

Breaking ESL Communication Barriers with CLIL in Indian Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Existing literature consistently documented challenges faced by learners from India and several other countries in various aspects of effective English as a second language (ESL) communication. Despite decades of prolonged, rigorous reforms; conventional ESL pedagogies have often fallen short, equipping learners with adequate ESL communicative competence required for the complexities of real-world interactions. The persistent research gap has underscored a growing need for innovative teaching-learning methodologies which foster learners' engagement and nurture substantive commitment to their learning process. One such promising pedagogical innovation is content and language integrated learning (CLIL). CLIL fosters ESL acquisition with subject-based instruction through authentic curricular content. Empirical studies have mentioned, CLIL has maximized opportunities of using ESL in meaningful contexts and empowered learners to approach diverse communicative situations with greater confidence and competence. Present study aims to explore the potential of CLIL to overcome ESL communication barriers in Indian higher education and advocates for contextual learning experiences, align with learners' academic and cultural realities. By adopting PRISMA 2020 framework, this study has systematically reviewed a wide range of literature conducted globally on ESL acquisition and communication in higher education, prioritizing insights from India.

Keywords: ESL Communication Skills, ESL Teaching-Learning, Innovative Pedagogy, CLIL, Higher Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century globalized world communicating in English is a prerequisite for comprehensive academic advancement (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley,2019; de Wit & Altbach,2020; Kurusu et al.,2024) professional opportunities (Meierkord & Schneider,2021; Rao,2019) and cohesive social integration (Bolton, Graddol & Meierkord,2011; Graddol,2010). For countries where English holds second-language status such as India, Philippines and several Asian, European and African nations; educational reforms and global spread of English create dual pressures- achieving academic competency through ESL based instruction while developing ESL proficiency to access and demonstrate that content (Cenoz, Genesee, & Gorter,2014; Maurer et al.,2015). In multilingual and multicultural higher education

settings (such as India), learners often encounter intertwined ESL communication barriers- linguistic (e.g., academic vocabulary load, disciplinary discourse), sociocultural (e.g., intercultural adjustment, local norms) and psychological (language anxiety, self-efficacy) which notably constrain learners' participation and correlate with reduced academic performance (Hajiyeva,2024; Ma,2022; Polishchuk,2017; Vanalestari & Setyarini,2025; Wu, et al.,2022). English plays a pivotal role across India's diverse linguistic landscape, where 1369 classified (including 22 schedule languages) and 1474 unclassified mother tongues coexist (Census,2011). Despite the necessity, Indian learners face persistent challenges in ESL acquisition and communication across educational levels, reflecting gaps in academic language proficiency, limited exposure to ESL and pedagogical support (Ennin & Manariyo,2023; Kumar,2023; Majumder,2024; Mythiri & Karthika,2023).

The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER,2020) highlights persistent disparities in access of quality education and learning environments between urban and rural institutions in India, which complicate ESL acquisition and communication of learners in resource-constrained rural settings. Alone (2024), Kalia (2017), Meganathan (2019), Pachimala & Raju (2018); Raju & Joshith (2017), Singh & Halim (2023), Suar et al., (2025) have attributed several reasons for weak ESL acquisition of Indian learners such as diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds; heterogeneous home literacies; socioeconomic constraints limiting access to quality input and support; limited exposure to English in authentic contexts; conventional teaching-learning that emphasizes examinations; geographical and cultural barriers to language-rich environments; insufficiency of trained teacher and continuous professional development; restricted use of technology in ESL education which have led to memorization over real-life communication in ESL among students

In response to these challenges, innovative pedagogy is essential to strengthen learners' ESL acquisition and communicative competence. One such promising pedagogical approach is content and language integrated learning (CLIL) which employs a unified approach to language and content learning (Coyle, Hood & Marsh,2010; Dalton-Puffer,2011; Vency & Ramganes,2013). CLIL is "a shift from 'instructivism' to constructivism', where learners learn by actively constructing knowledge and developing language skills for themselves" (Scholey,2015). CLIL is a pedagogical framework (de Zarobe,2017; Goris, Denessen & Verhoeven,2019; Hu & Gao,2020; Kováčiková,2020; Morton,2016; Ruiz de Zarobe,2015) in which learners learn a non-language subject through a target language (mostly ESL/EFL) while simultaneously acquiring both content knowledge and language skills (Burazer and Skela,2024; Dalton-Puffer,2011; Dalton-Puffer and Smit,2013; de Zarobe,2013; Marsh,2012; Nikula, Dalton-Puffer and García,2013; Ruiz de Zarobe & Querol-Julián,2025; Yumnam,2023). CLIL integrates subject content with the target language to create an immersive, contextualized learning experience (Cenoz,2015; Omarbekova,2020; Sudarso, Globalisasi & Dibdyaningsih,2024; Villabona & Cenoz,2021). This approach is grounded in "dual-focused education," where language is taught not in isolation but used as the medium of instruction for other academic disciplines (Dalton-Puffer,2011; Dalton-Puffer & Smit,2013; Pérez-Cañado,2012; Gómez & Cañado,2022). CLIL aims to develop both language and academic proficiency by teaching subjects such as science, history, psychology mathematics and others through ESL as the medium of instruction. The dual-focus approach enables learners to acquire ESL naturally while exploring academic content. Several empirical studies have reported, CLIL significantly enhanced learners' ESL communication skills, fosters dynamic and enriched teaching-learning experience (Coyle, Hood & Marsh,2010; Lin,2016; Macaraeg et al.,2024; Marsh,2012; Taillefer,2013).

According to Coyle, Hood and Marsh (2010), CLIL is “an educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language.” CLIL advocates for bilingual education (ESL and mother tongue/s), especially in higher education institutions. The uniqueness of CLIL lies in the 4Cs framework (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010), which integrates content, language, cognition and culture within a single pedagogical design:

- Content: Developing subject knowledge, concepts, and skills that meets curriculum’s learning goals.
- Communication: Using the target language (ESL) to interact and express ideas.
- Cognition: Developing critical thinking, problem-solving and reasoning.
- Culture: Fostering cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

This innovative integration enables students to learn subject content and develop language proficiency at the same time, deepening their comprehension and skills in the target language (Cenoz, Genesee & Gorter, 2014; Llinares, 2015). The integration of CLIL in higher education globally has gained significant momentum in past few decades. The increasing interest of CLIL adaptation in multicultural and multilingual educational settings has highlighted its promising opportunities for ESL acquisition and communication. However, the actual impact of CLIL on learners’ ESL acquisition and communicative competency in Indian higher education context has yet to be examined comprehensively.

OBJECTIVES

The study has undertaken to address the following primary objectives-

1. To identify ESL acquisition and communication barriers among learners with special emphasis on Indian higher education.
2. To examine the extent CLIL-based pedagogies can address prevalent ESL communication barriers in higher education.
3. To explore the current status of CLIL integration in Indian higher education.
4. To recommend CLIL integration strategies for Indian higher education institutions to address ESL communication gaps.

METHODOLOGY

This review critically analyses existing literature on CLIL with respect to ESL acquisition and communication skills in higher education, with a special emphasis on studies from India. Current study employs a systematic review by adopting PRISMA 2020 framework for its robust, internationally accepted framework, which ensures transparency and methodological rigour. The revised checklist and flow diagrams offer a comprehensive research framework for bringing together diverse CLIL and ESL studies globally, enabling rigorous synthesis and drawing reliable conclusions in Indian context. For this study, searches were conducted across scholarly databases, internet archives and journal websites to identify English-language studies published from 2007-2025. The search yielded several relevant sources. After screening for relevance, credibility and recency 116 peer-reviewed journal articles and 20 book chapters were selected for analysis. Reference lists of shortlisted studies are hand-searched to identify additional eligible publications. The review identifies ESL acquisition and communication barriers, status of CLIL integration in India and emerging themes and trends in using CLIL to enhance ESL acquisition and communication in higher education, with particular attention to Indian context. A qualitative synthesis has been undertaken, organising the evidence into coherent categories and thematic strands.

DICUSSION

Objective 1: To identify ESL acquisition and communication barriers among learners with special emphasis on Indian higher education.

English holds a distinctive position as a second language (ESL) in India and gains prestige as an associate official language. English acts as a socio-cultural, political and economic backbone of the nation for its extensive use across key domains- education, governance, administration, management, business and everyday communication (Azam, Chin & Prakash,2013; Lin,2018). Despite its widespread importance, developing effective ESL communication skills in India is hindered by multiple barriers.

Linguistic Barriers: Several linguistic challenges hinder seamless ESL acquisition including limited vocabulary, syntactic and grammatical difficulties, lack of familiarity with academic discourse, use of jargons, complex structures, abstract concepts, restricted exposure to domain-specific terminology; which discourage overall ESL comprehension (Agrawal,2014; Alone,2024; Bhatia,2022; Bhattacharya,2022; Graddol,2010; Meganathan,2019; Pachimala & Raju,2018). Green (2022), Schmitt et al., (2017) have reported learners need a vocabulary size of 8,000 to 9,000 words to achieve optimal lexical coverage and comprehend academic texts at the college/university- level. Majority of learners from India and several other countries enter higher education with vocabularies far fewer than the required size, which constrains their ESL acquisition, communication and comprehension (Macaro et al.,2018; Rajkhowa & Das,2015; Sindkhedkar,2021; Srilakshmi & Mani,2023). The problem intensifies with sudden shifts to English medium instruction, despite students' uneven exposure in ESL in K12 (Agnihotri, 2017; Mahapatra and Mishra, 2019; Robert and Meenakshi, 2024). De Jong (2018), Pickering & Gunashekar (2016), Tavakoli & Wright (2020) have observed learners often experience a significant gap between conversational fluency and overall language proficiency in ESL, both of which are essential for success in higher education.

Multilingual Environment: The complex multilingual environment often hinders early ESL acquisition, which further challenges effective communication at advanced levels (Dsouza,2025; Jayendran, Ramanathan & Nagpal,2021; Kaushik & Khanna,2024). Widespread multilingualism in India and other countries contributes to code-switching and first language interference in ESL acquisition and communication (Bhatia,2017; Bhatia,2022; Kumari,2024; Zubair,2025). Switching to mother tongue disrupts ESL fluency and impede clear communication (Ezeh, Umeh & Anyanwu,2022; Kumar, Nukapangu & Hassan,2021; Remoshan,2021; Rubab & Zaidi,2022). In Indian academic setting, Aporbo (2024), Bredtmann, Otten & Vonnahme (2021), Rao (2024) note linguistic diversity leads learners to rely on their native languages for ESL expression and struggle to retrieve English words, which results frustration and diminished confidence among learners.

Cultural Constraints and Limited Exposure to English: Cultural attitudes and norms in several regions discourage open expression in ESL, especially among younger learners (Alisoy,2024; Choudhury & Kakati,2017; Gangavarapu et al.,2022; Sahu,2024; Wan,2021). Al Zoubi (2018), Kumar (2024), Peters (2018), Robert & Meenakshi (2024), Sharma & Dwivedi (2025) have consistently reported learners with greater English exposure outside the classroom have demonstrated higher ESL proficiency and confidence in real-life communication. In reality, majority of young Indian learners have limited opportunities to practice English outside the classroom which hinders their ability to develop practical ESL communication skills and lead to fear of making mistakes, reluctance to practice in public settings (Darasawang & Reinders,2021; Özdemir & Seçkin 2025; Ramli, Fitriawati & Nirmala,2024; Septiawan et al.,2025).

Educational Disparities: Agrawal (2014), Das (2023), Garg, Choudhury & SK (2022) note significant disparities in availability of educational resources and quality between urban and rural India. ASER (2020), Kumar (2024), Muduli (2021), Singh & Halim (2023), Tilak & Choudhury (2021) reports urban schools often have well-trained English teachers, better resources and rural schools face shortages of trained staff, infrastructure, which hinders early ESL development and faces challenges in coping ESL proficiency in later stages.

Curriculum Constraints, Exam-oriented Pedagogy and Teacher Preparedness: In Indian academic context, traditional ESL methods and exam-oriented pedagogy emphasize memorizing grammar, vocabulary, language structures and written examinations over developing communicative competence (Borg, Padwad & Nath,2022; Meganathan,2015; Sharma,2013; Sharma & Dwivedi,2025; Sharma & Joshi,2024; Suar et al.,2025). Which creates a disconnect between ESL acquisition and real-world interactions and leaving learners struggle to engage in meaningful communication (Bhattacharya,2022; Kapur,2017; Rajkhowa & Das,2015; Sindkhedkar,2021). On the other hand, majority of Indian educators lack adequate training in ESL pedagogy which reduces the effectiveness of classroom instruction and communication (Mahapatra & Mishra,2019; Nguyen et al.,2023; Pickering & Gunashekar,2016; Suar et al.,2025).

Objective 2: To examine the extent CLIL-based pedagogies can address prevalent ESL communication barriers in higher education.

Given these challenges, CLIL offers an effective solution by embedding ESL acquisition into content areas. A comprehensive review of the literature supports the efficacy of CLIL in enhancing ESL acquisition and communication skills in several ways (De Diezmas,2016; Evnitskaya & Morton,2011). CLIL emphasizes a dual focus on content mastery and language proficiency, which can be particularly beneficial in multicultural and multilingual contexts such as India (Banegas,2016; Sudarso, Globalisasi & Dibdyaningsih,2024). Below are insights from several studies highlight to what extent CLIL enhances ESL communication skills.

Authenticity: Lasagabaster & Doiz (2016), Marsh (2012), highlight CLIL enhances cognitive and linguistic benefits, leading to improved ESL communication skills among learners. Their empirical works depict how learners engaged in CLIL demonstrate greater language proficiency and content knowledge than their peers in traditional ESL programs. Aladini & Jalambo (2021), Fernández-Costales (2023) further extend by embedding language acquisition in academic content through CLIL which fosters authentic, meaningful communication, helping learners to outperform their peers (enroll in traditional ESL programs) in vocabulary acquisition, oral fluency and critical thinking skills. By utilizing authentic materials and topics, learners can apply their acquired language skills in practical situations.

Enhanced Engagement: A growing body of research shows CLIL creates a vibrant learning environment where learners actively participate in their own learning. Coyle (2013), Pérez-Cañado (2012), report learners in CLIL programs often express greater enjoyment in their learning and reduce monotony of traditional ESL methods. Banegas (2012, a), Coyle (2018), Meyer et al., (2018) emphasize CLIL fosters a sense of ownership among learners, increasing their motivation and commitment to learning.

Real-World Application: CLIL helps learners communicate about real-world issues, fostering a sense of purpose in their language learning. Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010); Gabillon (2020); Mettewie et al., (2024) reports contextualized language learning enhances both relevance and applicability; motivating learners to use English beyond the classroom. Aladini & Jalambo (2021) reveal learners in CLIL

programs are more likely to use English in real-life scenarios, effectively bridging the gap between classroom learning and practical communication. Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra (2014) highlights, CLIL learners are better prepared for tasks requiring English proficiency in real-world settings.

Cognitive skills development: CLIL promotes development of higher-order thinking skills, critical thinking and motivation by encouraging learners to analyse, synthesize and evaluate information. Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010) highlight cognitive processes are essential for effective communication and CLIL has a positive effect on learners' communication skills, critical thinking and motivation. Dalton-Puffer (2011) supports this notion and highlights, learners in CLIL classrooms often demonstrate improved critical thinking abilities, which enable them to articulate their thoughts more clearly in English. Lasagabaster & Doiz (2017), Pérez Cañado (2018), Pérez Cañado & Lancaster (2017) suggest CLIL contributes better long-term retention of language skills than traditional methods. Cruz (2021), Fernández-Costales (2023), Guntur et al., (2023) report CLIL enhances creative thinking and problem-solving skills and contributes to learners' overall intellectual growth.

Cultural Awareness: Engaging with diverse cultures through CLIL helps learners to develop intercultural communication skills. Exposure to different CLIL perspectives foster empathy and understanding which are key components of effective communication in today's globalized society. Romanowski (2018), Yang (2019), Gómez-Parra (2020) indicate CLIL promotes cultural awareness, allowing learners to appreciate various viewpoints and communicate more effectively across linguistic boundaries. Yang (2021), Montaña-Acosta (2025) further emphasize CLIL enhances learners' understanding of cultural nuances, which are crucial for successful communication in multicultural contexts.

Holistic Learning Experience: CLIL provides a comprehensive learning experience by integrating language and content, enhancing retention and comprehension. Gajo (2007) supports this viewpoint and reports CLIL fosters a deeper understanding of both language and content, leading to more effective learning outcomes. Lorenzo, Casal & Moore (2010) report learners who participate in CLIL programs exhibit improved performance in both language and subject assessments, highlighting the interconnectedness of those domains. Coyle, Hood & Marsh (2010) emphasize the importance of integrating content and language, and report learners engaged in CLIL are better prepared for academic and professional success.

Objective 3: To explore current status of CLIL integration in Indian higher education

Growing demand for English-medium education across socioeconomic groups makes CLIL relevant in India's multilingual educational context (Pareek,2024; Scholey,2015). CLIL primarily involves teaching and learning from academic disciplines (other than languages) in ESL to learners whose first language is any Indian language. CLIL has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach which supports ESL acquisition without sacrificing content comprehension. The aim of CLIL is multifaceted in the Indian context. First, CLIL can be used as a strategic model to bridge the gap between learners from Indian and English-medium instruction in higher education. Second, it can be used to enhance ESL communicative competence and skills among learners who are part of the regional/vernacular medium of instructions. Third, it can promote bilingual competence (L1 and ESL) and subject knowledge simultaneously among learners. Fourth, CLIL can equip learners with basic cognitive abilities such as thinking, analysing, solving problems and expressing content knowledge (Campillo-Ferrer, Miralles-Martínez and Sánchez-Ibáñez,2020; Fernández-Costales,2023) in ESL irrespective of their mother tongues (L1) and sociocultural backgrounds. Fifth, CLIL aligns with the vision of National Education Policy 2020, which

advocates for 21st century skills and multilingual proficiency (three-language formula) to balance linguistic equity with global competence. The policy aspires India to become a knowledge hub for global education while recognizing English (ESL) as a global linked language to uplift academic standards and professional growth. In the given scenario, CLIL plays an important role by incorporating ESL in regular teaching-learning.

Although CLIL is in its budding stage, several research projects, pilot implementations and government-supported initiatives have explored its potential in Indian educational scenario. British Council projects have been implemented in several Indian states including Gujarat, Kerala and Maharashtra (Joint British Council English INSET projects in Mumbai and Maharashtra- Scholey,2015). Several Indian and European universities have taken great initiatives for successful implementation of CLIL at tertiary level of education; one such promising project is CLIL@India (2016-19). This joint research project has been undertaken by University of Castilla-La Mancha, Spain; University of Milano, Italy; University of Latvia, Latvia; Symbiosis International University, Pune; Pondicherry University, Pondicherry and Chitkara University, Chandigarh. Brooks (2021), Cinganotto (2023), Ganesan (2016), Iswarya & Sundarsingh (2022), Kapur (2019), Lal & George (2021), Madhavaiah (2019), Preksha & Kaur (2024), Relañó-Pastor & McDaid (2022), Tamilselvi (2018), Yumnam (2023), have conducted significant studies on implementation strategies, problem- prospects and impact of CLIL in Indian higher educational context.

Objective 4: To recommend CLIL integration strategies for Indian higher education institutions to address ESL communication gaps.

It is evident from the existing studies, CLIL helps learners to develop fluency and confidence in using ESL by creating immersive and contextualized learning experiences. To successfully implement CLIL in Indian classrooms, educators need to consider several practical aspects discussed below.

Curriculum Design: Educators and policy makers may design curricula which ensures learners are learning language skills in a context that enhances their understanding of the subject matter. Gajo (2007), Marsh (2012) highlight the growing need to create coherent links between language and content to enhance learner understanding. Graves (2016), Vázquez & García (2017), Pham & Unaldi (2021) emphasize the importance of aligning content and language objectives in CLIL curriculum design.

Teacher Training: Effective CLIL implementation requires well-trained teachers and educators to navigate the complexities of integrating language and content instruction. Teachers need training in both lexical and pedagogical skills (Scholey,2015) to deliver CLIL lessons effectively and create engaging, effective and meaningful CLIL experiences for learners. Coyle et al., (2010), Sudarso et al., (2024), Morton (2024) highlight the growing need for ongoing professional development to equip teachers with necessary skills, strategies and resources for successful CLIL implementation. Hillyard (2011), Roiha (2012), Godzhaeva & Logunov (2015), McDougald (2015), Morton (2017), Pérez Cañado (2018, b), Villabona & Cenoz (2021) report teachers who receive specialized training in CLIL methodologies are better prepared to address the challenges of integrating content and language.

Assessment Methods: Traditional assessment methods fail to capture both learners' content knowledge and language proficiency adequately in a CLIL context. Alternative assessment strategies including project-based assessments, presentations, peer evaluations provide a more comprehensive view of learner progress (Coyle et al., 2010). Casal (2016), DeBoer & Leontjev (2020), Kao (2023), Sofía (2023), Wong (2024) suggest formative assessment practices are particularly effective in CLIL contexts due to continuous feedback and improvement mechanisms.

Feedback Mechanisms: CLIL provides timely and constructive feedback essential for learners' growth. Educators may facilitate opportunities for self-assessment, peer feedback, allowing learners to reflect on their learning and identify areas for improvement (Coyle, 2013). Meyer et al., (2018) reports feedback mechanisms in CLIL classrooms fosters a growth mindset among learners, encouraging them to take risks and improve their language skills. Alisoy (2025) highlights effective feedback practices enhance learner confidence and motivation.

Resource development: Developing appropriate resources is crucial for successful CLIL implementation at higher education level. Gajo (2007) suggests incorporation of a variety of materials can increase learners' motivation and interest in learning. Fürstenberg & Kletzenbauer (2012), Mehisto (2012), Morton (2013), Siepman & Pérez Cañado (2022), Guerrini (2023) advocates for utilization of diverse resources to make content more accessible and enrich learners' CLIL learning experience. Educators can utilize multimedia resources including videos, interactive simulations, online platforms and AI tools to increase learner engagement and facilitate meaningful learning experiences.

Policy Support, Research and Innovation: Several studies have emphasized both central and state governments should take initiatives to promote CLIL in schools and colleges by prioritizing funding and framing comprehensive educational policies (Marsh, 2012; de Zarobe, 2013; Fortanet-Gómez, 2013; Wallace, Spiliotopoulos & Ilieva, 2020; Zhu et al., 2024). In Indian context, ongoing research on CLIL is essential to refine methodologies, develop assessment tools, ensure continuous professional development of teachers explore new applications.

CONCLUSION

Content and language integrated learning represents a radical transition in ESL education in India by addressing the shortcomings of conventional teaching-learning methods and integrating language acquisition into meaningful contexts. CLIL promotes holistic, integrated multidisciplinary and experiential learning which aligns with the vision of National Education Policy 2020. NEP 2020 emphasizes on optimal learning environment, 21st century skills to inculcate among Indian learners and highlights "Effective learning requires a comprehensive approach that involves appropriate curriculum, engaging pedagogy, continuous formative assessment and adequate student support". CLIL has the potential to cater to all the necessities of learning environment mentioned above. CLIL allows learners to meet cognitive, affective, linguistic and sociocultural demands of present-day world. It fosters authentic communication, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, cultural awareness and interdisciplinary learning as essential components of 21st century skills. In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, CLIL offers a promising solution to bridge communication gaps and content mastery in higher education. However, the successful integration of CLIL largely depends on comprehensive teacher training, continuous professional development, curriculum development and equitable access to resources. With robust policy planning and strategic implementation, CLIL can greatly impact ESL education globally and prepare learners for a future where ESL is not just a language but a gateway to opportunity.

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Data Availability Statement: All data supporting the findings of this study are derived from published and openly accessible literature, which has been properly cited in the References section.

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