Psychological Characteristics of Students in Teaching Foreign Languages Using the CLIL Method

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Abstract: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is increasingly recognized as a powerful methodology for foreign language acquisition. This article explores psychological traits and characteristics that significantly impact students' outcomes when CLIL is implemented in language education. Key factors including motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and cognitive flexibility are examined, providing insights into enhancing language learning through tailored pedagogical strategies.

Introduction: The effectiveness of CLIL, which integrates content instruction with foreign language learning, has prompted numerous educational institutions globally to adopt this innovative approach. Despite its widespread acceptance, understanding the psychological factors that underpin student engagement and success in CLIL remains crucial. Exploring these dimensions enables educators to optimize methodologies and improve learning outcomes.

Motivation is paramount in the context of CLIL, where students encounter both linguistic and academic challenges. According to Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation fosters deeper learning experiences. CLIL naturally promotes intrinsic motivation by connecting language use directly with meaningful academic content, thus making language learning authentic and contextually rich. Research by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2009) indicates that students involved in CLIL exhibit higher motivation levels due to increased relevance and immediate applicability of the language learned. Teachers utilizing CLIL must carefully design curriculum content to maintain student interest and motivation, leveraging topics students find engaging and personally relevant.

Foreign language anxiety significantly influences learning success. In CLIL contexts, the integration of language and subject content might initially heighten anxiety due to dual cognitive demands. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) described language anxiety as a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process.

CLIL classrooms should proactively address anxiety by fostering a supportive environment. Techniques such as peer collaboration, scaffolding, and continuous formative assessment help mitigate anxiety levels. Furthermore, a positive classroom climate where errors are seen as natural parts of the learning process significantly reduces anxiety.

Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura as belief in one's ability to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific outcomes, plays a critical role in the CLIL classroom. Students with high self-efficacy are more likely to actively participate, persist in challenging tasks, and achieve better academic and linguistic outcomes. In CLIL, teachers enhance self-efficacy through structured feedback and achievable learning milestones. Research by Mehisto, Marsh, and Frigols highlights that gradual content and language scaffolding positively impacts self-efficacy by helping students perceive language tasks as manageable.

Cognitive flexibility, the ability to switch thinking

modes or adapt cognitive processing strategies, is crucial for successfully navigating CLIL instruction. Since students simultaneously process academic content and language, cognitive flexibility is extensively employed. Studies by Coyle, Hood, and Marsh, 2010 suggest CLIL methodology significantly enhances cognitive flexibility, making students more adaptable learners. Educators are encouraged to structure learning activities that explicitly target and develop cognitive flexibility, such as varied group dynamics, cross-disciplinary tasks, and problem-based learning scenarios.

RESULTS

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate positive correlations between CLIL implementation and enhanced student psychological outcomes. Specifically, students in CLIL classrooms exhibit significantly increased intrinsic motivation, reporting greater enjoyment and engagement in learning activities compared to traditional language instruction. Anxiety levels are notably reduced as students become more comfortable navigating content in a foreign language, supported by a collaborative classroom environment.

Furthermore, enhanced self-efficacy is consistently observed, with students demonstrating greater confidence in their language abilities and higher persistence in facing challenging academic tasks. Cognitive flexibility, too, shows marked improvement, with students better able to shift between language and content tasks, reflecting improved adaptability and problem-solving capabilities. Resilience involves effectively coping with and overcoming academic challenges. Given the demanding nature of learning academic content in a non-native language, resilient students in CLIL contexts exhibit stronger coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and adaptability. Supporting resilience involves creating a classroom culture that normalizes challenges, fosters constructive responses to mistakes, and promotes a growth mindset.

Psychological characteristics significantly vary between students enrolled in CLIL programs and those attending traditional language classes, impacting their overall language acquisition process and outcomes. In CLIL classrooms, students often exhibit higher levels of intrinsic motivation because language learning is directly linked to meaningful academic content, enhancing relevance and perceived usefulness. Conversely, students in traditional language classrooms frequently depend more heavily on extrinsic motivation, such as grades or external validation, as language instruction tends to focus on isolated linguistic components without immediate real-world applicability.

CLIL learners initially may experience heightened anxiety due to the simultaneous cognitive load of mastering complex content in a foreign language. However, over time, structured CLIL programs often lead to reduced anxiety levels as learners become comfortable in authentic communicative scenarios. In contrast, traditional language classes often trigger anxiety associated specifically with language accuracy, testing situations, and isolated linguistic tasks, potentially hindering spontaneous language use.

Students in CLIL contexts tend to demonstrate higher self-efficacy, resulting from regular interactions and authentic language use tied directly to content knowledge. As students consistently engage in meaningful tasks, they develop confidence in their abilities. In traditional classes, learners' self-efficacy may fluctuate more dramatically, as tasks often involve abstract language rules and memorization, potentially undermining confidence when faced with real communicative situations.

CLIL students typically display superior cognitive flexibility because they continually process and integrate multiple cognitive demands—simultaneously learning language and academic content. Conversely, students in traditional language classes might experience less cognitive flexibility as their learning typically emphasizes discrete linguistic skills, reducing opportunities to develop adaptive cognitive strategies. Students involved in CLIL tend to develop greater resilience as they regularly encounter and overcome language-related academic challenges, becoming adept at managing setbacks through sustained problem-solving and perseverance. Traditional language learners may exhibit lower resilience, as challenges often appear disconnected from practical or personally meaningful contexts, limiting opportunities to develop robust coping mechanisms.

Uzbek students often exhibit a strong desire to learn foreign languages, driven by aspirations for higher education, international opportunities, and career advancement. This motivation is particularly evident in urban areas where access to resources and exposure to global cultures are more prevalent.

Language learning can induce anxiety among students, especially when instruction methods are heavily grammar-focused or when there's a fear of making mistakes. This anxiety can hinder active participation and speaking confidence. However, CLIL approaches, which integrate language learning with subject matter content, have been found to reduce anxiety by providing context-rich environments that encourage practical language use.

Students' belief in their ability to succeed (self-efficacy) varies, often influenced by teaching methods and classroom environments. Traditional rote learning methods may limit opportunities for students to develop autonomy and confidence in using the language independently. In contrast, CLIL methodologies promote active learning and problem-solving, enhancing students' self-efficacy.

The ability to switch between different tasks or thoughts (cognitive flexibility) is crucial in CLIL settings, where students must process both language and content simultaneously. While traditional classrooms may not emphasize this skill, CLIL environments encourage it through interdisciplinary learning and critical thinking activities. Resilience, or the capacity to recover from difficulties, is essential for language learners facing challenges such as complex grammar or unfamiliar vocabulary. Students in CLIL programs often develop stronger coping strategies due to the immersive and supportive nature of the learning environment, which encourages persistence and adaptability.

CONCLUSION

Understanding psychological characteristics like motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and cognitive flexibility can substantially enhance CLIL's effectiveness. Educators employing the CLIL method should actively create supportive, engaging, and cognitively stimulating environments that consider these psychological dimensions, thereby optimizing foreign language acquisition. Educators should actively integrate pedagogical strategies designed to foster intrinsic motivation, reduce anxiety, and enhance self-efficacy and cognitive flexibility. By creating supportive, engaging, and cognitively stimulating learning environments, educators can maximize the benefits of CLIL, improving both language proficiency and academic achievement. Future research should further explore longitudinal impacts and develop comprehensive frameworks for best practice implementation. Overall, CLIL learners generally display higher intrinsic motivation, greater cognitive flexibility, enhanced self-efficacy, and increased resilience compared to students in traditional language classrooms. However, managing initial anxiety effectively remains crucial. Recognizing these differences enables educators to create supportive environments, adapting their pedagogical strategies to foster positive psychological outcomes in both learning contexts.

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