

CLIL Strategies and Their Effects on International Standardized Tests

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Theoretical Framework | 7 |
| Objectives..... | 15 |
| General Objective | 15 |
| Specific Objectives | 15 |
| Methodology..... | 13 |
| Context..... | 15 |
| Instruments | 17 |
| Data Analysis | 18 |
| Results: Analysis, Findings, and Discussion..... | 22 |
| PBL: Test-Driven Projects..... | 23 |
| TBL: Balancing Curriculum, Tests, and Engagement..... | 35 |
| Thinking Classrooms: Implementation for Test Preparation..... | 37 |
| Beyond Grades: LOA in Practice | 40 |
| Test Preparation through CLIL Classrooms | 43 |
| Conclusions | 45 |
| Annexes | 51 |
| References..... | 53 |

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explores the effects of strategies that are used in CLIL learning environments and their effect on the preparation for international standardized tests. Those strategies include Project-Based Learning, Task-Based Learning, Thinking Classrooms, and Learning-Oriented Assessment within two ESL bilingual schools in Valle de Aburrá, Colombia. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan analysis. Results show that the above CLIL strategies enhance language proficiency, critical thinking, and student engagement. However, implementation varies due to institutional constraints and limited teacher training. The study concludes that integrating CLIL strategies into test preparation can bridge the gap between exam readiness and meaningful content-rich instruction, supporting academic achievement and holistic bilingual education.

Key Words

Task-based learning, Thinking classroom, Preparation for international certification exams, English as a Second Language, Learning Oriented Assessment

Este estudio fenomenológico cualitativo explora los efectos de las estrategias utilizadas en entornos de aprendizaje CLIL y su impacto en la preparación para pruebas estandarizadas internacionales. Dichas estrategias incluyen el Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos (ABP), el Aprendizaje Basado en Tareas (ABT), las Aulas de Pensamiento (Thinking Classrooms) y la Evaluación Orientada al Aprendizaje (Learning-Oriented Assessment) dentro de dos escuelas bilingües ESL en el Valle de Aburrá, Colombia. Los datos fueron recopilados a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas, observaciones de aula y análisis de planes de clase. Los resultados muestran que las estrategias CLIL mencionadas mejoran la competencia lingüística, el pensamiento crítico y la participación de los estudiantes. Sin embargo, la implementación varía debido a limitaciones

institucionales y a la capacitación limitada de los docentes. El estudio concluye que la integración de estrategias CLIL en la preparación para exámenes puede cerrar la brecha entre la preparación para las pruebas y una instrucción significativa rica en contenido, apoyando así el rendimiento académico y una educación bilingüe holística.

Palabras Clave:

Aprendizaje Basado en Proyectos, Thinking classrooms, Preparación para Exámenes Internacionales, Inglés como Segunda Lengua, Evaluación Orientada al Aprendizaje.

Introduction

Bilingual education policies in Colombia have changed throughout the years, aiming to tackle the need for improving language proficiency in the school population and demanding standards and curricula aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Mora, 2019). However, bilingualism policies frequently do not correspond with the real teaching environments. Policymakers can be unaware of the practical circumstances, resulting in ineffective execution and insufficient English proficiency in students (Cely, 2024). Furthermore, teachers are often excluded from decisions about bilingualism policies, resulting in inadequate training that undermines the quality of bilingual education. (Cely, 2024).

As a result, bilingual schools seeking global education certification must ensure their students' exposure to rigorous assessments evaluating their in-depth subject knowledge, conceptual understanding, and higher-order thinking skills (Cambridge International Education, 2019). Schools have the essential role of preparing students for higher education. Students need to prepare adequately for admissions tests and certification examinations. Some of these assessments are conducted in English and require a specific level of proficiency in the language. Furthermore, certain universities, both locally and internationally, mandate that applicants submit

international English certifications (Dang & Dang, 2023) as part of their application process. Consequently, having a comprehensive understanding of the proper methodologies to promote constant learning for future challenges and prepare students for their certification is a task that bilingual schools must do. Bilingual education boosts cognitive skills, including enhanced focus, concentration, and problem-solving abilities. These cognitive advantages are associated with superior performance in English, making certification a crucial milestone for students to display their proficiency and cognitive growth (Creed et al., 2024).

Standardized international tests (SIT) are designed to evaluate non-native speakers' skills in the target language for academic or migratory purposes (Read, 2022). Additionally, these assessments aim to evaluate English language proficiency according to Inner Circle standards (such as American and British English). These assessments are extensively utilized for both academic and professional objectives around the world (Zhang, 2021). Nowadays, bilingual schools are tasked to prepare students to be proficient in all kinds of contexts around the world, which means mastering a second language.

Crosswise, Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) subjects provide the tools and knowledge for learners to gain agency in their path to proficiency (Leontjev & deBoer, 2020). That is why it is necessary to delve into the intricate connections between some strategies to prepare learners for SIT and CLIL. CLIL effectively develops language proficiency by prioritizing both second and first languages equally (Darvin et al., 2020). Consequently, this research conducted a comprehensive analysis of teachers' multifaceted teaching experiences in two bilingual schools in Valle de Aburrá, which is an urban area located at the center of Antioquia, Colombia. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of various CLIL strategies as reflected in teachers' lived experiences when preparing students for SIT in bilingual schools. The findings contribute meaningfully to the ongoing discourse surrounding bilingual education.

In addition, the two chosen institutions for this study were high and middle-class bilingual schools in Envigado and Medellín. Calendar B school in Medellín has around five hundred students, and Calendar A school in Envigado has around one thousand three hundred students. Accordingly, CLIL strategies have been used in second-language lessons, and their effects have been assessed through teachers lived experiences in their lessons. These assessments evaluate communication skills and accurately reflect students' English proficiency levels.

In summary, this research attempts to answer the following question: How do strategies for international standardized test preparation and the CLIL approach influence the English as a Second Language teaching experiences in two bilingual schools?

Theoretical Framework

This research focuses on studying Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) strategies in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. This review examined Project-Based Learning (PBL), Task-Based Learning (TBL), Thinking Classrooms, and Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) as CLIL mechanisms, as both bilingual schools employ these strategies in their methodologies. Moreover, this study analyzes these strategies through the lens of English International Certification exam results.

In CLIL, instruction is given in a second language (L2) to support learners in acquiring a target language in bilingual subjects (Darvin et al., 2020; Leontjev & de Boer, 2020). This approach has increased students' motivation and provides opportunities to develop social and cognitive skills for operating in the multilingual and multicultural world by promoting content mastery and language proficiency without hindering the first language (L1) (Kunschak, 2020; Leontjev & deBoer, 2020).

Educators can approach language learning from different perspectives, depending on the process they are developing. Language learning and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) both focus on communication and operate in authentic contexts. Language learning and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP) are context-reduced and centered on students' abilities to process information, such as questioning, debating, and enquiring. Finally, learning through language seeks to grasp new concepts, and new vocabulary and language structures are necessary (Pixel, 2020; Leontjev & deBoer, 2020).

Test preparation strategies refer to the methods and resources that learners use to enhance their performance on standardized tests. These strategies can include formal activities, such as attending face-to-face classes or using online resources, as well as informal practices, such as completing practice tests or accessing downloadable study materials (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

Test preparation strategies are shaped by local educational practices, individual traits like age and gender, and beliefs about what methods work best. For instance, some learners may prioritize teacher-led instruction, while others prefer peer advice or self-study tools, such as timed practice tests (O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

CLIL teaching performance and stability can present challenges. Some senior teachers conveyed feelings of uncertainty about their position in their school. Newly qualified teachers saw the General English Program (GEP) as an opportunity to enhance their teaching profiles through CLIL training. (Codo, 2023). For example, in Catalonia, Spain, the GEP aimed to extend CLIL beyond innovation-inclined schools. The GEP teachers required a B2 level of English or other languages like French, German, or Italian (Codo, 2023). Hence, there is a likelihood that teachers continue disclosing strains when implementing CLIL because of the need for knowledge in strategies, training, and self-doubt that revolves around teaching content in L2 (Kim & Graham, 2022; Codo, 2023).

Furthermore, other issues are to be considered, such as the roles and responsibilities of teachers working collaboratively with CLIL. The process of carrying out a teaching project together has been recognized as ambiguous and constantly put under the scope of power dynamics (Darvin et al., 2020). In contrast, not only does it become a problem if a teacher is a senior and feels insecure, but there is also the burden of feeling left out in discussions about materials and strategies with more confident teachers. In addition, Kunschak (2020) talks about the workload that some teachers must carry while figuring out classes with barely available materials and funding. Therefore, this puts teachers under constant pressure to use the right content in the second language with depleted resources. Consequently, it is not a wonder that the teaching community has not fully embraced the CLIL approach.

This research frequently mentions CLIL strategies: Task-based Learning (TBL), Project-based Learning (PBL), Thinking Classroom, Language-oriented Assessment, and Critical Thinking skills strategies. Task-based learning can bridge the content and the language CLIL promises to develop since it guides learners into how to use language while manipulating content language (Kunschak, 2020). It complements the learning environment with practical, holistic, and intellectually stimulating settings that motivate students to communicate their ideas and accomplish goals. Teachers must align the goals set by the curriculum with straightforward tasks and detailed rubrics to create a better environment. Additionally, considering the priority given to completing tasks and the ability to acquire some L2 skills, the lack of books and materials can prove to be a challenge (Kunschak, 2020).

PBL is a constructivist theory aligned with the needs of 21st-century education by focusing on student-centered, hands-on learning (Sánchez, 2023). Unlike traditional teaching methods, PBL is especially effective in motivating students. This strategy makes students more engaged in class and helps them work better together since what they learn is more meaningful (Sánchez, 2023; Shekhar et al., 2023).

According to Sánchez (2023) and Shekhar et al. (2023), in a PBL experience, students get to develop a project in groups with real-world relevance where different skills and knowledge areas are at play. Students are the center of the process; Therefore, the teachers focus on supporting students' needs and creating a learning environment that fosters intrinsic motivation, active participation, and student ownership helping them build knowledge rather than just receive it.

Task-Based Learning (TBL) aims to promote meaningful tasks that promote second language use in authentic life situations, in which scenarios engage the students to work in teams in which communication is relevant for accomplishing the goal. This strategy is student-centered and seeks to encourage learners to take an active role in their learning process. It has three stages,

the first one, pre-task, is used to introduce the topic and prepare. Secondly, the task cycle is the reporting and performance part, and finally, the post-task is where the students reflect on the second language focus. Grammar and vocabulary are learned in context and are not the focus of the task (Ellis et al., 2020).

Educators sometimes regard TBL and PBL as sister approaches. They promote interactive classrooms, learner autonomy, and collaborative work. Teamwork is promoted to fulfill specific tasks connected to environmental issues or real-life situations (Kunschak, 2020; Sánchez, 2023). Hence, both strategies work as complementary methods that engage students to work on small tasks for a bigger project.

Thinking classrooms are an approach that invites students to develop critical thinking (CT) skills. Learners understand learning as a dynamic process of exploring, questioning, and revising ideas, rather than focusing on memorization. This approach focuses on using CT in L2, and it divides it into three categories: examining how CT strategies and techniques affect L2 skills, investigating the relationship between CT and other factors that influence learning, and studying how specific CT strategies and activities impact the development of CT skills (Ghanizade et al., 2020).

Thinking classrooms develop their tasks on vertical whiteboards available for students to work standing, while their work is visible to everyone else. This way, collaboration and teamwork are the main strategies for increasing students' performance. Students usually can develop activities with different people chosen randomly, with the intention of reducing tension and developing diverse interactions with fixed roles. Teachers design tasks to encourage students to think instead of memorizing specific content. The teacher has the role of offering hints for the ones struggling with the task and extension for the ones who solve the problems easily; also, establishing norms that can promote respect for cultural differences (Liljedahl, 2020).

Assessment should support CLIL's primary mission, which is to provide information about learner content and linguistic knowledge; therefore, the teacher can adjust their teaching strategies to guide the learners toward goals they have not achieved yet (Kunschak, 2020; Leontjev & deBoer, 2020). Subsequently, assessment should also involve learners activating cognitive thinking and reasoning processes more autonomously (Xavier, 2020). Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) proposes that all evaluations applied should be for learning; as a result, no matter, if your tool is a quiz or a collaborative activity, through Feed-forward Feedback, the learning purpose of assessment is reinforced more than the measurements (Sánchez, 2023; Xavier, 2020).

According to Kunschak (2020), Leontjev & deBoer (2020), and Xavier (2020), Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) relies on four key principles, starting with aligning assessment tasks with learning objectives to accurately measure target competencies. Learners must know the objectives they are chasing throughout the process and the criteria used to assess their progress to achieve them. The teacher encourages students to critically evaluate their progress. Students reflect on their own work and that of their companions to develop strategies for future applications, as they follow the paths marked to achieve the objectives. Lastly, the teacher's feedback aims to pinpoint the student's accomplishments and areas that still need improvement. It emphasizes in-person and timely communication with students.

On the other hand, private schools nowadays in Colombia face a curricular dichotomy because of the demand for international certifications for students (Madroñero et al., 2023). These certifications come in many shapes and forms. Still, the most recognized ones are the ones that have dual diploma academic programs, such as Cambridge International Schools (CIS), International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (IB), or Academic International Studies (AIS). The issue comes with the debate between the country's English as a Second Language (ESL) and

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) program. First, “a second language learning context is one in which the target language is widely used in the language society, whereas foreign language learning contexts are those where the target language is learned and used mainly in school settings, specifically in classrooms.” (Zhang & Kang, 2022, p. 02)

However, private bilingual schools that use L2 settings and dual diploma programs have also been looking for ways in which students can have more exposure to L2 settings besides the classrooms. For example, students in bilingual schools travel to English-speaking countries for various immersion programs, attend events such as UN models alongside other schools in L2, and participate in English summer camps with some frequency. ESL research has also demonstrated that teenagers nowadays are being increasingly exposed to English content in digital media, which shows how the status of English has been progressively changing to ESL in several countries around the world due to this (Muñoz & Cadierno, 2021).

Cambridge’s International General Certification of Secondary Education (IGCSE) for 14 to 16-year-olds comes in handy for schools that desire to prepare students whose first language is not necessarily English as candidates for international high-stakes assessments in a variety of bilingual education settings (Shaw, 2020). The IGCSE is carried out at the end of the eleventh grade. It can include written, oral, coursework, and practical assessments.

The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a globally recognized standardized test designed to evaluate the English language proficiency of individuals who aim to study, work, or migrate to countries where English is the primary language of communication. It assesses four key language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. The British Council, IDP: IELTS Australia, and Cambridge Assessment English jointly manage IELTS. The test is available in two formats: Academic, for those pursuing higher education, and General Training, for those seeking work experience or immigration purposes. Its comprehensive structure ensures that test-

takers are evaluated in real-life communication scenarios, making it a reliable measure of English language ability (British Council, n.d.).

High-stakes assessments can have serious unintended negative consequences at both macro and micro levels, affecting entire systems and individual efficacy, agency, and capacity to be successful, known as negative washback (Leontjev & deBoer, 2020). Students can feel overwhelmed and pressured by their families, making them unable to achieve the expected results (Wuthrich et al., 2020). The methodology used for exam preparation can also be monotonous and stressful when requiring the students to take as many mock exams as possible to prepare them for actual tests. In contrast, CLIL would offer teachers opportunities to face this responsibility with less burden and creative strategies. In summary, students must adopt new approaches to learning and preparing for international exams.

International universities usually require dual diplomas from students who come from different countries. IELTS exams offer students the possibility to study abroad with a national diploma. The IELTS test originated from the English Language Testing Service (ELTS) established by the British Council in collaboration with Cambridge University (Read, 2022). The primary goal of the test was to measure English academic reading competence and vocabulary through tasks that simulated real-life situations. Organizations now promote it as both an academic study test and a test for migration purposes. Approximately 309 universities prepare their students for English academic reading competence and vocabulary (Warnby, 2024; Read, 2022).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative perspective to understand teachers' experiences, knowledge, and achievements deeply, and to identify the CLIL approach strategies they use to

prepare students for standardized international tests. Qualitative research allows researchers “to describe, understand, and interpret human phenomena, human interaction, or human discourse” (Lichtman, 2023, p. 20). This research focuses on a phenomenological study about understanding and describing the strategies teachers use when preparing for international English certification exams. These strategies have four pathways according to the CLIL approach: first, PBL design; second, TBL activities; Third, Thinking Classroom design; and last, LOA implementation.

This phenomenological research uses a hybrid approach that entails both interpretative and descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology focuses on describing experiences as individuals perceive them, and interpretative phenomenology is about interpreting these experiences (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). Moreover, regarding data collection and analysis, this research has interviews with open-ended questions to elicit detailed descriptions from participants and class observations, which can provide insightful experiences of interactions with the strategies on test preparation. Hence, it would be possible to assess CLIL approach strategies, with a qualitative methodology, in preparing students for standardized international tests in two private bilingual schools in Valle de Aburrá.

Question

How do strategies for international standardized test preparation and the CLIL approach influence the English as a Second Language teaching experiences in two bilingual schools?

Objectives

General Objective

Analyze CLIL approach strategies in teachers lived experiences as they prepare students for standardized international tests in two private bilingual schools in Valle de Aburrá.

Specific Objectives

Describe CLIL strategies in lesson plans and class designs in both schools to enhance students' test preparation skills.

Determine English Language Teachers' perceptions of strategies for teaching ESL and standardized test preparation.

Foster a deep understanding among teachers of how to apply CLIL strategies in test preparation effectively.

Context

International private bilingual schools were first intended to educate children of multinational companies' representatives, and kids from expatriate communities, to offer them a bilingual education with bicultural programs. Later, National bilingual schools proposed a bilingual education for Spanish speakers who wanted their children to have better opportunities (de Mejía, 2020). This project focuses on two national private bilingual schools serving medium-high socioeconomic populations in the metropolitan area between Medellín and Envigado, Antioquia.

Referring to mission, vision, and key programs, School A is an institution that aims to educate students to do well in even the smallest actions. For nature and conviction, they want their alumni to progress according to their philosophy through responsible freedom from love, reason, and the common good. At the same time, school B works forward innovative processes, educating leadership and skillful students who contribute to an inclusive and sustainable society.

Both environments are categorized as National Bilingual schools and teach English as a Second Language. They are both associated with the Cambridge curriculum and train their students in the four communicative skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. They expect their students to learn English as a Second Language, so they are required to achieve a B2 level according to the CEFR, although some students can achieve a C1 level. In School A, students need to take Cambridge Checkpoints exams in 6th and 9th grades, in 11th grade they must take the IGCSE, and in 12th grade they take the IELTS. While in school, B students are required to take IELTS in 11th grade and use Checkpoints and other Cambridge exams in 5th and 8th grades.

The stakeholders involved in this study are eight English teachers. Three of them work at School B, a national institution, teaching grades 5, 8, and 11. The other three are from School A, an international B calendar school offering national and international curricula. The school assigns these teachers to 6th, 9th, 11th, and 12th grades in the international system, which correspond to 5th, 8th, 10th, and 11th grades under the Colombian national education system (Calendar A). Most participants hold a bachelor's degree in education with a focus on language teaching. While the grade names differ between schools due to the coexistence of international and national educational frameworks in School A, their placement within the students' academic trajectory is equivalent.

This project examined the relationship between standardized evaluation and teaching strategies in the CLIL approach, aiming to reflect on school processes and support similar contexts that are transitioning into bilingual education, while seeking to understand the effects of standardized evaluation.

Instruments

When selecting the instruments, the chosen ones were those that could reveal the participants' ideas, knowledge, and purpose (Lichtman, 2023), as well as the dynamic interactions between them and their students, which is the case with semi-structured interviews, class observations, and review of lesson planning.

This research adopted Lichtman's (2023) view of interviewing as a guided conversation, aiming to listen to participants' perspectives on the strategies that teachers use to prepare students for standardized international tests. They conducted face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with eight teachers who were involved in high-stakes test preparation. The analysis chose this type of interview because it allows them to gather information using predetermined questions and to seek clarification or elaboration from the interviewee (Lichtman, 2023). During the interview, they took the opportunity to explore the teachers' perspectives in depth on strategies for teaching ESL and preparing students for standardized tests.

Nonparticipant observations were crucial for witnessing the participants in their natural environment. Researchers documented six instances of classes where students were preparing for international exams. The study adopted the instrument as an interpretive and reflexive process, with researchers remaining attuned to the human interactions that occurred during the observed classes (Lichtman, 2023). The tool developed was entirely open-ended, consistent with many qualitative research methods. The study examined factors such as the number of students, the classroom environment, seating arrangements, levels of student engagement, student roles, and specific classroom events or moments that reflected the implementation of CLIL strategies.

The study analyzed written materials, recognizing their potential to reveal participants' thoughts, ideas, and intended meanings (Lichtman, 2023). This study selected lesson planning as the primary artifact for analysis. It examined several classes, cycles, and projects using a checklist

that assessed elements such as clearly defined objectives, the development of language skills and/or content, the integration of authentic situations and materials, proposed tasks, opportunities for collaborative work, critical thinking, and teacher support. These elements served to identify characteristics indicative of a student-centered approach. The study assessed the information collected through nonparticipant observations and written documents based on the researcher's expertise (Lichtman, 2023), which aimed to identify various CLIL strategies implemented by participants in their classrooms and the corresponding student reactions.

Utilizing semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observations, and the evaluation of written materials, this study offered an in-depth understanding of how educators prepare students for standardized international assessments through CLIL strategies. The integration of these methods enhanced the study's findings and the significance of reflexivity and sensitivity in qualitative research.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a structured and organized iterative approach to extracting significant insights from non-numeric data. This methodology is particularly beneficial for this research, as it involves open-ended questionnaires, reviews of lesson plans, and classroom observations. The framework presented by Bingham (2023) offers a thorough guide for conducting rigorous and credible qualitative analysis. It integrates deductive and inductive coding methods, guided memoing, and analytic questioning to facilitate the creation of actionable conclusions. This five-phase approach ensures an effective plan, communication, and performance of systematic qualitative data analysis, thereby improving the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of this study.

This study employed triangulation to enhance trustworthiness and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the teachers lived experiences, as recommended by Bans-Akutey

and Tiimub (2021). Triangulation, particularly data and methodological triangulation, supports the validation of findings by incorporating multiple sources and techniques by combining semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan reviews. This research enhances both credibility and analytical depth. Triangulation involves studying a single phenomenon using multiple theories, data sources, methods, or investigators to gain a more comprehensive understanding. It aims to corroborate, elaborate on, and illuminate a research problem, thereby minimizing biases and enhancing the generalizability of the study (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023, p. 7).

This study employs Bingham's (2023) qualitative data analysis process to examine data collected from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan reviews. It utilizes both inductive and deductive coding strategies. To analyze data, triangulation integrates multiple complementary sources, exploring a phenomenon from diverse temporal and spatial perspectives. This process engages various individuals to promote collaboration and mitigate biases, ultimately enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Donkoh & Mensah, 2023, p. 8).

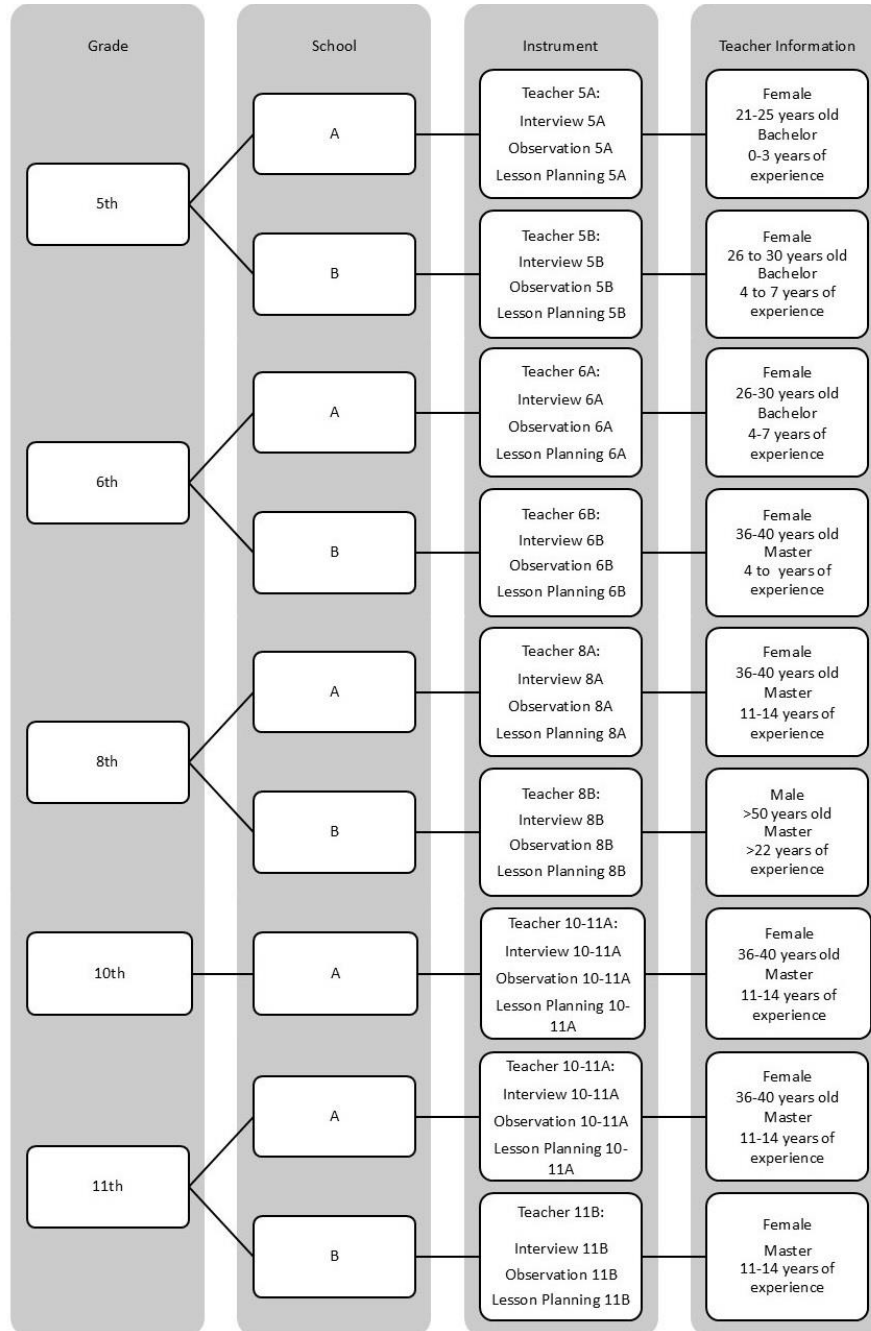
First, Attribute Coding under deductive methodology was applied to systematically organize data based on predefined attributes (Bingham, 2023) such as school, teacher, teacher's age, teaching experience, education level, and the grade level they currently teach, ensuring consistency across all instruments. This phase utilized attribute coding to organize data by type, source, time, and location. For instance, the process labeled data from open-ended questionnaires, lesson plans, and classroom observations separately. ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, imported and labeled this data. This methodology ensured appropriate tagging for all information, facilitating its easy retrieval and analysis.

The participants in this study were eight English teachers: three from a national school (School B), teaching grades 5th, 6th, 8th, and 11th, and three from an international B calendar

school (School A), teaching grades 6th, 9th, 11th, and 12th, which correspond to national grades 5th, 8th, 10th, and 11th. Each teacher participated in an open-ended interview, was observed through non-participant observation, and submitted lesson plans for analysis (see Figure 1). Next, Topic Coding, part of a Deductive methodology, categorized the data according to the research questions and theoretical frameworks (Bingham, 2023). The instruments were designed around predetermined analysis categories to guide data collection toward specific aspects of the study related to the CLIL strategies implemented in both schools. In this second phase, it was necessary to sort data into relevant topical categories. It was essential to develop key topic codes based on these research questions and objectives. For instance, this research focuses on teaching strategies for standardized test preparation, student engagement with CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) strategies, and learning outcomes. It was fundamental to create the following topic codes for each of these categories: (topic codes, artifact codes, teacher codes, etc.)

Figure 1

Graphic Overview of Teacher Participants by School, Demographics, and Instruments.



Note. This figure presents the distribution of teacher participants by grade level and school type (School A: international B calendar; School B: national). Each teacher is listed by their pseudonym, along with the instruments they use, as well as their demographic and professional details.

Then, open coding, adopting an inductive methodology, enabled the identification of new patterns and themes that naturally emerged (Bingham, 2023). These were taken from participants' responses, classroom observations, and artifacts analysis, enriching the study with unexpected insights. This third phase involved conducting open coding by reading through the data within each topical category and identifying emerging patterns, themes, and concepts. This methodology involved creating and applying codes during the data analysis process. It was an iterative process because it required continuously comparing new data with previously coded data to refine and develop the current codes. This iterative process helped identify consistent patterns and themes across different data sources.

The fourth phase involved identifying patterns, themes, and findings. It involved pattern coding, which entails reviewing the data coded in the previous phase to identify patterns and develop themes. This process involved collapsing initial codes into broader analytic concepts.

Finally, in the Application of Literature and Theory, Deductive and Inductive methodologies were used. Findings were examined in the context of existing research, while remaining open to novel contributions to academic discussion (Bingham, 2023). The study's theoretical foundation and existing literature guided the further development of codes. The analysis applied these codes to the research data, connecting its findings to existing research.

This structured approach ensures a systematic, transparent, and rigorous analysis of the strategies teachers employ in preparing students for standardized international tests through the CLIL approach, aligning with the study's phenomenological perspective on understanding teachers' experiences and instructional practices.

Results: Analysis, Findings, and Discussion

The study identified the five categories outlined in the theoretical framework through data collected from interviews, non-participant observations, and lesson plan analysis:

- PBL: Test-Driven Projects
- TBL: Balance in Curriculum, Test, and Engagement
- Thinking Classrooms: A Gap in Practice
- Beyond Grades: LOA in Practice
- Test Preparation

Each category emerged from the data gathered from the above-mentioned instruments applied to the participating teachers. It was done by a close analysis of pedagogical choices, instructional intentions, teachers' perceptions, and classroom practices. Within each approach, both strengths and weaknesses were identified concerning test preparation and the development of 21st-century skills, providing insights into how teachers navigate the demands of standardized assessments while aiming to promote critical thinking, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

PBL: Test-Driven Projects

PBL is an instructional approach centered on engaging students in investigating and resolving real-world questions, challenges, or problems. It emphasizes inquiry, collaboration, creativity, and reflection, often integrating various skills across disciplines (Sánchez, 2023). In bilingual education, PBL offers a dynamic environment for developing both language proficiency and academic content mastery, as it allows students to use language meaningfully in context-rich scenarios (Sánchez, 2023; Shekhar et al., 2023).

This approach requires multiple task types to effectively prepare students for standardized assessments and literature-based challenges. "By engaging students in activities that require them to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information, PBL models can significantly enhance critical thinking skills. These activities often involve drawing connections between historical events and

contemporary issues, thereby fostering a deeper understanding and critical analysis" (Yu & Zin, 2023, p. 7).

Bearing in mind the above mentioned, the data gathered showed that literature-based projects can enhance lessons, At Interview 5B, the teacher illustrated this method by stating: "We are currently working on literature-based projects in which the students read and bring historical events to current life from facts in the past, and talk, discuss, and compare those facts with those happening currently. In this case, we are reading Anne Frank's diary." This idea underscores the vital role of literature-based projects in cultivating historical awareness and analytical skills among students. By engaging with historical texts such as Anne Frank's diary, students were encouraged to draw parallels between past events and contemporary issues, thereby enhancing their critical thinking and discussion abilities.

This pedagogical strategy not only enriches the curriculum but also cultivates a deeper understanding of historical contexts and their relevance to present-day scenarios, which enhances preparation for reading comprehension in standardized evaluations.

Interview 11B echoed this idea:

"This kind of project [literature] gives students lots of opportunities to improve and elevate their vocabulary range, as well as the chance to practice the language more naturally."

Interview 8B also noted that a literature-based project encouraged students to draw connections between historical and current events:

"We are reading Anne Frank's diary; it offers a wide view to the students about how modern life evolves and how different and vital matters relate".

By reading Anne Frank's Diary within a project framework, students actively connected with the human stories behind World War II, gaining a deeper and more meaningful understanding that extended beyond just the facts. This emotional and narrative context helped

them internalize historical events more thoroughly than they would have through textbooks alone. Students drew parallels between Anne Frank's experiences and current global or personal issues, such as displacement and refugee crises, human rights, and freedom of expression, as well as the impact of war on civilians. These connections encouraged critical thinking and empathy, helping students see history as relevant and alive.

Literature-based projects inherently integrate disciplines such as language arts, history, ethics, and civics, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of real-world challenges, which seldom align neatly within a single academic domain. This approach fosters holistic thinking, a vital competency for the 21st century. PBL further empowers students by granting them autonomy in how they investigate topics and demonstrate their understanding. For instance, a project centered on Anne Frank encompasses creative writing from multiple viewpoints, research into contemporary global conflicts, and the development of presentations or structured debates. Such multifaceted engagement enables students to articulate their insights through diverse modalities, thereby enhancing comprehension and motivation.

While both School A and School B implemented CLIL methodologies, their pedagogical approaches diverged significantly in terms of focus and structure. School B adopted a literature-centered model, anchoring its PBL units around specific texts and thematic explorations. This approach emphasized literary analysis and narrative engagement as primary vehicles for language development. In contrast, School A employed a more integrative and interdisciplinary strategy, allowing projects to emerge organically from various content areas throughout the academic year. This flexible model aims to support the development of all four communicative skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, across various thematic contexts.

This contrast highlights differing perspectives on how to effectively integrate content and language in CLIL environments. In Interview 8A, the teacher noted that an exclusive focus on

reading was insufficient for comprehensive language acquisition: “I would say that in English it is particularly challenging because we work on four different skills. If I were just focusing on reading, I could easily find an article related to a specific question.” This insight highlights the complexity of designing CLIL projects that address multiple language learning objectives, extending beyond literacy alone.

Among the instructional materials reviewed, Observation and Lesson Plan 5A stood out for their practical synthesis of PBL principles with the pragmatic demands of high-stakes assessments, such as the IGCSE. This example illustrates the potential for CLIL-based instruction to strike a balance between creativity, skill integration, and academic rigor.

Lesson Planning 5A reflected core principles of PBL based on Saimon et al. (2022). It is centered on the students' interests and future aspirations around a driving question. The project began with an entry event designed to spark motivation. Consistent with PBL principles, students were allowed to choose an inspiring job they wanted to explore, nurturing ownership and intrinsic motivation. It integrated knowledge from multiple areas, language skills, research, and design, encouraging interdisciplinary learning. It also had clear relevance to real life and community impact, as students imagined themselves in roles that contribute to society. The culminating product, a “Job Fair Presentation,” required collaboration to prepare posters, design uniforms, and role-play professionals, which they shared with peers at a classroom job fair.

In Observation 5A, the teacher provided clear guidance on the characteristics of the oral presentation and supported students with a vocabulary and grammar-focused session on job-related suffixes, such as -er, -ist, and -or. In the same observation, Teacher 5A effectively integrated elements of both approaches into coherent and dynamic lessons, demonstrating that PBL can coexist with the need to prepare students for standardized assessments.

Additionally, in Observation 8B, the teacher demonstrated integration of grammar instruction within both the TBL and PBL frameworks. Rather than isolating grammatical structures as discrete content, the lesson embedded the use of modal verbs within a meaningful communicative task and the production of argumentative texts. This approach aligns with contemporary pedagogical perspectives that advocate for contextualized grammar instruction, wherein learners apply linguistic forms in authentic, purpose-driven contexts. By requiring students to use modal verbs to express degrees of certainty, obligation, or possibility in their arguments, the teacher not only reinforced grammatical accuracy but also enhanced students' rhetorical competence. This dual focus on form and function shows how teachers can use grammar as a tool to achieve broader communicative and cognitive goals within CLIL environments.

Despite the numerous advantages of PBL, educators have encountered significant challenges in its implementation, particularly in environments where educators prioritize international examinations and textbook-driven instruction. Insights gained from interviews with teachers underscore these challenges.

In interview 8A, a teacher highlighted the complexity of language learning, noting that it encompasses multiple components that do not always align with a single guiding question. The teacher stated, "Language learning involves multiple components, so the unit's focus is not always directly connected to a single guiding question. If I had to find a listening comprehension activity specifically about designing newspapers, it would be nearly impossible." This statement underscores the inherent difficulty in aligning PBL activities with specific language learning objectives, particularly when such activities require highly specialized resources that may not be readily available.

Lesson Plan 8B exemplified an integration of grammar instruction and argumentative texts within both TBL and PBL frameworks, supported by a diverse array of multimodal resources. The teacher strategically embedded the use of modal verbs into a communicative task, proposing a lesson in which students apply these structures in constructing argumentative texts. This pedagogical choice reinforced grammatical competence and promoted critical thinking and persuasive writing skills. Notably, the lesson plan incorporated a rich selection of authentic materials, including videos, audio recordings, and supplementary readings, which enhanced the contextual relevance and engagement of the learning experience. This resourcefulness reflects the broader capacity of educators at School B to curate and adapt meaningful content that aligns with linguistic and thematic objectives. Such practices underscore the importance of teacher agency and material selection in the successful implementation of CLIL methodologies.

Furthermore, interview 5A revealed another critical issue, the disconnect between PBL activities and the requirements of standardized tests. In the same interview, Teacher 5A recounted, "I recently had a student ask why the Cambridge exams were not directly related to the project. There is not always a clear connection. PBL strategies help develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, but test preparation requires targeted practice." This observation highlights a fundamental tension between the broader educational goals of PBL and the narrow focus of standardized test preparation. Despite its strengths in fostering critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving, project-based learning (PBL) often faces tension with the demands of standardized testing. These assessments typically prioritize discrete academic skills and factual recall, which may not align with the broader competencies developed through PBL. Consequently, educators may view PBL as a risky instructional strategy when test performance is a primary concern, particularly because standardized tests rarely capture creativity, collaboration, or applied knowledge (Thomas, 2020).

Interview with Teacher 8A echoed this concern, suggesting that although PBL can support international test readiness, it demands significant teacher effort to align materials with exam formats. For instance, they described adapting Cambridge exam structures to fit project themes, an approach that worked well for reading and writing tasks but proved challenging for listening comprehension. They emphasized that mock exams alone are insufficient; instead, teachers might create exam-style questions from diverse texts to bridge the gap. Ultimately, while PBL offers rich educational value, its integration with standardized test preparation requires intentional design and adaptation.

In contrast, School B did not state the same disconnect between PBL and standardized test preparation. Lesson Plan 9B highlighted how teachers at School B intentionally designed projects that aligned with curricular standards and exam objectives. In Lesson Plan 9B, the instructional design centered on a PBL unit focused on *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which served as a platform for integrating literacy-oriented activities aligned with standardized test preparation. Through tasks such as essay and letter writing, the lesson plan effectively bridged the objectives of the CLIL methodology with the demands of formal assessment. This dual focus illustrates a pedagogical strategy that not only cultivates language development through meaningful content but also equips students with the genre-specific writing skills required for high-stakes examinations.

This approach promotes a more cohesive strategy, positioning PBL not as separate from test preparation but as a complementary method. Unlike School A, where the lack of materials and alignment created tension, School B demonstrated that thoughtful planning could support both deep learning and exam readiness through PBL. This alignment may reduce the perceived risk of using PBL in high-stakes contexts and offers a model for integrating creativity and critical thinking with measurable academic outcomes.

Critically, these challenges suggest that while PBL offers a holistic and engaging approach to education, its integration into curricula dominated by standardized testing and textbook-driven instruction requires careful consideration and adaptation. Educators must navigate the dual demands of developing critical thinking and adequately preparing students for standardized assessments. This methodology may involve developing hybrid instructional models that incorporate the strengths of PBL while also providing targeted test preparation and support. Additionally, there is a need for greater alignment between PBL activities and standardized test requirements to ensure students can benefit from the holistic learning experiences PBL offers without compromising their performance on standardized assessments.

Sanchez (2023) also acknowledged that although teachers value PBL for competency development, its implementation often clashes with curricular demands and testing pressures in bilingual schools. Shekhar et al. (2023) further noted that for PBL to be genuinely effective, school systems must allow sufficient time, flexibility, and teacher autonomy. These conditions are not always present in exam-focused settings. Therefore, while PBL can significantly enhance student competencies, its success in bilingual schools depends on systemic support that integrates pedagogical innovation with standardized curricula and assessment demands. This support reconciles pedagogical innovation with the realities of standardized curricula and assessment pressures.

Even with the PBL project taking center stage, the activities seamlessly incorporated test preparation. In Interview 5A, the teacher's explanation of the upcoming speaking test highlighted key components of the IGCSE exam, including grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, connectors, pronunciation, and interaction. Moreover, in school B, Lesson Plan 8B integrated test preparation tasks into its planning. Although the class did not strictly adhere to the Cambridge exam format, the workshop activities helped students develop essential skills, such as reading

comprehension, grammar application, and vocabulary development, all of which are crucial for success in international tests. As Sánchez (2023) suggests, integrating PBL with test preparation can stimulate a deeper understanding of the language and enhance the competencies required for high-stakes exams. Shekhar et al. (2023) argue that PBL enhances student motivation and engagement, particularly when integrated with real-world challenges.

Furthermore, while PBL offers a dynamic and engaging approach to language development, nurturing key skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity, its integration into test-driven environments presents significant challenges. Time constraints, institutional reliance on textbooks, and the pressure of preparing students for high-stakes exams often complicate the seamless incorporation of PBL into curricula. However, Teachers' 5A's and 8B's Observations demonstrated a balance between test preparation and PBL by aligning project themes with language skills development, such as vocabulary acquisition and grammar practice, which are critical for standardized assessments. This approach addresses the immediate demands of test preparation and cultivates a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, thereby enhancing overall student performance and engagement.

TBL: Balance in Curriculum, Test, and Engagement

TBL promotes real-world language use. The study confirmed that TBL enhances authentic communication by structuring lessons around practical tasks, such as debates and problem-solving, thereby improving fluency and cognitive engagement (Ellis et al., 2020). TBL encouraged students to engage in real-world tasks that require meaningful use of the target language, facilitating both language proficiency and cognitive skills. Unlike PBL, which demands significant time investment and can sometimes conflict with the pressures of test preparation, TBL offered a more efficient alternative.

In observation 5A, a strong connection to TBL was evident. The class centered around the next project question: “What makes a job inspiring, and how can we prepare for it?” This question was seamlessly integrated into Observation 5A, linking vocabulary development (using job-related suffixes such as -er, -ist, and -or) to the broader project theme. The students engaged in various activities that combined language learning with real-world applications, such as participating in job interview role-plays. This task encouraged students to practice English in contexts that mirrored real-life scenarios, emphasizing the importance of communication, grammar, and vocabulary skills that would also serve them in test environments.

In contrast, the interview with Teacher 5B revealed a pedagogical emphasis on creative, student-driven tasks that extend from literary texts, such as poster creation, video production, and interviews. As the teacher explained, “I have my students working on tasks related to the texts we previously read, such as creating posters, making videos, doing interviews, and so on.” This approach reflects a commitment to fostering student engagement and multimodal expression. However, it also suggested a more loosely structured application of TBL, where educators primarily designed tasks to reinforce previously covered content, rather than to systematically promote inquiry or language development.

Additionally, in observation 5A, the class incorporated elements of the language-led approach by focusing on specific grammar points and vocabulary related to professions. The students were tasked with using suffixes to form job-related words and were guided through a process of guided discovery, identifying patterns in the usage of suffixes. These activities not only supported their project work but also reinforced the necessary language skills for high-stakes assessments.

According to Ellis et al. (2020), TBL focuses on completing tasks that require students to apply language knowledge in context, making it an ideal strategy for integrating lesson content with

international test preparation. This strategy was evident in Interviews 10- 11A, where the teacher designed thematic lessons that integrated all four skills assessed in exams, such as reading C1-level texts and writing reports on environmental topics. The teacher noted that this approach "focuses on a single topic while incorporating multiple tasks," enhancing test readiness without sacrificing depth. Similarly, in interview 8A, the teacher observed that a task involving the creation of a multi-section newspaper not only consolidated the year's content but also "fostered teamwork and collaboration" while engagingly reinforcing grammar and vocabulary.

In contrast, Lesson Plan 11B's survival plan activity, while still rooted in TBL principles, leaned more toward experiential and problem-solving learning. Students are engaged in real-world scenario planning, which promotes critical thinking, negotiation, and persuasive communication. Unlike the exam-oriented tasks in Lesson plan 10–11A, these activities prioritized creativity and practical application over test alignment. However, both approaches shared a commitment to meaningful communication and collaboration, demonstrating the flexibility of TBL in addressing diverse educational goals.

Class Observation 8A demonstrated this alignment, as the teacher guided students through the steps of a report-writing task explicitly framed as preparation for the IGCSE. The lesson followed a TBL sequence: the teacher introduced the writing task and modeled the report structure (Ellis et al., 2020). During the task setup and scaffolding phase, students explored text samples posted around the room through guided discovery and then collaboratively developed headings and sections for their reports, engaging both communication and cognition. The use of real exam formats and sample papers created a strong connection between the classroom task and high-stakes test outcomes.

Interviews 10–11A and 8B highlighted that educators can strategically design TBL to enhance international test preparation by integrating multiple language skills into cohesive,

purposeful activities. In Interview 10–11A, the teacher narrated that tasks were structured around a central theme, allowing students to engage in reading, writing, and discussion activities that mirror the demands of standardized exams. This thematic integration ensures that learners practice all four skills in a meaningful context, reinforcing test-relevant competencies while maintaining depth of content. Similarly, in Interview 8B, the teacher emphasized that TBL naturally supports test readiness by using each topic as a springboard for comprehensive skill practice. Rather than isolating skills, the educators crafted tasks to encourage full engagement with language, making test preparation an organic outcome of communicative, student-centered learning. Together, these perspectives underscore TBL’s effectiveness in aligning classroom activities with the multifaceted demands of international language assessments.

A critical examination of teacher testimonies revealed a nuanced understanding of how TBL aligns with both exam structures and student motivation. In Interview 6A, the teacher described courtroom role-plays within a “Laws and Order” unit to enhance speaking fluency under simulated exam-like pressure, noting that such tasks help students “practice working efficiently under pressure.” While this suggested a strong alignment with the time constraints of international assessments, it also raised questions about the balance between authentic communication and performance under stress. Similarly, in Interview 8B, the teacher emphasized that integrated tasks involving the composition of written responses to assigned readings serve as effective means for developing multiple language skills within a cohesive instructional framework, facilitating comprehensive skill development by enabling students to engage with the full range of competencies evaluated in standardized examinations. These reflections support Sánchez’s (2023) assertion that TBL’s adaptability makes it a preferred pedagogical approach. However, they also invite further inquiry into whether the emphasis on test alignment might risk narrowing the scope of learning to exam formats, potentially limiting opportunities for more exploratory or student-

driven language use. Thus, while TBL appears effective in preparing students for high-stakes assessments, its implementation warrants careful consideration to maintain a balance between test readiness and holistic language development.

In Observation 8A, the classroom setting emphasized exam-oriented literacy, with students analyzing report structure, word count, and coherence markers. Scaffolded practices, such as the structured design of headings and the strategic use of connectors, play a critical role in effective assessment. As Teacher 8B mentioned in Interview 8B, “full practices of entire skills were assessed by international tests.” The teacher’s choice to model and gradually release responsibility to students aligns with Interview 5A, where a teacher expressed the goal of promoting more autonomy through TBL: “I would be available to help if needed, but the rest of the process would be autonomous.”

During one task development in Observation 6A, most students demonstrated motivation and engagement, despite a few instances of reluctance to rotate during the carousel activity or occasional off-topic conversations. These observations underscored the effectiveness of TBL in fostering student engagement through its emphasis on movement, interaction, and real-life contexts, even in test-preparation environments. As noted in Interview 11B, controlled tasks help students “practice and enlarge their vocabulary and structures”, thereby building a stronger foundation for both academic performance and authentic language use.

However, some educators have identified limitations in applying TBL for high-stakes test preparation. In interview 5B, a teacher acknowledged TBL's role in developing reading and writing skills but argued that “what really helps to improve is practicing on the test itself,” highlighting a common concern regarding the mismatch between communicative, task-based approaches and the rigid structure of standardized exams. Similarly, in interview 6B, another teacher expressed skepticism, believing that tasks offered limited direct benefits for test preparation.

These reflections resonate with broader debates in the literary world. Noroozi and Taheri (2022) found that while TBL can significantly enhance communicative competence and learner engagement, it may fall short in directly preparing students for traditional, accuracy-based assessments unless deliberately adapted to mirror test formats. This tension also appeared in Banegas (2021); he emphasized that teachers' beliefs and institutional pressures often shape how educators implement TBL and other CLIL strategies. In contexts where exam performance is a primary concern, educators may feel compelled to prioritize more traditional methods, even if they recognize the pedagogical advantages of the TBL approach.

These tensions suggest that the successful integration of TBL into test-oriented curricula depends not only on methodological soundness but also on institutional alignment and teacher agency. Educators must navigate the dual demands of developing communicative competence and adequately preparing students for standardized assessments; this requires a hybrid approach that incorporates the strengths of both TBL and traditional test preparation methods.

Nevertheless, the consensus among most educators is that TBL enables students to practice language in a meaningful way while nurturing autonomy and confidence, which are crucial for success on high-stakes tests. In interview 5A, a teacher reflected on their interest in applying TBL, noting that although they had not yet implemented it, they believed it could be beneficial because "students are very used to direct instruction." This methodology "could help them become more autonomous."

This perspective underscored the potential of TBL to transform traditional instructional practices by promoting student independence and self-directed learning. The ability of TBL to integrate seamlessly with existing materials and test-oriented goals further positions it as a practical and effective approach for enhancing bilingual education outcomes. As students engage in real-

world tasks that require meaningful use of the target language, they not only develop linguistic proficiency but also build up the cognitive skills necessary for academic success.

Critically, the successful implementation of TBL in test-driven environments hinges on its adaptability to the specific needs of standardized assessments. While TBL emphasizes communicative competence and real-life application, educators must also tailor it to address the accuracy-based demands of high-stakes exams. This dual focus ensures that students are well-prepared for practical language use and the rigorous requirements of standardized tests.

In conclusion, while there are challenges in integrating TBL with test preparation, its ability to promote meaningful language practice, autonomy, and confidence makes it a valuable strategy for bilingual education. Educators must navigate the balance between cultivating communicative skills and ensuring test readiness, leveraging TBL's strengths to create a holistic and practical learning experience.

Thinking Classrooms: A Gap in Practice

Building Thinking Classrooms (BTC) is an instructional approach designed to transform traditional teaching by replacing passive lecture-based methods with dynamic, student-centered learning. It prioritizes active problem-solving, visible thought processes, and structured collaboration to deepen reasoning. Key strategies include using vertical whiteboards for collaborative problem-solving, designing tasks that require higher-order thinking, and encouraging student independence to enhance conceptual understanding (Muirhead et al., 2025).

The interviews revealed a range of perspectives on the implementation and effectiveness of Thinking Classroom strategies. While many teachers recognized the benefits of these strategies in promoting engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration, there were also significant

challenges related to space constraints and the need for traditional instruction methods. The successful integration of Thinking Classroom strategies into test-oriented curricula depends on striking a balance between these innovative approaches and the practical demands of standardized assessments.

In Interviews 5A, 6A, and 6B, teachers consistently emphasized the value of Thinking Classroom strategies in developing the cognitive and communicative competencies necessary for success in international language assessments. In interview 5A, the teacher affirmed that these strategies were particularly effective in tasks requiring analysis and argumentation, stating, “Yes, I believe Thinking Classroom strategies can help with international test preparation, especially in tasks that require analysis and argumentation.” Similarly, in Interview 6B, the teacher emphasized their role in promoting “critical thinking and communication skills.” At the same time, in interview 6A, the teacher noted that such approaches “can definitely help with international test preparation by allowing students to identify weaknesses and address them in time.” These insights collectively underscore the pedagogical potential of the Thinking Classroom method in cultivating higher-order thinking, enhancing reading comprehension, and encouraging the exploration of diverse perspectives. This type of engagement is especially pertinent for preparing students to tackle exam items that demand critical analysis, synthesis of information, and reasoned argumentation, rather than merely recalling factual knowledge.

Furthermore, teachers incorporated movement into lessons to keep students engaged. For example, in Lesson Plan 5B, the teacher used activities like placing answers around the classroom and creating human timelines. In interview 5B, the teacher explained, “For example, I once designed an activity where students had to find different stations around the school to complete exercises. This added an element of problem-solving and kept them engaged, rather than just

sitting at their desks. This method highlights the importance of dynamic and interactive learning environments in maintaining student engagement and enhancing problem-solving skills.

Hence, while Thinking Classroom strategies offer significant benefits in promoting engagement, critical thinking, and collaboration, their successful integration into test-oriented curricula requires careful consideration of practical constraints and traditional instruction methods. Balancing these innovative approaches with the demands of standardized assessments is essential for maximizing their effectiveness in preparing students for high-stakes tests.

In interviews 10-11A and 5B, teachers expressed doubts about the effectiveness of Thinking Classroom strategies for test preparation, citing the need for more traditional methods to address specific knowledge gaps. These observations highlight both methodological implementation gaps and the relative novelty of this approach within the schools' curricular framework.

In School B, interview 11B revealed a teacher's unfamiliarity with the methodology. In contrast, interview 5A featured a teacher openly questioning its usefulness for test preparation, suggesting that it failed to provide explicit grammar instruction, a perceived necessity for success in standardized assessments.

Similar patterns emerged in School A. In Interview 8A, the teacher recalled that a colleague from the primary section had attended Thinking Classroom training at School B and later shared insights with the bilingual teachers at School A. This pattern supports Banegas' (2021) findings that teacher beliefs and contextual limitations often impede the implementation of innovative methodologies.

Critically, these reflections underscore the importance of addressing both practical and perceptual barriers to the adoption of Thinking Classroom strategies. While the potential benefits of these methodologies are recognized, their successful integration into test-oriented curricula

necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes professional development, institutional support, and adaptation to specific educational contexts.

Beyond Grades: LOA in Practice

LOA transforms test preparation into an ongoing learning process, rather than a high-stakes endpoint. Kunschak (2020) demonstrates how Learning Objectives (LOA) integrate test-taking skills into regular classroom activities through authentic practice tasks, allowing students to develop exam strategies while receiving continuous feedback. Xavier (2020) highlights how LOA's emphasis on transparent assessment criteria helps students better understand test expectations and self-monitor their progress. Research by de Boer and Leontjev (2020) shows benefits for CLIL test preparation, where LOA simultaneously builds both content mastery and the language skills required for academic assessments. This approach makes test readiness more meaningful by connecting it to students' overall growth and self-regulation.

The analysis of the instruments revealed a broad spectrum of understanding and implementation of LOA, which shifts the focus of evaluation from judgment to learning. While some teachers actively used assessment to inform instruction and guide students' development, others remained anchored in test-preparation practices that offer limited opportunities for metacognitive growth or learner autonomy.

From School A, Interviews 10 – 11A and 6A demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of LOA principles. For instance, in Interview 10 – 11A, the teacher revisited concepts based on student test performance, such as reteaching graph analysis after identifying errors in a science test, thus using assessment as a diagnostic and formative tool (Xavier, 2020).

Likewise, in Interview 6A, the teacher employed detailed rubrics with feedback sections and adapted lesson content according to students' evolving needs. "I started by reviewing and practicing graph analysis, ensuring that students had the opportunity to revisit and strengthen this skill before moving forward. This approach allows me to target specific areas of need and better prepare my students for their assessments".

Observation 6A revealed a comprehensive LOA-oriented lesson that includes a structured review of the zero, first, second, and third conditionals, which are common in standardized English exams (e.g., Cambridge or IGCSE). The class featured a grammar reinforcement activity where students filled out a chart with conditional formulas, followed by task-based practice through a carousel activity simulating timed, exam-like conditions. Students engaged in scenario-based oral and written production, generating complete sentences and receiving real-time feedback from the teacher, mirroring the strategies endorsed by Kunschak (2020) for active and contextually meaningful assessment.

In School B, while several teachers described using assessment strategies, only a few demonstrated practices that closely align with the Learning Outcomes and Assessment. Observation 11B offers one such example. In this lesson, students reviewed their peers' written productions using a rubric that included task achievement, coherence and cohesion, lexical resources, grammar, and accuracy. In Interview 11B, the teacher mentioned, "Students tend to choose the strongest classmates for peer review. To address this, I pair with students strategically to ensure fair and effective feedback." Framed within test preparation, the activity promoted peer feedback and reflection, enabling students to analyze their performance in a high-stakes context and target specific weaknesses before the following simulation. This model integrated TBL with assessment and feedback in ways that support deBoer and Leontjev's (2020) emphasis on classroom assessment as a collaborative and developmental process.

However, not all educators exhibited this depth of application. For instance, in interview 5B, the teacher expressed uncertainty about how to use assessment for learning. Across several cases, educators discussed assessment primarily in terms of compliance with external standards or exam formats, rather than as a tool for fostering deep learning. This idea highlighted a gap between awareness of LOA and its practical application in daily instruction.

Notably, only one of the lesson plans reviewed throughout this project explicitly and intentionally used LOA. This idea suggests that while teachers may informally practice aspects of learning-oriented assessment, they rarely embed it in planning documentation. This finding reflects Xavier's (2020) concern that teachers often conflate performance assessment with learning assessment, and they need targeted support to bridge this conceptual divide.

In conclusion, while some classrooms showcased the promise of LOA, particularly through feedback-rich, peer-supported, and test-aligned practices, its implementation remains inconsistent. To fully harness the potential of LOA, it is essential to deepen teachers' capacity to integrate assessment systematically into instructional planning. Doing so can shift assessment from a peripheral grading tool to a central pillar of bilingual education. This transformation nurtures metacognitive development and learner autonomy, ensuring that assessment practices support international exam readiness. Ultimately, a more consistent and strategic use of LOA could bridge the gap between meaningful learning and high-stakes performance, promoting both academic success and long-term language proficiency.

Test Preparation through CLIL Classrooms

Teachers in CLIL classrooms embed test preparation within TBL, PBL, Thinking Classrooms, and LOA by designing activities that simultaneously promote content mastery, academic language development, and test-taking strategies. TBL utilizes scaffolded tasks replicating exam formats, such as science lab reports or argumentative essays (Coyle et al., 2021), while incorporating authentic problems with exam-style questions (Ellis et al., 2020). PBL employs extended real-world projects (e.g., designing climate solutions) that integrate test competencies through collaborative work and rubric-based peer assessment (Beckett & Slater, 2022; deBoer & Leontjev, 2020). This approach seamlessly connects classroom learning with assessment requirements.

The data analyzed frequently highlight test preparation as a crucial category. It encompasses various elements, such as test alignment strategies, which ensure that study materials and practice tests closely align with the actual exam content. This preparation includes article-based questions that challenge students to apply their knowledge in real-world contexts. Non-traditional methodologies, such as interactive learning and gamification, are also employed to enhance engagement and retention. Test adaptation is another key factor, enabling modifications to accommodate diverse learning styles and needs.

Educators often characterize adequate standardized test preparation by a systematic approach that incorporates structured learning strategies, vocabulary development, and controlled practice, all of which help students internalize exam formats and performance expectations (Brookhart & Nitko, 2020). In Interview 8B, the teacher exemplified this approach, emphasizing alignment between lesson objectives and test requirements: “I ensure that my lesson objectives align with the skills assessed in the test by thoroughly understanding the exam structure and requirements.” This perspective reflected a focused, exam-oriented methodology

aimed at maximizing student performance through targeted instruction. In contrast, in interview 8A, the teacher adopted a more holistic stance, acknowledging the importance of test preparation while resisting a narrow focus: “My lessons are designed to focus on the required skills, but I also make sure they go beyond just test preparation. It is not that I do not take progression tests seriously, but I approach them with a broader perspective.” This contrast highlights a pedagogical tension between teaching the test and nurturing broader language development. While both approaches recognized the value of preparing students for standardized assessments, they differed in the extent to which test preparation shapes instructional design, raising important questions about the balance between assessment readiness and comprehensive language education.

Vocabulary development is particularly critical, as it enables learners to comprehend complex test items and articulate sophisticated responses (Nation, 2020). Controlled practice, through timed exercises and scaffolded feedback, allows students to refine skills under simulated testing conditions. Together, these elements form a comprehensive preparation methodology that addresses both cognitive and procedural demands of high-stakes assessments.

By aligning classroom activities with the specific demands of standardized tests, educators can ensure that students are not only familiar with the test format but also capable of applying their knowledge in practical contexts. This approach addresses the need for both content mastery and test-taking skills, thereby providing a holistic preparation strategy.

Moreover, the use of non-traditional methodologies, such as PBL, TBL, Thinking Classroom, and LOA, might increase student engagement and retention, which are often challenges in traditional test preparation methods. By incorporating these innovative strategies, educators can create a more dynamic and motivating learning environment that supports deeper understanding and long-term retention of material. As highlighted in the CLIL literature, these approaches

develop active learning by encouraging students to become knowledgeable partners in the learning process (deBoer & Leontjev, 2020).

For instance, LOA emphasizes formative assessment practices that promote learner autonomy, metacognitive awareness, and critical thinking skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning. Similarly, PBL and TBL offer students opportunities to engage in meaningful, real-world tasks that integrate content and language learning, thereby enhancing both cognitive and emotional investment in the learning process. These methodologies not only support academic achievement but also align with broader educational goals, such as promoting independence, collaboration, and reflective thinking.

In conclusion, a comprehensive test preparation strategy that incorporates all these principles, interactive methodologies, and targeted skill development can significantly enhance student readiness for standardized assessments. By addressing both the content and format of the tests, educators can provide students with the necessary tools to succeed academically and develop essential life skills.

Conclusions

This research aimed to assess the impact of CLIL strategies on students' preparation for standardized international tests in two private bilingual schools in Valle de Aburrá. A key finding of the study is the gap between pedagogical intention and classroom practice. Although both institutions under study promote innovative methodologies, including those discussed in this research, systemic challenges hinder the actual integration of these approaches. Teachers frequently cited time constraints, insufficient resources, and a lack of professional development as major obstacles. This triad of barriers revealed a critical disconnect between policy-level aspirations and the realities of classroom implementation. Time constraints limit the ability to plan

and execute complex, student-centered activities; insufficient resources curtail access to necessary materials and technologies; and inadequate professional development leaves educators ill-equipped to adapt to new pedagogical demands. Together, these factors not only impede innovation but also reflect a broader structural inertia within educational systems. These limitations underscore the broader tension between educational policy and the operational demands of test-driven environments. Addressing this issue requires not only structural reforms but also a concerted effort to raise awareness among stakeholders such as administrators, policymakers, and educators about the practical challenges teachers face. By fostering a deeper understanding of these constraints, institutions can begin to design more coherent support structures that align institutional goals with the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning.

PBL emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool for enhancing language acquisition and fostering critical thinking. When effectively implemented, PBL supports the integration of grammar instruction within meaningful communicative contexts, such as argumentative writing and oral presentations. However, its application is often constrained by the rigid demands of standardized testing, prioritizing discrete skills over holistic learning. This issue is because the application of such assessments prioritizes the acquisition of measurable skills over the development of interdisciplinary competencies. Standardized tests typically emphasize grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension in isolated formats, which contrasts sharply with the integrative and inquiry-based nature of PBL. The study highlights the importance of aligning PBL models with institutional goals and student needs. While literature-centered frameworks offer structured integration of content and language, cross-disciplinary models provide greater flexibility and engagement. Researchers recommend hybrid instructional models that combine project-based tasks with targeted test preparation to reconcile pedagogical benefits with exam requirements.

Nevertheless, educators frequently encounter difficulties aligning PBL activities with exam requirements, particularly when assessments demand targeted practice that does not naturally emerge from open-ended, student-driven projects. This misalignment creates tension wherein PBL's emphasis on critical thinking, collaboration, and real-world problem-solving is undervalued or even perceived as a risk in test-focused environments. Moreover, institutional reliance on textbook-driven instruction and the pressure to produce quantifiable outcomes limit the flexibility and time necessary for meaningful PBL implementation. Consequently, while PBL offers rich educational benefits, its integration is often compromised by the structural and evaluative priorities of standardized testing systems.

Similarly, TBL demonstrates strong potential for developing communicative competence and preparing students for high-stakes assessments. Teachers who designed thematic units that integrate the four language skills, reading, writing, speaking, and listening, reported improved student readiness. Nevertheless, the perceived misalignment between TBL and standardized exam formats often leads educators to revert to traditional methods, such as the grammar-translation method, rote memorization, and drill-based instruction. They see these methods as more directly aligned with the discrete-point testing and accuracy-focused nature of these exams. The integration of translanguaging within TBL practices further enhances inclusivity and cognitive engagement, yet it remains at odds with the monolingual norms of formal assessments. A balanced instructional model that maintains the communicative ethos of TBL while addressing exam-specific competencies is essential for sustainable implementation.

Moreover, Thinking Classroom strategies offer a transformative approach to language education by promoting active problem-solving, collaboration, and visible thinking. These methods are particularly effective in developing the analytical and argumentative skills required for

international assessments. Teachers observed that activities such as structured debates and collaborative analysis significantly enhanced students' cognitive engagement and academic performance. However, logistical constraints and skepticism regarding the alignment of these strategies with exam formats limit their widespread adoption. A comprehensive implementation framework is a necessary strategy to fully realize the potential of Thinking Classrooms in test-oriented contexts, including sustained professional development, collaborative planning, and institutional support.

Furthermore, the integration of LOA within CLIL classrooms provides a promising avenue for aligning instruction with the cognitive and procedural demands of standardized tests. LOA emphasizes formative feedback and reflective learning, making assessment an integral part of the instructional process. Adequate CLIL test preparation hinges on three core elements: vocabulary development, scaffolded feedback, and student engagement. The use of interactive methodologies such as gamification and peer review not only enhances motivation but also supports deeper learning. While tensions like time constraints, insufficient resources, and a lack of professional development persist between exam-focused instruction and broader educational aims, LOA offers a viable strategy for bridging this divide and advancing the holistic goals of bilingual education.

Ultimately, this study reveals a nuanced picture of CLIL-based instruction in bilingual settings. On the one hand, pedagogical frameworks such as PBL, TBL, Thinking Classrooms, and LOA offer rich opportunities to foster critical thinking, communicative competence, and learner autonomy, skills that are essential for success in international standardized assessments and beyond. These approaches, when thoughtfully implemented, replicate real-world language use and promote deeper cognitive engagement and long-term language development. On the other

hand, systemic constraints often curtail their full potential. These constraints include time limitations, resource scarcity, and insufficient professional development. Moreover, the persistent pressure of test-driven accountability can lead to a reversion to traditional, exam-focused instruction, undermining innovative practices. The findings underscore the importance of designing integrated instructional models that balance exam preparation with holistic learning goals. Promoting awareness and understanding of these pedagogical tensions among all stakeholders is crucial for creating supportive environments that foster innovation. By aligning institutional policies with classroom realities, schools can better equip both teachers and students to navigate the dual demands of language learning and standardized assessment.

In terms of test preparation and outcomes, CLIL-based instruction contributed significantly to equipping learners with the skills required for success in contemporary assessment formats. By emphasizing authentic language use, critical thinking, and cross-curricular integration, CLIL strategies foster the development of higher-order cognitive skills and communicative strategies. Exams such as IELTS and Cambridge English Qualifications increasingly value these. Students engaged in CLIL environments demonstrated enhanced performance in integrated tasks, including reading-to-write and listening-to-speak activities, as well as improved confidence in managing complex, real-world scenarios under exam conditions. These instructional approaches also supported the development of metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring and reflection, which are crucial for effective test-taking. As such, CLIL strategies prepared students for immediate assessment demands while also cultivating transferable academic and linguistic competencies that extend beyond the testing context.

Limitations and Further Research

While this study offers valuable insights into the use of CLIL strategies for international test preparation in bilingual schools, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. The research took place in two private institutions within a specific region. This range may not fully represent the diversity of bilingual education settings across Colombia or beyond. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, though rich in detail, relies heavily on teacher perceptions and classroom observations, which may vary depending on individual experiences and interpretations.

Another consideration is the varying levels of familiarity and confidence among teachers in applying CLIL strategies such as Thinking Classrooms or Learning-Oriented Assessment. Although many educators demonstrated thoughtful and innovative practices, others expressed the need for more training and support. These differences highlight the importance of ongoing professional development and institutional backing to ensure consistent implementation.

For further research, expanding the study to include a broader range of schools, like public, rural, and lower-income schools, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of CLIL's effectiveness in diverse contexts. Additionally, exploring student perspectives on CLIL strategies and their perceived impact on learning and test readiness could offer a more holistic view. Finally, future studies might investigate the long-term effects of CLIL on language proficiency and academic achievement, particularly when integrated with translanguaging and learning-oriented assessment frameworks.



Annexes

Annex 1

Semi-structured Interview

<https://forms.office.com/r/MwdqV68G5L>

Annex 2

Non-participant Observation

<https://forms.office.com/r/PJkz7cbein>

Annex 3

Lesson Plan Overview

<https://forms.office.com/r/vGwxkbi276>

Annex 4

[School A - 10th-Grade - English - Period II - 24-25.docx](#)

Annex 5

[School A - 11th-Grade - English - Period II - 24-25.docx](#)

Annex 6

[School A - 12th-Grade - English - Period II - 24-25.docx](#)

Annex 7

[School A - 6th-Grade - English - Period II - 24-25 - People and Work.docx](#)

Annex 8

[School A - 9th-Grade - English - Period II - 24-25.docx](#)

Annex 9

[Lesson Plan 6-11 School B](#)

Annex 10

[Coding](#)

Annex 11

[Apéndice B - Cartas intencionalidad o aval de las instituciones.pdf](#)

Annex 12

[Apéndice C - Formato de consentimiento informado y-o asentimiento.pdf](#)

Annex 13

[Apéndice F - Formato de presentación de proyecto al CEB.pdf](#)

Annex 14

[Evaluación de instrumento 1](#)

Annex 15

[Evaluación de instrumento 2](#)



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