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Abstract

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an educational context in which a foreign language, in the majority of the cases English, is used completely or partially as the medium of instruction in the teaching of subjects, such as History and Biology, has enjoyed increasing popularity in Austria in the last 10-15 years. Among the aspects most favourably influenced by the method is the learners' lexical proficiency. Replicating an earlier Swedish study (Sylvén 2004), the present thesis investigates whether CLIL learners have a larger and more complex general English vocabulary than students taught in the traditional way.

The theoretical part provides an overview of the history of lexical learning, and discusses the concept of word knowledge, as well as the role of vocabulary in the framework of CLIL. The major part of the thesis is then devoted to my empirical research. For this purpose, 33 students (21 CLIL, 12 traditional) of grade 11 at a Viennese grammar school were involved in a test sequence comprising a battery of four different types of lexical tasks. In addition, questionnaires concerning personal background were filled in by all students as well as the teachers of the CLIL group.

The results of this empirical survey show that the CLIL students clearly outperform their traditional peers; yet, the degree of superiority depends on the respective test type used. Tasks allowing for a wide range of answer possibilities, including explanations in German, were successfully completed even by less proficient learners of English, whereas the most difficult of all test types turned out to be highly representative of the participants' lexical competence as a whole.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that exposure to English outside the educational context had a positive impact on the students' test performance. Nevertheless, the CLIL method itself proved to play a more decisive role: Irrespective of their extracurricular use of English, the traditional students scored significantly below their colleagues who constantly received English language input through CLIL. In this respect, it should be noted that it was also more often than not the CLIL learners who indicated that they used English for various purposes in their leisure time, rather than their control group peers. Besides, the CLIL students were more likely to come from university-educated family backgrounds, displayed overwhelmingly positive attitudes towards English and language learning in general, and rated their own linguistic competence considerably higher than the traditional subjects did.

Overall then, the CLIL group's superior lexical performance cannot be traced to the practice of Content and Language Integrated Learning alone. Rather, the CLIL method triggers, and depends on, a variety of other sociolinguistic, didactic, as well as psychological factors, which, in sum, have contributed to the learners' outstanding scores.