



An English as a lingua franca perspective on teachers' attitudes toward content and language integrated learning in Serbian higher education

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Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has emerged as one of the most influential pedagogical approaches in bilingual and multilingual education across Europe. Despite its growing prominence, research examining CLIL implementation in Serbian higher education remains limited, particularly from the perspective of teachers operating in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) context. This qualitative study explores university teachers' attitudes toward CLIL, their perceptions of teaching efficacy, and the challenges they experience in English-medium instruction at a private university in Serbia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires involving nine university instructors across multiple disciplines. Using thematic analysis, the study identified four dominant themes: positive perceptions of CLIL pedagogy, insufficient professional preparation, linguistic insecurity linked to native-speaker norms, and institutional constraints affecting implementation. The findings suggest that although teachers recognize the academic and international value of CLIL, sustainable implementation requires systematic teacher training, curriculum adaptation, and institutional support. The study contributes to current discussions on multilingual pedagogy, teacher cognition, and English-medium instruction in emerging CLIL contexts.

Keywords: CLIL, English as a Lingua Franca, teacher attitudes, higher education, Serbia

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education institutions worldwide have progressively embraced multilingual educational patterns in response to globalization, international student mobility, and the growing demand for English-medium instruction. Among the most influential educational innovations emerging from this movement is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), a pedagogical approach in which subject content is taught through an additional language, most commonly English.

The growth of CLIL has been aided by bilingual education programs in many Asian, Middle Eastern, and South American nations as well as in Europe, including Spain, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Austria. In contrast, CLIL application in Serbia remains relatively underexplored, particularly within university settings.

The Serbian educational system has traditionally emphasized foreign language instruction as a separate discipline rather than as a medium of content delivery. However, recent trends toward academic internationalization have led some government-funded/public and private universities to introduce English-mediated instruction in selected programs.

At the same time, the role of English in these contexts has evolved. English no longer functions exclusively as a foreign language tied to native-speaker norms; rather, it increasingly operates as a lingua franca among multilingual speakers. This shift has important implications for teacher identity, classroom communication, and pedagogical practice.

This study investigates Serbian university teachers' attitudes toward CLIL through an ELF lens, focusing on their experiences, professional perceptions, and implementation challenges.

Literature Review

1. Content and Language Integrated Learning

Pedagogical innovations require time to take root and come to fruition – as many as 20 years, according to certain experts (Hughes, 2010 in Yshan and Lin, 2020). Nonetheless, according to Mehisto (2008), CLIL has a much longer history.

The first beginnings of the CLIL program date back to 5000 years ago and were present around today's Iraq (Manic, 2013). It is also evident that the Latin language has been used for centuries to teach content, but what makes present-day CLIL different is that CLIL supports the learning of a foreign language, and at the same time favours the development of the mother tongue (Manic, 2016).

To improve comprehension of the above, it is crucial to emphasise that in the late 90's CLIL was formally conceptualized by researchers Coyle, Hood, and Marsh as a dual-focused educational approach in which both content mastery and language development occur simultaneously. Years later, as the idea of CLIL was changing and shaping, and with the additional details regarding this approach, researcher Bentley briefly outlined the theoretical underpinnings of CLIL through Coyle's 4Cs Framework, which comprises:

- **Content** – Mastery of academic subject matter
- **Communication** – Language use for interaction and learning
- **Cognition** – Development of critical thinking
- **Culture** – Intercultural awareness and global perspectives

This model emphasizes that language learning should occur through authentic academic engagement rather than isolated grammar instruction.

In contrast to its past, the contemporary CLIL concept provides the possibilities of using vehicular language in a spontaneous & natural way for students to rapidly forget about learning any foreign language and focus on learning the topic instead. In other words, pupils or students can spend a part of the school week learning subjects (General Science, Mathematics, etc.) or special modules by applying another language, as discussed in Marsh (2000).

Concerning the purpose of CLIL, it is substantially twofold. Firstly, it seeks to use the second language (L2) as a medium of instruction for relatively difficult content matters. Secondly, as L2 is a main tool for the medium of instruction, it provides learners with the opportunity to boost their level of second language proficiency.

Research across Europe has demonstrated that CLIL can enhance student motivation, academic language proficiency, intercultural competence, and engagement. However, successful implementation depends heavily on teacher preparedness and institutional support.

2. English as a Lingua Franca and its relation to CLIL

A comprehensive understanding of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is essential for examining contemporary approaches to Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), particularly in multilingual educational settings. ELF is generally defined as the use of English as a common means of communication among speakers who do not share a first language and for whom English functions as a contact language rather than a native language. The increasing globalization of education, business, and technology has positioned English as the predominant medium of international communication, resulting in a substantial increase in interactions among non-native speakers of English.

The emergence of English as a global lingua franca has been attributed to a complex interplay of historical, political, economic, and sociocultural factors. Scholars have frequently associated the worldwide diffusion of English with the expansion of the British Empire and, subsequently, the economic, political, and cultural influence of the United States. However, contemporary ELF scholarship emphasizes that the current global status of English is sustained not primarily by native speakers but by the vast and growing community of multilingual users who employ the language in diverse international contexts.

Within applied linguistics, ELF has been conceptualized as “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option” (Seidlhofer, 2011^[6], as cited in Yshan *et al.*, 2020). This perspective challenges traditional views that position native-speaker varieties, particularly British and American English, as the sole linguistic benchmarks. Instead, ELF research highlights the dynamic, adaptive, and context-dependent nature of English as it is used by multilingual speakers to achieve effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Consequently, ELF is increasingly viewed not merely as a functional tool for communication but as a legitimate linguistic phenomenon characterized by its own pragmatic, lexical, and grammatical features. Rather than prioritizing conformity to native-speaker norms, ELF interactions are typically guided by principles of intelligibility, accommodation, and communicative effectiveness. Such an orientation reflects the realities of contemporary

international communication, where successful interaction often depends on participants' ability to negotiate meaning across diverse linguistic backgrounds.

The relevance of ELF to educational contexts can be further understood through Kachru's (1992) Three Circles Model of World Englishes. This framework distinguishes between the Inner Circle, where English is spoken as a first language; the Outer Circle, where English has an institutionalized role as a second language; and the Expanding Circle, where English is primarily learned as a foreign language. Serbia is commonly situated within the Expanding Circle, reflecting the widespread study and use of English despite its lack of official status within national institutions.

This classification carries important implications for CLIL implementation in Serbian higher education. As university students increasingly participate in international academic and professional networks, English is frequently used as a medium for accessing disciplinary knowledge rather than as an object of linguistic study alone. In such contexts, adherence to native-speaker norms may be less relevant than the ability to communicate effectively within multilingual environments. The integration of ELF perspectives into CLIL pedagogy, therefore, offers a framework that aligns more closely with the communicative realities experienced by Serbian students and educators. By acknowledging linguistic diversity and prioritizing intercultural communicative competence, ELF-informed CLIL approaches may contribute to more inclusive and authentic language learning experiences in higher education settings.

3. EFL Teacher Cognition and Professional Identity within CLIL

Based on the literature reviewed, it appears that in the Serbian higher education system, little attention is paid to English as a Lingua Franca teachers' attitudes or the means through which a change in attitude can be promoted in a CLIL environment. The issue of ELF teacher attitude as a distinctive area about the various issues related to the CLIL approach mainly emerges in the conclusions of papers that attempt to venture into this issue by suggesting mostly qualitative or a blend of both quantitative and qualitative exploratory inquiries, being careful not to exhaust such a complex matter.

According to Karabassova (2022), CLIL is not a brand-new way of teaching, but it at least gives some instruction for the CLIL teachers' role. Since teachers' views affect the way they implement integrated teaching in their classes, it is important to investigate what integration means to teachers and how they perceive their professional role in CLIL (Skinnari and Bovellan 2016), particularly when it comes to implementing their variety of English and ELF-aware content in-class. The selection of coursebooks used in vehicular language is intermittently built on the idea of native speakers as supreme speakers, and standard English (SE) as the only admissible norm of language use. This puts non-native teachers of CLIL in an uncomfortable situation sometimes, particularly when they find themselves in front of a foreign student who perhaps expects to be taught by a native speaker of English, and echoes Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, which suggests that teachers' beliefs about their professional competence strongly influence instructional performance.

In CLIL settings, teacher confidence may be affected by:

- Language proficiency perceptions
- Access to training
- Institutional expectations
- Availability of teaching materials
- Workload demands

Studies show that teachers who receive formal CLIL preparation demonstrate stronger pedagogical confidence and more flexible instructional strategies.

Methodology

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to explore teachers' experiences and perceptions in depth.

A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to understand how ELF instructors construct meaning around CLIL practice within their professional environments.

2. Research Context

The study was conducted at a private and governmental university in Belgrade, where selected undergraduate and postgraduate courses are delivered in English.

Programs included:

- International Relations
- Psychology
- Digital Media
- Humanities
- Communication Studies
- Southeast European Studies
- Peace, Security, and Development Studies

English serves primarily as a medium for international academic communication.

3. Participants

Nine university instructors participated.

Variable	Description
Gender	5 female, 4 male
Age Range	29–48
Teaching Experience	4–18 years
CLIL Experience	1–6 years
English Proficiency	B2–C1

All participants were Serbian first-language speakers.

Data Collection

1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Three instructors participated in face-to-face interviews lasting approximately 35 minutes.

Interview questions explored:

- Experiences with CLIL instruction
- Perceptions of classroom effectiveness
- Language confidence
- Institutional support

2. Open-Ended Questionnaire

Six instructors completed an online questionnaire designed to complement interview findings.

Questions focused on:

- Professional preparation
- Teaching strategies
- Student interaction
- Perceived challenges

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Gibbs (2008) [4].

The process included:

1. Transcription
2. Familiarization
3. Open coding
4. Theme generation
5. Cross-validation across data sources

Results

1. Positive Professional Attitudes

Participants generally viewed CLIL positively. Teachers reported improvements in:

- Student participation
- Academic communication
- International classroom engagement

One participant stated

“Students become more active when content is delivered in English.”

This suggests that CLIL increased both academic engagement and communicative confidence.

2. Limited Training

Most participants reported receiving no formal CLIL preparation.

Instead, they relied on:

- Personal teaching experience
- Self-study
- Domestic and foreign peer collaboration

One instructor noted:

“I learned CLIL while teaching.”

This reflects institutional gaps in pedagogical preparation.

3. Native-Speaker Pressure

Many participants reported linguistic insecurity.

Common concerns included:

- Pronunciation accuracy
- Academic vocabulary
- Spontaneous classroom interaction

Teachers often compared themselves to native-speaker models despite functioning successfully in multilingual classrooms.

4. Institutional Challenges

Participants identified several structural barriers:

- Limited teaching materials
- Curriculum rigidity
- Lack of workload recognition
- Absence of CLIL workshops

These challenges increased preparation time and emotional pressure.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Serbian university teachers generally recognize the value of CLIL in supporting academic internationalization.

However, implementation remains constrained by professional and institutional challenges.

From an ELF perspective, teachers' linguistic insecurity appears rooted not in actual communicative failure, but in persistent ideological attachment to native-speaker norms.

This aligns with previous research suggesting that language ideology influences teacher identity and pedagogical confidence.

The results also emphasize the importance of institutional support in sustaining educational innovation.

Implications for Future Research

1. Teacher Education

One of the most significant findings of this study was the lack of formal CLIL preparation among university instructors. Most participants reported entering CLIL classrooms without specialized methodological training, relying instead on individual teaching experience or self-directed learning.

This suggests that teacher education programs in Serbia should integrate CLIL-specific pedagogical training into both pre-service and in-service professional development. Such training should focus on:

- Integrating language and content objectives
- Scaffolding academic language for multilingual learners
- Designing CLIL-based assessment tasks
- Managing multilingual classroom interaction
- Developing strategies for balancing content mastery with language support

In addition, teacher education programs should include awareness of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) principle to help instructors move beyond native-speaker models toward more communicative and inclusive language practices. Universities should develop CLIL-specific professional development programs.

2. Curriculum Design

Curricula should integrate:

- Language objectives
- Content objectives
- Assessment alignment

3. Educational Policy

Educational policymakers in Serbia should consider formalizing CLIL teacher preparation in higher education.

The findings of this study generate several important implications for higher education institutions, teacher education programs, and language policy development in Serbia and comparable educational contexts. At the policy level, the findings suggest that Serbia's higher education institutions may benefit from clearer strategic frameworks for bilingual and multilingual instruction.

Educational policymakers should consider:

- Developing national guidelines for CLIL implementation in tertiary education
- Defining professional competencies for CLIL instructors
- Supporting partnerships with European institutions experienced in CLIL practice
- Encouraging research-based innovation in multilingual education

Furthermore, policy frameworks should recognize English primarily as an international communicative resource rather than exclusively as a native-speaker model. This shift may help reduce linguistic insecurity among teachers and promote more authentic classroom communication.

4. Institutional Practice

The study also highlights the need for stronger institutional support. Participants consistently reported challenges related to increased workload, a lack of teaching materials, and limited administrative recognition of the demands of CLIL teaching.

Universities implementing English-medium or CLIL instruction should therefore consider:

- Establishing CLIL professional development workshops
- Creating institutional repositories of CLIL teaching materials
- Supporting collaborative lesson planning among instructors
- Recognizing CLIL preparation in workload calculations
- Providing language support services for academic staff

Such institutional measures may improve teacher confidence, reduce professional stress, and promote more sustainable implementation.

5. Future Research

The study also opens several avenues for future research.

Scholars may explore:

- Student perceptions of CLIL in Serbian universities
- Classroom interaction patterns in ELF-oriented CLIL contexts
- Longitudinal development of teacher identity in multilingual instruction
- Comparative studies between private and public university contexts

Such research would deepen understanding of how CLIL evolves within emerging educational systems.

Limitations

This study has several limitations:

1. Small sample size
2. Single institutional context
3. Self-reported data

Future studies should include multiple universities and classroom observation data.

Conclusion

This study examined teachers' attitudes toward CLIL in Serbian higher education through an ELF lens.

While teachers generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward CLIL, successful implementation remains limited by insufficient training, linguistic insecurity, and institutional barriers.

The findings highlight the need for more inclusive, multilingual, and institutionally supported approaches to English-medium instruction in Serbia.

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