

# Differences And Similarities Between CLIL, ESP, And Content-Based Teaching

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**Abstract:** This paper examines three related approaches in language education -Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and Content-Based Instruction (CBI)-comparing their theoretical underpinnings, aims, roles of language and content, syllabus design, teacher roles, challenges, and empirical evidence. While each approach has distinctive features, they share core principles of integrating language and content. The analysis shows that rather than being strictly distinct, these methodologies lie on a variety of emphasis between language and content. The paper concludes with implications for practice and suggestions for further research.

**Keywords:** Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

**Introduction:** In recent decades language pedagogy has moved beyond teaching language in isolation toward approaches that integrate content (subject matters) as a vehicle for language learning. Among the most influential frameworks are Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Although they all incorporate content and language interplay, they differ in their historical roots, objectives, classroom implementation, and scope. Exploring both their commonalities and distinctions helps clarify how these models can be used (or combined) most effectively in varied educational contexts.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Content-based approaches to language teaching such as Content-Based Instruction (CBI), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) all share the idea that language is best learned through meaningful content rather than in isolation. CBI serves as a broad framework that integrates language and subject matter, allowing students to learn both simultaneously through themes, topics, or subject-specific materials. It emphasizes that language structures and vocabulary should emerge naturally from the content being studied. CLIL, which developed in Europe in the 1990s and was popularized by David Marsh, takes this idea further by teaching

school subjects, such as history or science-through a foreign or second language, thus pursuing two goals at once: developing content knowledge and improving language proficiency. ESP, meanwhile, focuses more narrowly on teaching English for professional or academic purposes, such as business, medicine, or engineering. It is a needs-based approach where course design depends on learners' real-world communicative requirements within their specific fields. While CBI and CLIL emphasize content as a medium for language learning, ESP places language at the center but contextualizes it within specialized domains. Together, these approaches highlight the growing importance of integrating language instruction with meaningful, authentic content to better prepare learners for academic and professional communication.

## METHODS

Empirical research on CLIL and CBI shows that learners generally achieve comparable or even superior outcomes in both language and content learning when instruction is well-supported. In terms of language proficiency, students tend to make strong progress in receptive skills like listening and reading, though challenges often persist in productive skills such as speaking and writing, particularly regarding accuracy. Content learning is not negatively affected by the use of an additional language; with sufficient scaffolding,

learners typically perform as well as or better than those taught in their first language. Integrated approaches also foster higher motivation, authenticity, and engagement due to meaningful exposure to the target language. However, implementation faces several challenges, including limited teacher preparedness, curriculum and time constraints, assessment misalignment, the risk of oversimplifying content, and imbalances favoring content over language. To address these issues, effective practice requires collaborative teacher training, strategic scaffolding, flexible curriculum design, integrated assessment methods that evaluate both content and language, and ongoing adjustments to maintain an appropriate balance between linguistic and disciplinary goals.

**DISCUSSION**

In practice, CLIL, CBI, and ESP share deep pedagogical similarities that make them complementary rather than competing methods. At their core, all three approaches advocate for integration—they reject the separation of language and subject matter, promoting simultaneous development of both. This integration fosters more authentic communication and enhances learners’ cognitive engagement with meaningful content. The use of authentic materials is another shared principle: instead of memorizing grammar rules or isolated vocabulary, students interact with real-

world texts, academic articles, or workplace documents, which prepare them for practical communication in academic and professional settings.

Furthermore, these approaches are learner-centered, meaning that students actively construct knowledge through inquiry, collaboration, and contextualized tasks. Teachers serve as facilitators who scaffold comprehension, gradually increasing linguistic and cognitive demands. All three also contribute to developing academic literacy, equipping learners with higher-order skills such as critical reading, structured writing, and domain-specific reasoning—skills vital for success in higher education and global communication.

Finally, scholars emphasize that CBI, CLIL, and ESP form a continuum rather than a set of isolated methods. ESP represents a language-led end focused on professional needs, CLIL is more content-oriented, and CBI bridges both. This continuum allows educators to adapt their teaching balance according to learners’ goals and institutional contexts. Thus, their shared pedagogical principles underline a unified vision: that effective language learning is achieved through meaningful engagement with real content, academic thinking, and authentic communication.

Below is a comparative discussion of the principal differences between CLIL, CBI, and ESP.

**Table 1**

Dimension	ESP	CBI	CLIL
Primary orientation	Language focus for specific domains	Dual focus (language + content)	Dual focus, often stronger on content
Starting point for syllabus	Learners’ communicative needs in specific field	Content themes or subjects	Content + language objectives (integrated)
Language role	Language is the primary goal (tool to function in the domain)	Language is medium and object of learning	Language is medium of instruction and object of learning
Content coverage	Content is supportive, domain-specific, limited	Broader content themes may be used	Full subject matter (e.g., science, history) through the target language
Teacher roles	Language specialist, ESP expert	May be language or content teacher, collaboration common	Often dual-trained or co-teaching; content teachers may take more role
Assessment emphasis	Language performance in domain tasks	Mixed assessment of content + language	Often heavier weighting on content outcomes

Time allocation	Significant class time devoted to language tasks	Balanced time between content and language tasks	More time may be devoted to content teaching, with language support integrated
Flexibility / continuum	More language-led	Flexible positioning on continuum	Can be “strong” CLIL (content-dominant) or “weak” (language-dominant)

CLIL, CBI, and ESP differ mainly in the balance between content and language focus (Table1). In CLIL contexts, teachers typically emphasize subject content more strongly, sometimes reducing attention to explicit language instruction; for example, research from Taiwan showed CLIL teachers prioritized content, while ESP instructors maintained a more balanced focus on both. ESP, in contrast, centers on teaching language through domain-specific vocabulary, genres, and communicative tasks relevant to learners’ professional or academic fields. CLIL often demands collaboration between language and subject specialists to ensure effective integration, whereas CBI tends to be more flexible and informal, using content primarily as a thematic framework within language courses rather than as the full basis of instruction. As Cenoz (2015) notes, CLIL and CBI share key pedagogical features, with differences arising more from contextual variations than from fundamental distinctions.

**CONCLUSION**

CLIL, ESP, and content-based instruction are interrelated approaches in modern language pedagogy, sharing the foundational premise that language need not be taught in isolation but can be meaningfully integrated with subject content. Nevertheless, they differ in starting points, emphasis, teacher roles, and design priorities. In practice, a continuum view is most useful: many language–content pedagogies will fall somewhere between extremes of language-led ESP and content-dominant CLIL. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes, optimal scaffolding practices, and context-sensitive models, especially in diverse settings like Uzbekistan.

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