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EDITED BY

Ileana M. Greca,
University of Burgos, Spain

REVIEWED BY

Melissa Cheese,
Bloomsburg University, United States
Almudena Alonso-Centeno,
University of Burgos, Spain

*CORRESPONDENCE

Lies Sercu
✉ lies.sercu@kuleuven.be

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The acquisition of subject literacy in secondary school CLIL and non-CLIL history education

Lies Sercu*

KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

In CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), subject matter content is taught in a foreign language to enhance the learners' mastery of the foreign language alongside subject matter learning. In previous research, no truly interdisciplinary stance was taken. By contrast, in the investigation reported here, the focus is on the integrated learning of language and content, investigating to what extent students master the characteristics of the genres typical of the subject discipline. Specifically, this article reports a study that, using insights from Systemic Functional Linguistics, investigated to what extent 18-year-old CLIL and non-CLIL students master the genre 'historical report' when writing in the CLIL language or in their mother tongue. On the basis of an interdisciplinary analysis of 60 student essays, we found that CLIL and non-CLIL students are equally able to express the voice of the historian in their texts and that overall text quality does not differ substantially between groups. In other words, regardless of the language in which they have studied history as a secondary school subject, they have learned at least to a certain degree to record, appraise, interpret, and evaluate historical facts, figures, and artifacts, just like a trained historian would do.

KEYWORDS

subject literacy, voice of the historian, CLIL, non-CLIL, English, systemic cognitive functional linguistics

Introduction

In CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), subject matter content is taught in a foreign language in order to enhance the learners' mastery of the foreign language alongside subject matter learning. The bulk of previous research has been concerned with three questions: is foreign language mastery enhanced through CLIL education? Does mother tongue mastery not suffer from CLIL education? And, thirdly, does subject knowledge not suffer from CLIL education? Viewed like this, no truly interdisciplinary stance has been taken in research. For example, the question has not been asked to what extent CLIL students learn the language of the subject and can produce the genres typical of the subject in the foreign language. Within this integrative conceptualization, students are expected to produce subject-specific discourse in the CLIL language. Discourse, then, does not merely refer to their ability to use specific lexical items in correct grammatical sentences while talking about subject matter. It also implies mastery of the characteristics of specific text genres commonly used within a certain scientific discipline (Council of Europe, 2016). "Genre" refers to a type of communication that is based on socially agreed-upon conventions. These conventions may concern the selection of topics, but also organizational, content-related or linguistic and stylistic features. Importantly, genres may be neutral in tone, but may also aim to manipulate the reader, promoting the authors' attitude toward the topic, their ideological convictions, or their appraisal of particular events (Sercu, 2021).

The study reported here aimed to investigate to what extent 18-year-old Flemish students in general secondary education taking a CLIL history course in English are able to use the voice of a historian when writing a composition in English in answer to an exam question touching upon subject matter covered in the classroom. Secondly, the study aimed to investigate whether and to what extent CLIL and non-CLIL students differ as regards their history literacy. Mastering the voice of a historian implies the ability to observe the conventions of the historical report, using an objectifying academic style to describe and narrate historical events, and put them in historical perspective. This genre does not typically allow for utterances of subjective interpretation and appraisal of, or involvement with the subject matter.

In what follows, it is first explained what can be expected of 18-year-olds in terms of writing in English and historical literacy on the basis of an analysis of curricular documents. Next, the study's methodology is presented and it is explained how the written essays (30 CLIL and 30 non-CLIL essays) were analyzed within Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL) and Martin and White's (2003) 'language of evaluation' framework. The article concludes with a presentation and discussion of the findings.

Background

Students' learning task in CLIL history-English

To determine what level of mastery of historical thinking as expressed in writing in English and in the mother tongue we can expect of 18-year-olds in Flanders (Belgium), we mapped the curricular attainment targets for history, writing in the mother tongue (Dutch), and writing in English for this age group. We also report the criteria put forward by the ECML/Council of Europe working group for writing in CLIL history (Council of Europe, 2015).

Becoming a historian at school: attainment targets for 18-year-olds

The development of students' historical thinking is a central objective within the subject of history (VVKSO, 2009). Learners begin to think historically when they begin to ask themselves historical questions or are confronted with them. To successfully resolve such questions, four central abilities have been discerned (Totter et al., 2024). First, the learner must be able to situate historical phenomena within a historical frame of reference. This frame of reference involves situating historical sources in time, space, and the broad social domains, being the political, social, cultural, and economic domains. A second ability is to reflect critically on historical sources and additionally make critical reflections based on these sources. Students are expected to be able to distinguish primary from secondary sources and analyze them. In doing so, they evaluate the usefulness, value, representativeness, and reliability of the source. This is done based in part on considering the context in which the source was created, the perspective of the creator, and the target audience for which the source was intended. A third ability is to form a reasoned historical picture from different perspectives. In this way, students build knowledge and

expand their historical frame of reference. They do this through historical argumentation in which they use typical historical modes of reasoning. Students argue a clear and logical case and must reach a substantiated judgment. A final ability concerns the acquisition of critical reflection on the complex relationship between past, present, and future. It is important for students to understand that the past and history and the image of the past are not always congruent. This is because a direct knowledge of the past is not possible, and the images we have of the past have come about through the study of relics and sources from different time periods. Here one must also be aware that there may be different versions of the past depending on the context of existence, for example, a Western view versus a more global view. This creates an awareness that the past is sometimes used or even misused for processes such as identity construction, group formation, ideology, and values formation (AHOVOKS, 2022).

Writing in the mother tongue: attainment targets for 18-year-old students

As far as writing in the mother tongue is concerned, 18-year-old students in general education are expected to be able to write texts that meet the criteria of a variety of genres, and are written for a familiar or unfamiliar audience. When given a particular writing assignment, it is up to the student to determine the text's contents, genre, and audience. Students are expected to construct the text logically using content and functional relationships, selecting vocabulary, grammar, form, and structural and organizational features judiciously to reflect audience, purpose, and context. The attainment targets also state that student should be able to use language imaginatively, creatively, and persuasively, including rhetorical devices (such as rhetorical questions, antithesis, and parenthesis). Finally, students should be able to quote their sources correctly (AHOVOKS, 2022; Department of English Education, 2013).

Writing in English: attainment targets for 18-year-old students

In the Flemish curriculum for English as a foreign language (VVKSO, 2014a), it is said that third-grade students, like second-grade students (15-16-year old), must be able to compose texts about concrete and familiar topics from their own living environment, but additionally and to a lesser extent, they must also be able to work around abstract topics, for example, relating to current events and the English-speaking world. The expectation is that their texts show more complexity than in the second grade, both linguistically (compound sentences) and in terms of content organization and text structuring. Text are generally still short, but can sporadically be extended in length. The students' vocabulary consists predominantly of frequent standard language words and is sufficient to formulate clear descriptions and opinions about their own environment and more abstract topics. Furthermore, students should be proficient in both the formal and informal varieties of English (VVKSO, 2014b). Taken together, this description suggests that students should be able to write at the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2020). The CEFR organizes language proficiency into six levels, from A1 (beginner) to C2

(proficient), which are grouped into three broad categories: Basic User (A1, A2), Independent User (B1, B2), and Proficient User (C1, C2). These levels are defined through 'can-do' descriptors that specify what learners can do at each stage of their language learning journey. The framework is widely used in Europe and increasingly in other parts of the world to facilitate language learning, teaching, and assessment.

Writing in CLIL history: expectations

When studying the B2 language descriptors for successful subject learning proposed by the ECML (European Center for Modern Languages) (Council of Europe, 2015) working group that linked CEFR descriptors to mathematics and history/civics learning, it can be concluded that in order to be able to function as a historian in the CLIL language, students need a B2 level of mastery of the foreign language. This B2 mastery comprises among others the following can-do statements.

The student

- Can explain different phenomena, results, or views on topical issues clearly.
- Can give the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions and options.
- Can give an account of or outline an issue or a problem clearly.
- Can discuss subject-related concepts and issues in detail, for instance, democracy.
- Can build a proof by stating arguments step by step in a structured and logical way that supports the final conclusion.
- Can express (in writing) evidence for conclusions drawn.
- Can summarize a wide range of information and arguments from a number of sources.

McCabe and Whittaker (2017) add that there are different ways of constructing historical texts depending on the purpose of the text. These differences can be classified into two general voices of the historian. On the one hand, there is the recorder voice that presents historical events objectively and factually with the result that the author of the text does not pass judgment or evaluation on the subject and stays in the background as much as possible. On the other hand, there is the appraiser voice that does include social evaluations and judgments about the subject and also expresses the author's point of view regarding these various evaluations. Within this second voice, another distinction can be made between an adjudicator voice and an interpreter voice. In the latter voice, the author/historian assumes responsibility for interpreting history. One step further is the adjudicator voice in which the author, beyond representing and interpreting history, also passes judgment on it (McCabe and Whittaker, 2017). In summary, within the voice of the historian, three important elements are present, namely objectively representing historical events, interpreting these events, and connecting the significance of these events to the present (Sercu, 2021).

Systemic functional linguistics as the essay appraisal framework

What we needed to analyze students' history reports was a framework that would allow us to assess in an integrated way students'

mastery of the contents of the history course on the one hand and on the other their ability to write as a historian from a linguistic point of view. We found Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) Framework (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004), complemented with Martin and White (2003) Evaluative language framework ideally fit for our purposes (also see Llinares and Morton, 2017; Llinares and McCabe, 2023).

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), three general types of functional meaning, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual, organize the language system and its utterances, such as written texts (Davidse et al., 2019). Making use of the possibilities of a given language system, language users produce texts (textual function) to write about something (ideational meaning) and creating a particular interpersonal context (interpersonal function). The text produced may refer to other similar texts or genres and make use of typical conventions, or not (textual function), and it may involve the readership in different ways. For example, authors may merely want to inform their readers, but they may also want to appeal to them, entice them into doing something, manipulate their views regarding something, etc. (interpersonal function). Ideationally speaking, authors make choices regarding what topics to include or to leave out, how to organize their text, what topics to emphasize or connect in order to present their worldview.

Because of the presence of both an ideational, textual and interpersonal perspective, the SFL framework is ideally fit for analyzing student compositions written within the context of CLIL history education. In such compositions, students write a text that is supposed to meet particular textual and linguistic conventions (linguistic-textual function). They write about the world for a particular audience (linguistic-interpersonal function) and this writing about the world is co-determined by their mastery of the language they are using (ideational-linguistic function).

We completed Halliday's SFL Framework with insights from Martin and White (2003), who identified the cognitive-linguistic appraisal resources of the English language, such as words, collocations or expressions to express feelings (judgment, admiration, praise, disapproval, criticism, social appreciation, social approval), engagement (monolog or dialog between different voices in the text, juxtaposing or contesting or refuting different voices) or graduation, with the latter term referring to language that can be used to sharpen, weaken, soften, enlarging or decreasing (the importance of) a saying or message. Given that historians are expected to use the objective register, it was determined that student texts should be void of such evaluative language. When writers express their moods, sense of engagement, or graduation too strongly or explicitly, their report cannot be considered neutral or reflective of the recording historian. Moreover, their report should not focus on the individual's views as expressed in the here and now, but possess a degree of generality that is independent of context parameters (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 38). Texts written in academic discourse will use precise terminology, generic terms that reflect the discipline's concepts and theoretical frameworks, objectivized forms of location in time, appropriate conjunctions, complex sentences expressing relationships, etc. (p. 38).

Research questions

Our research questions were the following:

- Are 18-year-old Flemish adolescents taking a CLIL history course in English able to write a high-quality English-medium historical report in response to a structured exam question?
- Are 18-year-old Flemish adolescents taking a CLIL history course in English as able as non-CLIL students of that age taking the same history course in their mother tongue to write a high-quality historical report in response to an exam question?

Our first hypothesis was that some students from both student groups would be able to write high-quality essays, but that other students would still be struggling with one or several aspects mentioned in the SFL, McCabe & Whittaker's frameworks, and in the curricular documents described above (Vermeersch, 2023). Our second hypothesis was that the CLIL language would not necessarily hamper the students' expression of their thoughts, given the fact that the mastery of English of adolescents is quite high in Flanders (Sercu and Strobbe, 2010). The English language is all around young people and many of them master a substantial body of vocabulary and grammar long before they start learning English as a school subject. Thirdly, we assumed that Dutch mother tongue teaching, assisting CLIL and non-CLIL students in writing essays about academic topics, would benefit both student groups with skills being transferred from the mother tongue into the English language (Hüttner and Smit, 2018; Llinares and McCabe, 2023; Meyer and Coyle, 2017). Fourth, we hypothesized that the mastery of historical skills would not be better in the non-CLIL group than in the CLIL group, a hypothesis that runs counter to what previous research feared, namely that CLIL education would lead to a loss in content mastery (for an overview, see Dalton-Puffer and Bauer-Marschallinger, 2019).

Methodology

Sample

A convenience sample of 30 CLIL and 30 non-CLIL students from general secondary education was used to investigate our research questions. All participants were studying in the same school and were taught history by the same teacher. In Belgium, CLIL regulations are quite restrictive, with a maximum of 6 50-min teaching periods per week being taught in the CLIL language. History is taught for 2 h per week. Whether students wanted to study in CLIL or not was their own free choice. All students signed an informed consent form before participating in the research.

Essay prompt

All students were given the same essay exam prompt, either in English or in Dutch. This essay question was prepared in collaboration with the history teacher.

The prompt touching upon the Palestine-Israeli conflict, ran as follows:

In the history of the region, some 'foreign' countries have been involved in the years toward, during, and after the declaration of independence of Israel in 1948. Select and explain the two most striking positions that were influential in the events that took place. Explain which countries were involved, what their presence

and actions implied for the region, and how it affected the situation in 1948. Write a 350-word essay and use sources to substantiate your argument.

To write their essay, students could use the sources (primary and secondary historical sources) they had been provided with in class. In this way, the test situation mirrored the way in which the students had been working throughout their history course, studying sources, summarizing them in historical narratives, interpreting facts, and reflecting on (today's) implications of decisions made in the past.

Scheme for analysis

The essays were analyzed using the scheme presented in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, the analysis of the essays was done using three main concepts, the voice of the historian, functions and appraisal (attitude, engagement, graduation). As regards the voice of the historian, three aspects were scored, namely the objective representation of historical facts, the interpretation of historical facts and the assessment of historical facts. The second concept used to analyze the essays is Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) Systemic Functional Linguistics theory which looks at how language functions in the context of "the real world. Here, in other words, the content focus is shifted to a linguistic focus. Within this theory, there are three parameters that can be realized in language to support the expression of content components. These are the textual metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction and the ideational metafunction. Using these three metafunctions, students can write convincing essays. Finally, Martin and White's (2003) appraisal frame of reference was used for analysis. This frame of reference complements the three metafunctions of language because, on the one hand, the metafunctions primarily attest to an objective use of language, while the appraisal frame of reference frames the subjective side of language use. Ideally, students should not use forms of subjective language in their essays since this is not a characteristic of a historian's writing style. This frame of reference was also included as a guide in the analysis since it was expected that not all students would be able to maintain a neutral tone when writing their essay.

The maximum score an essay could obtain was 10/10, earning maximum 1 point per analytic category, and maximum 1 point for overall text quality.

Example essay and example analysis

In Figure 1, an example can be found of an essay written by a student following the CLIL track.

The overall score assigned to this essay is 7/10. As regards the voice of the historian, the student presents the historical facts in an objective way. For example, the essay talks about "Britain's mandate," "the Balfour Declaration," and "the UN partition plan." These are all important historical facts, and therefore the student receives full marks for this first criterion, namely 'the historian as objective recorder of facts.' The interpretation and assessment of the historical facts are present, yet to a limited extent. For example, the student says that the various interventions of the foreign powers made the situation worse, but no more details or further interpretation are given. Therefore, the student is awarded half a point for 'the historian as an

TABLE 1 Scheme used for the analysis of the student essays.

Assessment criteria		Y/N	How it is said in the text
Voice of the historian	Historian as objective recorder of facts		
	Historian as interpreter		
	Historian as appraiser, evaluator, judge		
Functions	Textual function (coherence, relationships expressed in language, specialized vocabulary)		
	Interpersonal function (reader enticed, addressed)		
	Ideational function (worldview presented)		
Attitude	Emotions (expression of feelings)		
	Ethics (good/bad from ethical perspective)		
	Esthetics (expression of beauty)		
Engagement	Focus on personal views		
	Focus on others' views		
	Agreement with others' views		
	Disagreement, lack of compliance with others' views		
Graduation	Sharpening of message		
	Weakening of message		
	Enlarging of facts, events		
	Diminishing of facts, events, ...		

To understand how the Palestinian and Jewish conflict started we have to go back in time. The United Nations as well as five Arab countries were involved in the declaration of independence of Israel in 1948. Since 1922 Palestine had been ruled under Britain's mandate. In the Balfour declaration the Jews got the right to build their homes in Palestine. After WWII the survivors were trying to find a new country to start their new life in Palestine and the Britans referred this situation to the United Nations to find a solution for the Jewish homelessness. The United Nations came up with a 'solution' in 1947, a plan to separate Palestine into an Arab and a jewish state. But this UN Partition plan was rejected by the Arab leaders. On the other side it was accepted by the Jews. Shortly after this the British government decided to give the Jews the right to declare their own state on 15 may 1948. And this led both of them to be drawn into a war. Also Arab countries played a big role and were involved in the declaration of independence of Israel. The Arab League opposed the United Nations for the UN Partition plan. When Israel got the power in their own hands and declared their independence in 1948, 5 Arab countries Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria joined the Palestinian army and attacked Israel. To take control over the Arab areas and block the establishment of a Jewish state. In conclusion Different countries were involved in this situation and this made it all worse. It led to civil wars and conflicts between the Palestinians and the Israelis. It all started with finding a new home for the Jews and ended up with the Palestinians being chased away from their country.

FIGURE 1 Example essay written by a sixth-year CLIL student.

interpreter' and 'the historian as a judge'. Thus, for the aspect of the 'voice of the historian', this student achieves a total score of 2/3.

The student also manages to realize the three linguistic metafunctions. Using the 'textual metafunction', the student ensures that the essay is sound and coherent in structure. For example, the student makes adequate use of signaling words and phrases such as "on the other side," "shortly after this," or "in conclusion." Overall, the text is

well-structured using an introduction, a well-developed middle section, and a conclusion. The only downside to the textual structure of the essay is that there is no literal reference to historical sources, even though this was part of the assignment. The 'interpersonal metafunction' is well expressed in the essay. The student's goal is both to inform the reader about the influence the countries discussed had on the Declaration of Independence and to convince the reader that the two countries

discussed also had the greatest influence. Thus, this essay meets the requirement to express the ‘interpersonal metalinguistic function’ well. Finally, the ‘ideational metafunction’ is also well-developed by the student. The focus is on Palestine and Israel. Yet, the reader can connect the involvement of these countries in a civil war with a general desire of people to own their own land, and with the catch-22 that when one people is granted a particular piece of land, it may follow from this that another people is chased from that land. For the total metafunctions, the overall score of this study is just under 2.3/3.

Finally, the student manages to maintain an objective stance throughout the essay, but with some exceptions referring to the “big” role played by the Arab countries, using “worse” in the expression “made it all worse,” and selecting the verb “were chased away” instead of the more neutral “had to leave.” The overall score assigned for ‘appraisal’ was 2.2/3.

Finally, the student was granted 0.5/1 for the overall quality of the essay. The essay is rather well-written and meets what is requested in the exam prompt to a large extent. Yet, it fails to mention explicitly which (secondary) sources were used to substantiate the argument.

Results

In what follows, we first describe our findings in detail and, toward the end of the section, offer a graph that summarizes our main findings. In the detailed descriptions, one by one, we address the categories distinguished in Table 1. Each time, we present the findings for the CLIL group before those of the non-CLIL group, also providing specific examples from student writings. Overall, the findings, first, show that both groups are equally able to express themselves like historians do. Secondly, appraising historical facts appeared to be about equally difficult for both groups. Finally, linguistically speaking, the non-CLIL group slightly outperformed the CLIL-group being better able to express the different metafunctions distinguished in systemic functional linguistics.

Voice of the historian

The recorder voice: objective representation of facts

In the CLIL class, two-thirds of the students were able to describe in an objective way relevant historical facts related to Israel’s declaration of independence. The students who cashed a full point did so by mentioning and discussing important events and figures such as, for example, “The Balfour Declaration,” “The Partition Plan,” or “The Biltmore conference.” Yet, 20% of the CLIL-students appeared unable to adequately integrate an objective statement of facts into their essays. Even if they may have mentioned important events, they did not present them in a meaningful historical narrative. Students who described historical facts but did not name them were equally classified as not mastering the recorder voice of the historian. One student merely presented his subjective point of view and was not rewarded any points for this part of his answer. The average score for the CLIL students for this component of the voice of the historian was 0.8/1, which testifies convincingly to the students’ ability to objectively record historical facts.

As regards the non-CLIL class, 28 of the 30 students represented the facts objectively, naming and describing the same important historical events as in the CLIL class, but also focusing on the

Holocaust as an influential factor. One student received a zero for this section because she did not mention the events by name and only described the facts from her subjective point of view. For example, this student wrote the following:

I think this is because Britain and the UN are the most notable foreign powers with influence, because the territory of Palestine belonged to the British from the beginning. So if the British had thought more about how to solve the problem in a decent way from the beginning, there would have been far fewer deads and much of the conflict would not have existed.

The non-CLIL average for the realization of this facet of the historian’s voice was high, namely 0.9/1.

The historian as an interpreter of facts

During the open-book exam, students were allowed to use a wide range of sources. It was up to them to select and interpret the appropriate sources to support their arguments. Therefore, the main focus for the interpretation of the facts was whether students indicated why they used a particular historical event or source to discuss the influence of a particular country on the Declaration of Independence. Answers could be related to why a particular event or source was important, or to what important consequences followed from a particular event. For scoring purposes, a distinction was made between superficial interpretations, for which students received half a point, and in-depth interpretations, for which students could obtain a full point. If no form of interpretation was present in the essay, students received no points.

In the CLIL group, over one-third of the students were able to provide an in-depth interpretation of the sources they consulted. Thus, all of them were awarded a full point. Eighteen students gave a superficial interpretation and were therefore awarded half a point. Only one student was unable to interpret the historical facts and only gave a historical overview of events. An example of a superficial interpretation and an example of a more in-depth interpretation can be found below.

From the arguments and sources, we can conclude that the two most influential foreign countries were the United States and the United Kingdom (Superficial interpretation).

And if you look at the map from the Palestine Awareness Coalition (Canada), you can see that after the partition plan, the Palestinians lost more and more of their land (More in-depth interpretation).

The average grade-point for the CLIL group came down to 0.7/1 for interpreting the facts, which shows that interpreting facts is more difficult than recording them in an objective way.

In the non-CLIL group, 18 of the 30 students received a full point because they gave an in-depth interpretation of the sources consulted. Twelve students received half a point because their interpretation was slightly more superficial. None of the students obtained a zero score. Taken together, the average for the non-CLIL group was 0.8/1, again confirming that objectively recording facts is easier than interpreting them.

The historian as an appraiser

The analysis regarding ‘the historian as an appraiser’ focused on whether or not the students were able to refrain from expressing positive or negative personal attitudes toward the historical events they were describing, and whether they also refrained from taking sides with either the Jewish or the Palestinian people. The data show that students in both the CLIL and the non-CLIL group show larger varieties with respect to this criterion than with respect to the two criteria described above. This suggests that mastering this part of the voice of a historian, namely judging historical events in an objective and/or nuanced way on the basis of reliable sources is more difficult a subskill to grasp and apply when confronted with a historical question, like in the exam prompt.

In the CLIL group, a distinction can be made between students who gave only limited assessments and students who gave more extensive assessments in their essays. Six students gave limited assessments and 16 students more extensive ones. The rest of the group remained neutral. In their assessments, nine sided with the Palestinians, five with the Jews, and 10 did not choose sides. Regarding attitudes toward the influential countries, only two students described these countries’ influence in positive terms, while 18 did so in negative terms. Two students presented a nuanced picture, describing both positive and negative attributes of influence. An example for each type of assessment can be found below.

By doing this they gave the Jews ‘a signal’ to occupy this area which caused the Palestinians to be powerless (Siding with the Palestinian people).

Thus Palestine was established as a Jewish community and by this they would right the centuries old injustice against the Jews! (Siding with the Jewish people).

Great Britain has helped in a military way by helping the Israelis with troops, just like that one story of the Arab evacuation of Haifa (Positive influence).

In conclusion, different countries were involved in this situation and this made it all worse (Negative influence).

Based on the argumentation we can conclude that Britain had both a positive and a negative impact on the situation (More nuanced image).

In the non-CLIL group, 12 of the 30 students gave a (comprehensive) logical source-based assessment of the facts they described. Eighteen of the 30 students gave none at all. Of the students who did give an assessment in their essay, two students sided with the Palestinians thus taking a subjective stance toward the events. No students sided with the Jewish people. The remaining students did not explicitly choose a particular side in the conflict. Regarding the students’ views of the influential countries, none of the students described the influence as positive. Ten students rated the influence negatively and two students gave a nuanced view.

Thus, when looking at the number of students in each subcategory, it can be said that the non-CLIL students are somewhat better able to maintain a nuanced or neutral position in the conflict they describe than CLIL students.

Textual, ideational, and interpersonal functions of texts

Textual metafunction

To analyze to what extent the students are able to realize the textual metafunction in their essays, we looked at three textual elements that can ensure the coherence of a text. The first element is the use of signaling words. Secondly, texts had to use a historical report-like structure with an introduction, a middle section, and a conclusion. The third element for analysis was whether or not students referred literally to the sources they used to support their arguments.

In the CLIL class, the essays of 16 of the 30 students contained all three textual elements discussed above. Therefore, they received full marks for this component. Ten students used at least one textual element in their essays but failed to include all of them. If not all elements could be identified in the essays, the students received half a point. Eight students failed to use any of the textual elements, which resulted in a zero mark. On average, the CLIL group’s score was 0.7/1.

In the non-CLIL group, only six students out of 30 used all three textual elements to build their texts and thus received a full point. Twenty students in this class received half a point because they used at least one element. Four students did not use any textual element. The average for textual metafunction for this group was just over half a point (0,5/1), which is substantially lower than the mark obtained in the CLIL group and on the whole on the low side for a sixth-grade class writing in their mother tongue.

Interpersonal metafunction

Since according to the exam prompt, the students’ essays were to discuss two influential countries in relation to Israel’s declaration of independence, ideally, they should have chosen to use their essay both to inform readers about these countries’ influence and to convince readers that the countries discussed also effectively exerted a major influence on the situation. Indeed, this aspect of persuasion is an important factor within a text constructed according to an argumentative structure. If this aspect of persuasion could be recognized in the essays, a full point was given. If this was not the case then no points were given.

In the CLIL group, half of the essays showed this persuasive aspect in their structure, and thus the students in question were awarded a full point. The other students only informed the reader about the influence of the countries discussed and therefore received no points. The average for this group was 0.5/1.

Almost all students from the non-CLIL group used both informational and persuasive aspects in the construction of their essays, resulting in all of them receiving one point. The remaining four students did not exhibit this combination in their text purpose and therefore received a zero. Taken together, the non-CLIL group achieved 0.9/1, which is a substantially higher mark than that obtained by the CLIL students.

Ideational metafunction

The analysis of the idea-forming metafunction revolved around what focus students placed in their essays. Students were instructed to discuss two influential countries in the context of Israel’s declaration of independence. Therefore, it was examined whether they effectively balanced their focus on two influential countries in their essay and whether they elaborated this focus to a sufficient degree. A well-elaborated and balanced focus on two countries was worth a full point,

an unbalanced or poorly elaborated focus was good for half a point, and when the focus was only on one country or on very different aspects, no point was given.

For the most part, the CLIL group obtained a full point. For example, 20 of the 30 students managed to divide their focus well between two influential countries. Four students received half a point for this section because they focused mainly on one of the two chosen countries and barely touched on the other. The remaining six students received no points since they did not put the focus on two influential countries but switched to an overview of the historical events that took place in the context of the Declaration of Independence. This brings the average for the CLIL group to 0.7/1.

In the non-CLIL group, half of the students received a full point, 12 received half a point, and three students received no points. The reasons for awarding these points are similar to those discussed above. As a result, the average for this class also comes to 0.7/1.

Overall comparison of CLIL and non-CLIL groups

From [Figure 2](#), it can be seen that the CLIL and non-CLIL groups show very similar results as far as their ability to use the voice of the historian is concerned. The non-CLIL groups show slightly higher results with respect to the metafunctional aspect of historical report writing, which is largely due to the fact that the non-CLIL group appeared better able to write convincing reports than the non-CLIL group. As regards the students' ability to provide non-subjective appraisals of the historical information, it was shown above that some individual students in the non-CLIL group performed better than the average student, irrespective of whether it is a CLIL or a non-CLIL student. Appraising without taking a subjective stance appeared difficult for both groups. As far as overall text quality is concerned, no significant differences appeared between the CLIL and the non-CLIL group with average scores of 0,5 /1 and 6/1.

Discussion

Based on our findings, it can be concluded that students studying history in English are capable of producing high-quality historical

reports. They show a high ability to report facts objectively but struggle somewhat more with interpreting these facts, just like their non-CLIL counterparts. Another more difficult systemic function aspect of text writing concerns the interpersonal function where it appears that the texts written by the CLIL students are slightly less convincing than those written by the non-CLIL students. Using cohesive devices to enhance the coherence of their texts still appears difficult for both CLIL and non-CLIL students. The overall text quality for both the CLIL and the non-CLIL group centered around 0,6/1.

One of our hypotheses was that, contrary to previous concerns (as summarized by [Dalton-Puffer and Bauer-Marschallinger, 2019](#)), the non-CLIL group would not demonstrate superior mastery of historical skills compared to the CLIL group. Our findings show that the CLIL group overall does as well as the non-CLIL group, but that some aspects of historical report writing that are more directly related to language mastery are indeed less well mastered by the CLIL group. For example, the essays in the CLIL group used fewer cohesive devices than those in the non-CLIL group. They also use less convincing or nuanced language. These findings suggest that both groups master the voice of the historian to an equal degree, but that the mastery of the mother tongue and the English language are not at level, something which should not surprise.

It is encouraging to see that the genre of 'historical report' writing is mastered by both the CLIL and the non-CLIL group. Earlier research ([Sercu, 2021](#)) has shown that younger students, namely Flemish 15-year-olds, are less able to write like historians than the group included in the current investigation. We agree with [Hüttner and Smit \(2018\)](#), and [Llinares and McCabe \(2023\)](#), who argue that the cognitive development over time shapes learner performances more strongly than when they are in the mother tongue or a foreign language. Yet, we also want to underline that heightened attention to genre-specific language development is necessary if CLIL education wants to support CLIL students well to reach the attainment targets set for history for secondary education. Achieving an overall B2 level is required, as is the mastery of subject specific vocabulary, grammar and discourse to be able to realize the different genres typical of the subject.

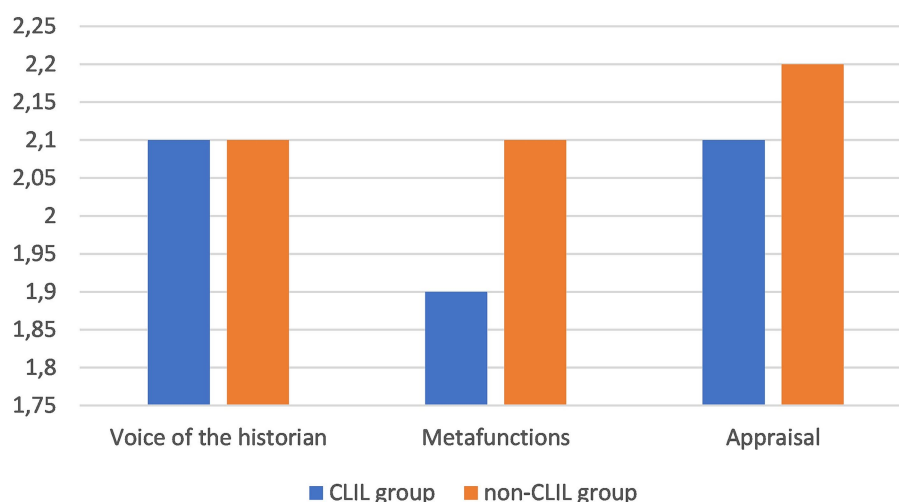


FIGURE 2
Overall results for the CLIL and non-CLIL groups.

Our findings, furthermore, suggest that what students learn in mother tongue education in terms of genre characteristics does not seem to suffice to promote mastery of specifically historical genres. The genres addressed in mother tongue education may be a formal letter, a CV, a website item, etc. To solve this problem, either mother tongue educators discuss historical genres with their students, or history teachers do so. Discussing genre characteristics within the confines of the CLIL subject would make for truly language-and-content integrated learning. We believe explicit teaching may be necessary as implicit learning may not suffice and automatic transfer of skills from one subject to another is not to be expected (Barnett and Ceci, 2002).

Even if the mastery of the mother tongue, as expected, appears higher than the mastery of the English language, the CLIL adolescents participating in this study demonstrate a mastery of English that is close to the B2 level, which is one level up from the B1 level that is defined as the attainment target level for writing for this age group. In other words, CLIL education appears successful in stimulating English mastery beyond the level that can be achieved through foreign language education, thus better preparing students for further studies in higher education, as is one of the premises CLIL is built on.

Though the sample for this qualitative study was relatively small, we believe we have been able to show important tendencies and provide detailed insights as regards the acquisition of historical literacy. The results underline the beneficial effects that can arise from CLIL education also with respect to the perhaps more accelerated mastery of academic discourse and genre characteristics. In the future, it would be interesting to study what effect explicit teaching in how to write like a historian might bring young people. All of this can be done when history or mother tongue teachers are knowledgeable about the genre of the historical report and know how to teach its characteristics. By using Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic Framework (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) together with the 'language of evaluation' framework of Martin and White (2003), a professional training program could be set up that might clarify both a genre's content characteristics as well as what language can be used to produce a text that meets the genre's conventions. Such a course may be useful for CLIL and non-CLIL teachers alike, and not only for those who teach history but also for teachers of other subjects (e.g., Social Studies, Cultural Studies or Civics). Understanding the different learning tasks involved in writing like a historian or a social scientist may help teachers to reconsider assessment practices in CLIL education and opt for truly integrative approaches that assess both content-and-language in an integrated way.

We consider a second significant strength of this research to be its demonstration of how the analytic scheme provided detailed insights into students' history literacy learning. Contrary to previous research that reported in more general terms about the lack of detriment of CLIL education to subject matter learning (e.g., Badertscher, 2009), we have been able to show which facets of the voice of the historian appear more difficult for CLIL students than for non-CLIL students. Moreover, we have focused on genre mastery, not only on knowledge reproduction, which was often the case in previous research (see, Dallinger et al., 2016).

Conclusion

This qualitative study on the acquisition of the voice of the historian in the final year of general secondary education in a CLIL

history English group and a non-CLIL group studying history at the same level highlights the need to consider CLIL performance on a history exam as a complex interaction between language and content mastery. Awareness and understanding of this interaction can support both teachers and learners in their approach to CLIL education. Together with a focus on the acquisition of subject matter contents, CLIL pedagogy can deepen its focus on the mastery of genre characteristics and the language needed to command these genres in a foreign language. In this way, CLIL education will become truly integrative, granting equal importance to language and subject matter learning.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by PRET Privacy and Ethics Committee KU Leuven. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

LS: Writing – original draft.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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