development goals, students are more willing to participate in oral activities and demonstrate clearer gains in spoken competence (Kruawong & Imsa-ard, 2024).

Finally, contextual variation affects the extent of oral benefits. Factors such as program intensity, duration, socioeconomic background, and access to resources shape outcomes significantly. Research shows that high-intensity programs yield stronger speaking gains than low-intensity ones (Merino & Lasagabaster, 2017; Lázaro-Ibarrola, 2025), while inequalities in

resources can limit access to these advantages (Lorenzo et al., 2022; Denman et al., 2023). These findings underscore that CLIL's potential is not uniform across contexts; the degree of benefit for speaking skills depends on how programs are designed, supported, and sustained.

CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed demonstrate that CLIL is a valuable approach for developing speaking skills in foreign language education. Across diverse contexts, learners in CLIL programs show more fluent oral production and a richer lexical repertoire than peers in traditional EFL classrooms. While gains in accuracy and pronunciation are less consistent, CLIL consistently fosters communicative competence by creating meaningful interaction situations. These benefits are strengthened when programs are sufficiently intensive and long-lasting, and when learners are encouraged to use language to engage with content in authentic ways.

At the same time, the review highlights that outcomes depend heavily on how CLIL is implemented. Effective scaffolding, feedback, assessment practices, and teacher training are essential for ensuring that speaking development is more than incidental. Motivation also plays a central role, both influencing and being influenced by participation in CLIL. Variation across contexts, including differences in program design and socioeconomic background, means that CLIL does not yield identical results everywhere. Nevertheless, the overall picture is clear: when carefully planned and supported, CLIL provides a powerful means of integrating language learning with content instruction to strengthen learners' spoken performance.

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