

Using *Hijan Hirao* to Develop English Language Skills and to Understand Culture

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Abstract

Research in the field of second language teaching and learning suggests that the use of literature as a teaching material in the classroom can extensively contribute to acquiring and learning the target language. The study explores the theoretical approaches of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) for the development of the English skills in the language classroom. The study further aims to examine the possibilities of using *Hijan Hirao* as the main teaching material to teach the English language skills of listening and writing and to understand culture. *Hijan Hirao* is a long narrative poem which is sung on the concluding day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), culture in classroom, *Hijan Hirao*, English Language Teaching

Introduction

The term Content and Language Integrated Language (CLIL) is defined by David Marsh as “situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh, 1994, p. 54). Conversely, CLIL is described by Coyle et al. as an educational approach which integrates and converges both language learning and subject learning and this convergence of the two aspects of learning brings a synthesis of the previously fragmented elements (cited in Gray, 2013, p. 114). CLIL is thus a dual-focused approach that caters to simultaneous teaching and learning of both content and language. The classroom practices employing CLIL approaches rely on the principles

of the second language acquisition theory (Coyle, 2008). Dalton-Puffer and Smit assert that CLIL has its principles drawn from Bruner's constructivism learning theory which is based on the idea that learning involves an active practice where new ideas, information, perceptions or concepts are constructed by the learners with their existing knowledge as the basis (2007, p. 7). And also in Bruner's constructivism learning theory, acquisition of the learner's second language has its basis in the major role played by society. Thus, an active learning of the content on the basis of the learners' existing knowledge is an important feature of the CLIL approach. In CLIL approach, the environment also plays an important role in second language acquisition.

Listening and writing skills are language skills which can be developed through practice. Liubinienė (2009) discusses the success of using CLIL methodology in developing listening skills. She asserts that the materials used in CLIL methodology enhance not only the language skills but also the cognitive skills of the learners. She maintains that CLIL students exhibit better development of listening skills, oral communication skills and writing skills. Also, Lasagabaster (2008) demonstrates the benefits of CLIL on written competence by examining foreign language written competence in CLIL contexts holistically. The foreign language competency was taken through English test comprising of grammar, listening, speaking and writing (Lasagabaster, 2008, p. 35). The results revealed that the CLIL student participants performed better than the non-CLIL student participants. Therefore, in the light of the above discussions, the English language skills of listening, speaking and writing have shown better development by adopting the CLIL approach.

Research thus supports that an integration of language and content is vital for developing the skills of language learning, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. The use of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach in the teaching of English as a second language will enable the learners to get acquainted with the target language as well as the content.

Culture and ELT

The interrelatedness between culture, literature and language is immense. Hall observes that understanding of culture is achievable by comprehending people's interactions, particularly their use of language

(2005, p. 66). Learning a language takes place in a cultural environment so a learner's cultural understanding is conducive for effective language learning. Therefore, the awareness and teaching of culture is crucial in the second/ English/ foreign language classroom. Culture is represented through various ways including symbols which are socially constructed in society. Cultural narratives describe the history, functions and existence of a community. They include creation myths, religious texts and rituals, migration histories, etc. that narrate stories about the community's origin, and moral and ethical values. *Hijan Hirao* is a long narrative poem which is sung on the concluding day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur. The poem, written in the *Meitei Mayek* script can be traced to the thirteenth or fourteenth century A.D. (Singh, 2015, p. 9) and is anonymously written. *Hijan Hirao* may be seen as the indigenous cultural narrative of the Meiteis (i.e. one of the ethnic groups inhabiting the plains of Manipur). It may be used constructively for the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to impart culture in the English language classrooms in Manipur.

The teaching of English in the upper primary schools in Manipur has several problems. In spite of English being the medium of instruction in schools in Manipur, the learners' receptive and productive skills are low. While many students manage to pass or score good marks in their English paper, it is observed that many of them are unable to effectively communicate in English in real life situations. Therefore, a curriculum which emphasizes the indigenous culture is conducive to be methodically woven in the English language classrooms. As the CLIL approach believes in the integration of the learning of content and language by encouraging group work and applying it to real life situations, it could be the answer to the problems faced by the English language learners and teachers in Manipur.

Cultural Implications of *Hijan Hirao*

Hijan Hirao is a narrative poem which is sung on the concluding day of the *Lai Haraoba* festival of Manipur. *Hijan Hirao* through its myth narrative describes the heartfelt lament of the fall of the tree son by the tree parents. The poem describes an event where the boat of a Meitei king of the Luwang clan is made. So, for constructing the boat, two of the king's artisans were employed to cut down the mighty tree. According to the tradition of the time, a ritualistic prayer was performed for the

“non-human tree” before cutting it. Through the use of pathetic fallacy in the poem, Irok Laicham Leima, the mother tree bemoans and wails at the imminent fate of her beloved tree son. The father tree, Irok Ningthou wishes his tree son to magnificently and regally serve the Luwang King. The poem thus brings out human beings’ ethical relationship with nature. The cultural traditions are reflected in its myth narrations where the king’s boat called *Hiyang Hiren* is described. The myth surrounding the *sangai* (a brow antlered deer which is found only in the Keibul Lamjao National Park, Manipur) and the human head which adorns the head and tail of the king’s boat *Hiyang Hiren* conveys a sense of Meitei history, literature and culture. Till the present day, the Meitei boat racing tradition called *hiyang tannaba* is celebrated every year. Thus, *Hijan Hirao* with its mythical, historical and cultural narratives brings out the importance of the cultural communications and traditions of the society.

Objectives and Methodology

The paper has explored the theoretical approaches of Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). It further has the objective to examine the response of the student participants when *Hijan Hirao* is used to teach listening and writings skills and to understand culture.

The extract of *Hijan Hirao* is employed to incorporate the teaching of listening and writing skills and culture for students, and was carried out using the English translation of *Hijan Hirao*. The study was conducted with the students of Class VIII from the Catholic School, Manipur. The number of students who participated in the study was 64. The testing of listening and writing skills was conducted with the student participants using the pre-test and post-test method. In the pre-test method, the conventional prose and poems prescribed by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur were used.

In the post-test method, the extract of *Hijan Hirao* adopting the CLIL approach was used. In the first part, the student participants were tested on understanding the content. They were required to write simple sentences on the subject matter taught in the class based on their listening ability. The second part of the test was application based. The student participants were given writing tasks and exercises based on the discussion of the subject matter where they conceptualized their ideas using their cognitive skills and presenting them in organized and grammatically correct sentences.

Some of the tasks and activities used in the post-test are:

1. Write simple sentences to explain culture and mythology.
2. Note-taking to test the listening and writing skills.
3. Group discussion on culture.
4. Write on the topic "Culture and Hijan Hirao"
5. Write a short story based on the poem, *Hijan Hirao* to incorporate the cultural elements depicted in the poem.
6. Read the extract and critically comment on it.

Findings

Table 1: Listening and Writing Ability When Using Conventional Prose and Poems Prescribed by the BSEM (Board of Secondary Education Manipur)

Criteria for assessment	The student is able to recognize new words and use them in sentences exhibiting knowledge and understanding from the text	The student is able to listen well and do the writing exercises with accurate sentences exhibiting knowledge and understanding from the text	The student is able to apply the knowledge learnt and can write in an organized form with accuracy based on the comprehension of the text
The percentage of the student participants who achieved the proficiency of listening and writing	48.3%	32%	19.7%

Table 2: Listening and Writing Ability When Using the Extract of Hijan Hirao

Criteria for assessment	The student is able to recognize new words and use them in sentences exhibiting knowledge and understanding from the text	The student is able to listen well and do the writing exercises with accurate sentences exhibiting knowledge and understanding from the text	The student is able to apply the knowledge learnt and can write in an organized form with accuracy based on the comprehension of the text
The percentage of the student participants who achieve the proficiency of listening and writing	41%	34%	25%

In the above findings, it has been observed that the level of learning of the student participants when using the extract of *Hijan Hirao* is consistently higher than when using conventional prose and poems prescribed by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BSEM). In the first criterion where the students are assessed based on their ability to recognize new words and use them in sentences through an understanding of the knowledge learnt, there is a slight decrease in the number of student participants from 48.3 percent to 41 percent. The reason might be that the student participants were used to the conventional prose and poems and so the introduction of the local cultural text might have made them reflect on the new kind of material. In the second criterion which tests the ability to solve the exercises given at the end of the class, there is a slight increase to 34 percent from 32 percent of the student participants. While in the criterion which assesses the application of the knowledge learnt, there is an increase from 19.7 percent to 25 percent. In both cases, the student participants are able to comprehend the content being taught in the study. In the case when the conventional prose and poems were used, the student participants could answer questions from the text. But when they were given tasks based on application of the content learned like group discussions, only some of the student participants

were able to take part. However when the extract of *Hijan Hirao* was used, the development level of the listening and writing skills in terms of application of the content learnt is found to be fairly higher. Most of the student participants were able to take part in the group discussions as the contents were familiar to them. After effectively listening to the group discussions, they were able to write and analyse the content.

Discussion and Analysis

In both cases, i.e. when the conventional prose and poems, and the extract of *Hijan Hirao* were used, it has been observed that learning of the content as well as the language skills have taken place. Integration of the knowledge learnt and application of it in real life situations is found to be less in the case of conventional prescribed texts, and was significantly higher in the second case. This can be attributed to the use of the indigenous cultural material, i.e. the extract of *Hijan Hirao* to teach content, culture, and language skills. In the CLIL approach, active learning of the content takes place based on the learners' existing knowledge. As the student participants were familiar with the existing local myths and cultural knowledge, active learning takes place. Further, in the CLIL approach, as the environment plays an important role in second language acquisition, the use of indigenous material in the study is found to be effective.

Conclusion

The study indicates that concurrent leaning of content and language takes place both when using the curriculum of BSEM and the local narrative. However, it clearly points out that the use of *Hijan Hirao* using the CLIL approach not only develops English language skills, but helps in greater understanding of culture. CLIL enabled the student participants to apply learning in real life situations, and at the same time takes steps towards preserving and promoting the indigenous culture.

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