IN CLIL LOW-ATTAINING BEGINNERS DO BETTER THAN WE THINK

CLIL wird immer noch oft als "elitär" bezeichnet, was zum Ausschluss von Anfänger:innen oder leistungsschwachen Lernenden aus bilingualen Angeboten führt. Die Primarschule in Buchrain hat kürzlich neue Wege beschritten, indem sie für Englischlernende der 3. und 4. Klasse zusätzliche CLIL-Stunden anbietet. Die Auswertung von Fragebögen und Interviews mit Lernenden unterschiedlicher Leistungsgruppen zeigte, dass auch die leistungsschwachen Schüler:innen den CLIL-Unterricht schätzen. Zudem gibt die Mehrheit dieser Lernenden an, dem CLIL-Unterricht erfolgreich zu folgen und auf Englisch kommunizieren zu können. Diese Ergebnisse und die positiven Beobachtungen der Lehrpersonen zum Lernen der Schüler:innen sind deutliche Anzeichen, dass CLIL mit allen Lernenden unabhängig ihres Englischlevels funktioniert.

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Introduction and description of context

CLIL, standing for Content and Language Integrated Learning, intertwines foreign language learning with content instruction to engage learners in meaningful, authentic, and cognitively demanding language use. In CLIL, the foreign language can be seen as an obstacle that makes the desired dual-focused learning more challenging than when both subjects are taught separately (Villabona & Cenoz, 2022). This is one reason why CLIL programmes are still often considered to be 'elitist', meaning that only students with certain linguistic pre-knowledge can attend while beginners or low-attaining students are deemed to be overstrained (Steinlen, 2021). Even though several newer studies conclude that CLIL works for all learners regardless of their foreign language level (Frank Schmid, 2021; Pérez Cañado et al., 2021), there are only few CLIL programmes for young learners in Switzerland (Elmiger et al., 2022) and there is a lack of knowledge about how beginners or low-attaining learners with very little foreign language competence cope with CLIL.

Therefore, the recently implemented project 'Buchrain Goes International' offers valuable insights into how beginners in their first or second year of learning English – with apparent heterogenous target language competence – experience CLIL. Since August 2022, two newly hired native English-speaking teachers instruct English with additional CLIL lessons in three 3rd and 4th primary classes. These pupils encounter the target language not only in the three regular English lessons but also in the subjects art, craft, P.E or music. This paper reports on findings collected through questionnaires and interviews with the learners as well as group discussions with the teachers aiming to depict how in particular low-attaining beginners of English perceive CLIL and what these learners can contribute to class in contrast to their peers with more favourable English language competence.

Suitability of CLIL for low-attaining learners

CLIL is often described as an umbrella term that includes a wide range of different teaching practices that vary from classroom to classroom depending on factors such as intensity, content, language aims or context. Given this variety, it is difficult to compare research findings – even more so when the spectrum of variants is additionally expanded by researching its suitability for varied learners. Although aspects of diversity have not yet been vastly considered in CLIL research, there are a number of studies that take learners' diverse skills and levels into account (e.g. Blasco, 2014; Frank Schmid, 2021; Pérez Cañado et al., 2021; Pladevall-Ballester & Vallbona, 2016). These studies share a general consensus that regardless of its form – from intensive programs to sporadic modules – less privileged, low-attaining learners can successfully be integrated into CLIL lessons. Despite the cognitive complexity of learning language and content at the same time, CLIL does not impede foreign language learning for low-attaining learners (Blasco, 2014). Instead, CLIL is considered to offer favourable learning conditions for all, including young learners with limited foreign language competence (Elsner & Kessler, 2013). There are two primary reasons for this:

First, research has shown that CLIL classrooms resemble real-life language learning situations due to rich and meaningful linguistic as well as content input taught by competent teachers. In this setting, the new foreign language can be put to real use which offers possibilities for deep processing (Coyle & Meyer, 2021; Dalton-Puffer, 2007). In this way, the content in CLIL offers an important scaffolding for the language learning processes (Wolff, 2007). This is particularly true at primary level because CLIL is often done in combination with subjects that actively involve learners like art, craft, P.E or music. These subjects, in contrast to more text-based subjects, all offer abundant visual aids and hands-on experiences that foster highly-contextualised comprehension and genuine communication (Heim, 2013). Such holistic learning settings are particularly encouraging for learners with low language competence because contributions can be supported with short, deictic or, if necessary, non-verbal communication or actions.

Second, there is strong evidence that in CLIL classrooms, learners' anxiety level is lower than in traditional language classrooms. This can be explained with the so called 'mask effect' (Maillat, 2010). In CLIL the challenging foreign language learning is masked by the content learning and hence perceived by learners as a non-focal learning target. The mask effect lowers learners' inhibiting affective filter (c.f. Krashen, 1987) and results in enhanced willingness to use the target language (Maillat, 2010). Since learners' anxiety is negatively related to school performance (OECD, 2017), the positive, low-stress foreign language learning atmosphere that CLIL classrooms can offer seems therefore particularly beneficial for weaker learners.

The favourable learning conditions in CLIL classrooms, however, do not directly lead to better learning outcomes or long-term success. Besides favourable conditions, successful CLIL learning depends on a variety of other factors including whether teachers and learners make use of this promising setting (c.f. Helmke, 2015). The study presented here does not focus on the learning outcomes nor can it predict the long-term effects of CLIL on foreign language learning. Instead, it describes how low-attaining learners perceive and use this CLIL setting for their dual or - in this paper rather - foreign language learning.

Research participants and data collection

About 730 kindergarten, primary and secondary pupils split into 40 classes attend classes at the public school of Buchrain in the canton of Lucerne. In three primary school 3rd and 4th grade classes the project 'Schule Buchrain Goes International' was implemented in August 2022. The school project was part of several measurements undertaken by the local authorities to strengthen the village's financial position. To reduce costs, class sizes had to be slightly lifted. To increase revenues, more mid- to high-taxpaying persons should reside in this economically attractively situated village between the cities of Lucerne and Zug. This could be achieved by expanding the educational offer for more internationally minded families with addition-

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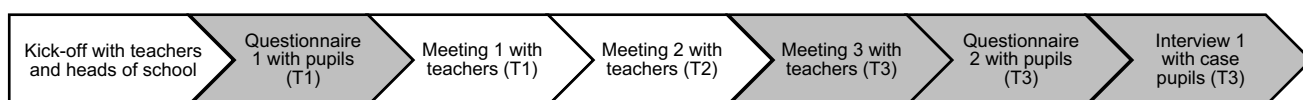
al CLIL lessons taught by teachers with English as their first language. The two newly hired native English teachers did not only team-teach the three regular English lessons together with the class teachers but also taught additional CLIL lessons in combination with the subjects art, craft, P.E., or music. The intensity of CLIL varied from two to six lessons in each class per week owing to the different workloads of teachers or their timetables.

A teacher trainer and CLIL researcher collaborated with the school to support and document the implementation of the new learning setting. In regular meetings with the five teachers involved (N=5) CLIL specific teaching methods, benefits as well as challenges, and students' learning experiences were discussed. For the latter, teachers were asked to illustrate CLIL task outcomes of three so-called 'case pupils'. The case pupils (N=9) were three selected learners in each class that represented the group of low-, middle- and high-attaining English learners. The affiliation of the three case pupils to the three levels was based on teachers' summative assessment of their English competence at the end of the first semester. Their learning was monitored and documented by the teachers. The idea of closely observing case pupils and tracking their learning in order to ensure that the class caters for all learners derived from the concept of lesson study (c.f. Dudley, 2014). In addition to the group discussions with the teachers, short group interviews with the three case pupils of each class were carried out. The main advantages of doing these interviews with the children in groups were time-efficiency, reduction of inhibitions and social desirability bias (Vogl, 2015). To capture the perceptions on CLIL of all learners (N=47) online-questionaries were made with the tool 'Lime Survey' three times throughout the school year. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements on English language learning and on CLIL in Buchrain that learners ranked on a ten-point Likert scale.

All data was then categorized according to learners' affiliation to the group of low-attaining (N=13), middle-attaining (N=17) or high-attaining (N=17) learners, again based on their level of English competence at the end of the first semester. The quantitative data from the questionnaires for each level group and data collection point separately was evaluated in SPSS and results displayed in either bar charts or boxplot diagrams. Bar charts are useful to illustrate the distribution of data for one data collection point and to estimate the mode, meaning the value of the most frequently chosen answer. Boxplots are considered valuable to display and compare the distribution of data, the mean, and the median from the three data collection points. The qualitative data in form of audio-recorded and transcribed statements from the interviews with the case pupils and group discussions with the teachers were coded in Excel according to a simplified version of a qualitative-content analysis. The mixed-method approach ensured that the research question of how low-attaining learners perceive CLIL and what they can contribute to class – also in comparison of their peers in the middle- and high-attaining groups - can be answered in a descriptive way based on varied data from multiple perspectives. The following overview (Figure 1) visualizes the timeline of the varied data collection points (T1-T5). The ones marked in grey were considered in this article.

Semester 1 (school year 2022/23)

Kick-off with teachers and heads of school → Questionnaire 1 with pupils (T1) → Meeting 1 with teachers (T1) → Meeting 2 with teachers (T2) → Meeting 3 with teachers (T3) → Questionnaire 2 with pupils (T3) → Interview 1 with case pupils (T3)

Semester 2 (school year 2022/23)

Meeting 4 with teachers (T4) → Meeting 5 with teachers (T5) → Questionaire 3 with pupils (T5) → Interview 2 with case pupils (T5) → Wrap-up with heads of school
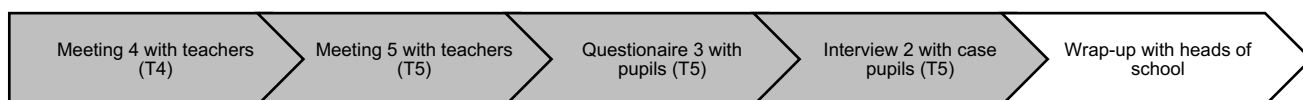
Figure 1
Timeline of all data collection points (in white), and the ones considered in this paper (in grey)

Findings

In the questionnaires learners were asked to rank the statement whether they appreciate the CLIL lessons in Buchrain (Figure 2). The analysis of the questionnaire at the end of the school year (T5) revealed that 40 out of the 47 learners (85%) fully agreed or partly agreed with the statement. Also the majority of low-attaining learners, 9 out of 13 (69%), supported the idea of having CLIL lessons in Buchrain fully or partly. Only one weak learner fully disagreed with this statement. The mode, hence the answer most often chosen, is for all three level groups 10 (='fully agree'). In one interview, a weak learner explained the value of CLIL lessons for him[1]: «*Für mich ist es perfekt, weil wenn ich in andere Länder gehe, kann ich auch dort noch Englisch sprechen, zum Beispiel in Amerika oder so.*» (Pupil 1, Interview C, T3) Another low-attaining pupil stated that he appreciated CLIL because even though he learns mainly about the subject, he could benefit for English too: «*Ja, man lernt doch noch etwas Englisch oben drauf, weil sie* [teacher] *spricht eigentlich nur Englisch.*» (Pupil 1, Interview A, T3) In a later interview another weak pupil expressed his appreciation for the dual-focussed learning as follows: «*Es ist eigentlich recht toll, weil man macht Musik und gleichzeitig übt man aber auch für Englisch.*» (Pupil 3, Interview D, T5)

The statement 'CILL is exhausting for me' was fully or partly denied by 33 out of all 47 (68%) learners. About a third of all learners found CLIL to some extend exhausting. Regarding the low-attaining learners, nine out of 13 pupils (69%) didn't find CLIL lessons to be exhausting. Three more learners (23%) assessed it as partly exhausting and one of the low-attaining learners found CLIL fully exhausting. Figure 3 reveals that even though the mean-values (X) and medians (–) of the low-attaining learners were higher than those of the other two groups at the three dates of survey, all learners – including the low-attaining learners – perceived the CLIL lessons as less exhausting over time.

In this way, the content in CLIL offers an important scaffolding for the language learning processes. This is particularly true at primary level because CLIL is often done in combination with subjects that actively involve learners like art, craft, P.E or music.
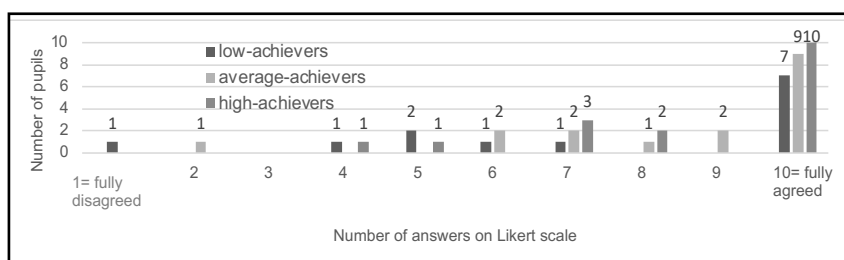
Figure 2
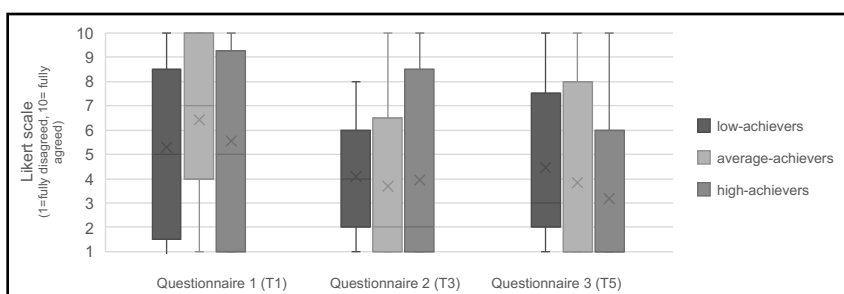Results on statement 'I appreciate the CLIL lessons.' at the end of school year (T5)

Figure 3
Comparison of results from questionnaires on statement 'CLIL is exhausting for me.'

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1 For reasons of simplicity and anonymity, in singular the learners are addressed in the masculine form.

Regarding the statement about learners' global understanding, 34 of all the 48 learners (72%) fully or partly thought that they understand most of what is being said in the CLIL lessons. 61% of the low-attaining learners assessed their understanding positively too. Figure 4 shows that the global understanding of the low-attaining learners had improved since the beginning of the schoolyear (T1 vs. T5). The case pupils in the interviews agreed that they didn't understand everything all the time, but that they got better at it. A low-attaining learner explained: «*Ich bin auch besser geworden. Ich verstehe es besser.*» (Pupil 1, Interview D, T5) The case pupils also said that they got help from their teachers or peers. They also described that their teachers supported comprehension with gestures, visuals, examples, actions or, mainly in the beginning, with German if everyone looked lost. One average-attaining case pupil explained that even if comprehension was sometimes difficult, he could still actively participate in the music lessons: «*Ja, ich versteh schon ein bisschen aber nicht alles. Wenn ich nicht alles verstehe, dann singe ich einfach oder tanze trotzdem.*» (Pupil 2, Interview C, T3)
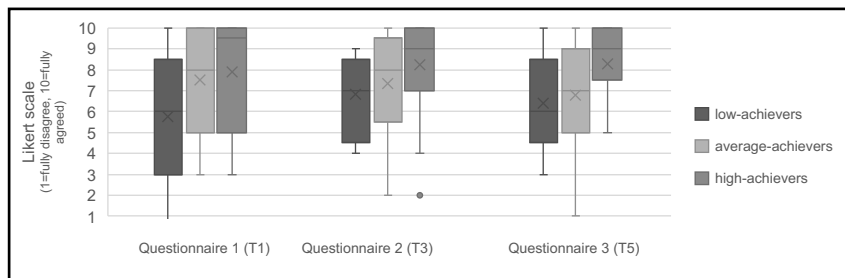

Figure 4

Comparison of results from questionnaires on statement 'I understand most in the CLIL lessons.'

«Ja, ich versteh schon ein bisschen aber nicht alles. Wenn ich nicht alles verstehe, dann singe ich einfach oder tanze trotzdem.»

Lastly, learners were asked to assess whether they tried to speak English in the CLIL class. 33 out of 47 (71%) partly or fully agreed that they tried to speak in the target language. Similarly, 69% of the low low-attaining learners indicated that they tried to speak English in CLIL. By looking at the medians in Figure 5, the group of low-attaining learners showed noticeable more progress in their attempts to communicate in the target language when compared to their peers. The teachers observed too that the low-attaining learners spoke frequently in the CLIL lessons: «*Dieser schwache Lernende ist sehr minimalistisch unterwegs. Doch was mir bei ihm auffällt ist, dass er sich wirklich meldet im Unterricht und Sachen sagt, was er sonst nie macht.*» (Teacher A, Meeting 3) They also described observations of remarkable progress from their low-attaining learners: «*Ein anderes Kind hat so grosse Fortschritte gemacht. Es ist eher sonst so - also im Unterricht oder in anderen Fächern — ist es eher so gemütlich und halt auch schwächer. Und im Englisch hat es jetzt schon so / also schon nach zwei Monaten hat es mich so positiv überrascht.*» (Teacher C, Meeting 3). Another teacher added: «*I would say that our lower ability learners are definitely enthusiastic. Even though they are working at a slower level / slower pace than the other kids, they are definitely still persisting. And I appreciate that from them that they still have the power behind them. And with my eyes, I don't think any of the children are left behind. They are processing at their own pace.*» (Teacher B, Meeting 3). Besides the mentioned persistence and enthusiasm, the teachers also noted these learners' high motivation and their willingness to take risks: «*Doch ich merke einfach, dass das Kind sehr motiviert ist. Dass es wegen dem auch mal versucht etwas zu sagen.*» (Teacher A, Meeting 3) Another teacher observed a change in learners' self-confidence when speaking at the end of the school year: «*We just did the presentations in English about the 'Dream House' and it was so nice to see the progress that they made from their first presentation. Just with the confidence - unbelievable!*» (Teacher E, Meeting 5) One case pupil supported these statements from the teachers and explained how he coped with communicating essential information: «*Also, ich kann nicht so gut Englisch, aber ein bisschen. Also einfach das Wichtigste.*»

(Pupil 1, Interview C, T3) Other case pupils confirmed too that they tried to speak in English but that they often needed to think for longer or that they had to drop in words in German. «*Also wenn ich etwas sagen will und ich nicht weiss, wie es heisst, dann versuche ich es auch zuerst so gut wie es geht auf Englisch und dann probiere ich auch auf Deutsch.*» (Pupil 2, Interview D, T5).

Discussion and conclusion

The overall positive findings presented in this paper are strong indicators that the majority of pupils experience CLIL as a positive class setting that supports them in their use and comprehension of English. This is also true for the low-attaining pupils, who on the one hand, seem to like the CLIL lessons (c.f. Figure 2); on the other, feel encouraged to speak in English in the CLIL lessons (c.f Figure 5). The latter is also confirmed by the teachers who are convinced that many low-attaining learners communicate frequently with confidence and motivation. Furthermore, most learners – regardless of their level – state that attending CLIL lessons is not particularly exhausting (c.f. Figure 3) and they feel positive towards their global understanding in CLIL lessons (c.f. Figure 4). Reasons for these positive outcomes are varied. First, case pupils in the interviews imply that the highly contextualized, action oriented CLIL setting supports and encourages them to use whatever language they have already acquired to interact in a safe classroom environment (Dalton-Puffer, 2007; Wolff, 2007). If their language competence limits them to communicate, they know that they can be fully participating in the lessons non-verbally or with the help of translanguaging. Second, some statements from the interviews confirm that for most learners, the content-based activities like creating art, doing sports, or playing music, are in the foreground. Therefore, the mask effect (Maillat, 2010) might indeed boost their use of the target language. Third, highly competent native speakers embody an authentic purpose and real-life goal for learning the target language. Learners seem to realise why learning – in particular speaking – English in the classroom and beyond is of importance (Coyle & Meyer, 2021). This seems to increase their motivation and risk-taking for contributions in the CLIL classroom further.
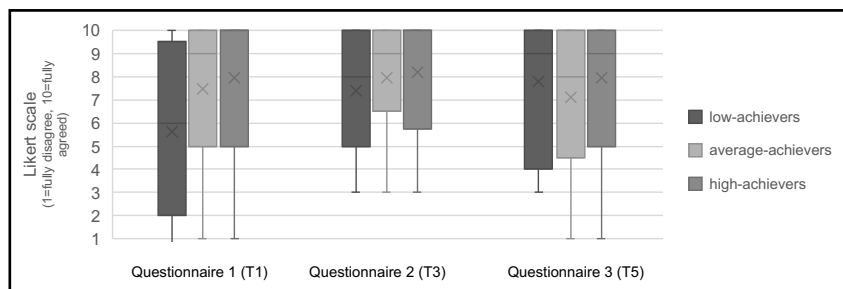
Given the fact that CLIL is still fairly new at this school, the overall positive results could also be biased by the 'novelty effect'. Even if data was gathered from different sources, the risk of bias can never be completely ruled out. Therefore, further data collection points in the future are planned to investigate if the positive tendencies persist and to also monitor students' development of their foreign language and subject-specific competence.

As of now, even if the findings of this small-scale study cannot be generalised, they nonetheless seem to confirm that in CLIL there is no need to be worried that beginners or low-attaining learners would be left behind because: «[…] well organised bilingual education offers, by far, more chances than challenges to any learner.» (Elsner & Kessler, 2013, p. 27)

«Dieser schwache Lernende ist sehr minimalistisch unterwegs. Doch was mir bei ihm auffällt ist, dass er sich wirklich meldet im Unterricht und Sachen sagt, was er sonst nie macht.»

Some statements from the interviews confirm that for most learners, the content-based activities like creating art, doing sports, or playing music, are in the foreground. Therefore, the mask effect might indeed boost their use of the target language.

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