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Integrating culture in ELT using an indigenous folktale, Poireiton Khunthok

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Abstract

Language, literature and culture are interdependent and their contributions to the teaching and learning of a second language are immense. The study aims at examining the purviews of the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach to teach language skills and culture. As CLIL has a dual focused learning approach, it seeks to examine the various possibilities of using the folk narratives of *Poireiton Khunthok* as the main teaching material to integrate the teaching of English language skills and culture. *Poireiton Khunthok* is a folktale of Manipur, a state in India which describes the long journey of Poireiton's migration and settlement from the netherworld Burmese side to Manipur. The study was conducted with the students of one of the schools of Manipur. The testing of the language skills was conducted with the student participants using the pre-test and post-test method. In the pre-test method, a conventional prose prescribed by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur was used. In the post-test method, the folk narrative of *Poireiton Khunthok* adopting the CLIL approach was used. The study indicated that the CLIL approach using the indigenous material assisted in developing the English language skills as well as understanding culture.

Keywords: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Culture, English Language skills, *Poireiton Khunthok*, ELT

Introduction and background

Researches in recent years have deliberated on the use of literature and its practical deliberations in ELT (English Language Teaching). The process of language learning consists in the development of language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Language, according to Halliday (1965) is neither an “organism” (p. 9) nor an “edifice” (p. 9) but an activity consisting of listening, speaking, reading and writing (p. 9). Halliday’s definition on language brings out the four important aspects of language skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing. In language learning, the main focus is to develop the language skills by involving more on ‘doing’ and ‘practising’ to ‘know’. In developing the language skills, it is conducive to examine the language use in various contexts. Undeniably, language is an integrated skill and is learnt through language use and practice. The sequence of mother tongue acquisition is L-S-R-W (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). The home and the surrounding environment are usually conditioned to acquire listening and speaking skills. The language skills of reading and writing are usually learnt in schools. Indisputably, the learners get ample opportunity to practice their mother tongue at home and the surrounding environment. On the contrary, learning a second language like English needs a formal classroom in a school environment. So, the formal classroom environment has to be equipped with a supportive language setting to condition a natural learning environment. Furthermore, in the schools of Manipur, English is taught as a second language from classes I to XII. There is too much emphasis on teaching grammar and students hardly get an opportunity to get actively engaged in the

process of language learning. It is observed that many of the English language learners in the region are poor in all the language skills. This is due to the fact that teaching-learning is still dominated by the behaviouristic approach, teaching-learning is always teacher fronted and the cognitive perspective has taken a back seat. It is therefore, favourable, to provide abundant motivation and opportunities in the classroom through various well designed tasks and activities consisting of values and culturally sensitive contents to enhance their cognitive level that will assist to their natural learning.

The term Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) was coined by David Marsh and defined as “situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language” (Marsh as qtd. in Ruiz, 2015). CLIL is further defined by Dalton-Puffer et al., as “an educational approach where subjects such as geography or biology are taught through the medium of a foreign language, typically to students participating in some form of mainstream education at primary, secondary but also tertiary level” (2010, p. 1). Therefore, CLIL can be described as an educational practice where the instructions of the curriculum subjects are given through/ by a language which is not generally used by the instructors and the learners. Furthermore, Dalton-Puffer asserts that CLIL has its principles drawn from Bruner’s constructivism learning theory which is based on the idea that learning involves an active practice where new ideas, information, perceptions or concepts are constructed by the learners with their existing knowledge as the basis (2007). The existing/ present cognitive structure of the learner is relied on to select, assess and transform ideas and information in the learning process (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Cognitive structures like mental models, schemata, etc., are employed to experience and unravel

meaning so that the learners can integrate their already existing knowledge system with new information in a highly organised manner (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Adding to this point, in the learning process, the teacher has to give instruction to the learners' existing comprehension and then embraces them to discover certain principles on its own while learning (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). Additionally, Coyle (1999) states a framework called the *4Cs Framework for CLIL* (qtd. in Coyle, 2008) which encompasses the second language learning process. They are: Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture. Coyle explains that in order to equally integrate learning, i.e., 'content and cognition' and language learning, i.e., 'communication and cultures', the framework first focuses on the content like the themes, the subject matter, etc., and then comprehend the close interconnectedness "between content (subject matter), communication (language), cognition (thinking) and culture (awareness of self and 'otherness')" (Coyle, 1999, qtd. in Coyle, 2008, p. 103). Therefore, according to Coyle's 4Cs Framework, in the CLIL learning approach, to acquire knowledge of the subject, critical thinking and creativity are required and then the acquired language skills are used to communicate understanding of knowledge within the environment, culture and society. The 4Cs Framework as formulated by Coyle is thus seen fulfilling the endeavour of simultaneous learning of language and content of CLIL.

Language skills can be developed through practice. Liubinienė (2009) argued that the use of CLIL methodology enhances the cognitive skills and also the development of the language skills of the learners. Further researches by Lasagabaster (2008) showed that the CLIL student participants fared better than the non CLIL student participants in the English language skills test. In the light of the preceding discussions, the

English language skills of listening, speaking and writing have shown better development by adopting the CLIL approach.

Culture and ELT

Culture, literature and language have always been closely interconnected. Hall (2005) observes that understanding people's interaction particularly their language use can assist in understanding culture. He further argued that the study of literature and teaching can be viewed as social practice and to understand it, the discourse of the contexts in literature with its participants be it instructors, learners or others needs to be analysed (Hall, 2005). Concurrently, he argued that a well crafted and effective implementation of the literature and language pedagogies can help promote cultural awareness as the literary texts describe in detail about the society and the interactions of the people in it thereby enhancing an individual's cultural identities, ideas, values and beliefs (Hall, 2005). Relatedly, Billington et al. (1991) asserted that culture is related to various disciplines concerning people's values and beliefs. Therefore, it is evident that cultural awareness through the teaching of language and literature is crucial for the development of the holistic development of an individual. Further, Brown (1990) is of the view that culture acts as a catalyst in learning a target language. Adding to this point, Byram and Morgan stressed on the idea that cultural learning and language learning has to take place side by side (in Hinkel, 1999). A cultural environment is required for learning a language, so a learner's cultural competence is favourable for an effective language learning process. This illustrates that the teaching of culture is fundamental in a second/ English/ foreign language classroom. Relatedly, cultural narrative accounts and details the existence, function and history of a community. Such cultural narratives

can be in the form of creation stories, folktales, religious texts and rituals, astronomy, etc. which recount a story depicting the origin, cultural and ethical values of a community. A folktale can be defined as a traditional story that has been generally passed orally before the advent of the writing systems. *Poireiton Khunthok* is a folktale of the Meiteis (the Meiteis are an indigenous ethnic group of Manipur, a state in India), rich in culture and values reminiscent throughout its narrations. As it is rich in cultural traditions, it may be used as the content in the CLIL approach to impart culture and to teach English language skills in the schools of Manipur. CLIL focuses not only on learning content and language but also on the ability of the learner to apply their learning in real life situations. Relatedly, Morton (2013) pointed out the significant role played by authentic learning materials for a successful CLIL classroom. Therefore, the use of indigenous authentic folktale in ELT may enhance the English language skills and also helps in understanding culture.

Methodology

Having deliberated on the importance of culture, literature and language, the objective of the study is constructed to incorporate the teaching of English language skills and culture through the CLIL approach using the folk narrative of *Poireiton Khunthok* in the upper primary schools of Manipur. In CLIL approach, conceptualisation is a cognitive process where the learner becomes acquainted with the language and the content. It is assumed that the learner's familiarisation of the language and the content is achievable through a literary text which can be used to learn the content as well as the language. For the content, the folk narrative of *Poireiton Khunthok* is taken up for the study. The study was conducted with the students of class VI from one

of the schools of Imphal, Manipur. The number of students who participated in the study is 86. The testing of language skills was conducted with the student participants using the pre-test and post-test method. The pre-test method used a conventional prose, prescribed by the Board of Secondary Education Manipur (BSEM) which was already taught in the English class.

In the post-test method, the folk narrative of *Poireiton Khunthok* adopting the CLIL approach was used. The assessment of the language skills was done based on the student participants' understanding the knowledge of the content and application of the knowledge of the content in real life situations. Based on the content, the tasks and activities are carried out in two parts. The first part tests the student participants' understanding of the knowledge of the content. In the second part, the student participants are tested based on their ability to apply the knowledge of the content in real life situations. The assessment was done using a rubric. Some of the tasks and activities which are used in the post-test are:

1. group discussion based on the topic 'Culture of my community';
2. write and enact a one-act play based on the story incorporating cultural elements drawn from the text;
3. group activity: to find out, write and speak on the various folktales of the diverse communities of Manipur;
4. reading the text and asking them to critically comment and discuss in the class.

Cultural implications in *Poireiton Khunthok*

Poireiton Khunthok uses the allegorical folk narrative, fable intertwined with myth and history to narrate the beautiful story of Poireiton and his journey to establish a new culture and

society in Manipur. The story begins by introducing the three brothers, Tokpa, a wild cat, Waba, a pheasant and Sabi, an underground rodent who were reigning on the earth. It has an allegorical element with Tokpa representing the destructive force, Waba who is always on the move and Sabi brings out the zeal and the spark, which is present in a man. The story is set in the beginning of the universe when there was no system of justice and law and order. One night, the eldest brother Tokpa went searching for Waba and ate him up. This incident scared the youngest brother Sabi.

So, Sabi went to the king of Netherworld, Thongaren to seek help. Thongaren was in a predicament as to who will go and start a society on earth as he was already married with children and wives. So he asked his younger brother, Poireiton for the mission to survey the possibility of settling down on earth. As Poireiton was a bachelor, his brother, Thongaren sends his youngest wife Leinaotabi as his consort to continue the life of existence on earth. After a wearisome journey, Poireiton and his sister-in-law Leinaotabi, reach the earth. The story of *Poireiton Khunthok* brings out a synthesis of myth and historical narrative. With the arrival of Poireiton and his people in Manipur and the nearby areas, comes the establishment of a new culture. It is more of a mythological account but it has reference to some historical incident as well. After travelling the tedious journey, they reached a place called Serou on the banks of the Tumbi river in Manipur. In the course of their journey, Poireiton met prince Yoimungba thus interlocking mythology and historical incident which establishes the function of the narrative (Singh, 2003). Poireiton and his followers were dispersed in different parts of Manipur and the neighboring regions. Some of them went on to start a society as a group of people called Cacharis, Burmese, Meiteis, Tripuris, Moirangs, Tangkhul Nagas, Maring, Khoibu, Lamsang, Chakpa Tangba and Tarao. The objective of Poireiton

and his people were to establish a certain standard of civilization in the human world. They were also in search of immortality in the realm of mortal beings. In the course of their journey, they also suffered the loss of many of their dear ones. So, in order to achieve permanence, the king of Netherworld, Thongaren advised them to do certain rites and rituals. This traditional culture is still prevalent in recent times. When a person is sick of some incurable disease, she/ he consult the Maibas (priests) and carry out the rites and rituals which Poireiton and his family had performed. A trace of historical and cultural traits from the mythological story can thus be seen in the present cultural practices of the Meiteis. In the narrative of *Poireiton Khunthok*, another aspect of their travel is that many of the places they have visited are still known by their names thus giving discrete characteristics. There was an exchange of traditional culture and the way of living with Poireiton and the people already living there. Thus came the beginning a new era of the way of living in a group and the construct of a society. The narrative techniques of fable, folk narrative, myth and history intertwined to narrate the beautiful story of Poireiton and his journey to establish a new culture and society in Manipur.

Findings: Results and Discussions

The following table shows the assessment of the student participants when using the conventional prose and *Poireiton Khunthok*:

Criteria of assessment	Pre-test score (%) (Conventional prose)	Post-test score (%) (<i>Poireiton Khunthok</i>)	Difference (%)
Development of language skills based on understanding the knowledge of the content	56	61	5
Development of language skills based on the ability to apply the knowledge of the content in real life situations	23.4	43.7	20.3

Table 1: Development of language skills when using the conventional prose and Poireiton Khunthok

The above table indicates that there has been an integrative learning of content and language in both the cases, when conventional prose and *Poireiton Khunthok* was used. However, it is seen that there has been a gradual rise in the post-test when the folk narrative, *Poireiton Khunthok* was used. In the first criterion, in the pre-test, 56% of the student participants have shown development in the language skills based on understanding the knowledge of the content and in the post-test, there is a rise to 61% of the student participants. So there is a slight rise of 5% when *Poireiton Khunthok* was used. It is seen that in both the cases, the development of the language skills based on understanding the knowledge of the content takes place. This entails that the student participants can comprehend the

knowledge of the content used. Concurrently, in the second criterion where the application of the knowledge of the content is tested, it is seen that there is a rise in the development level of the language skills from 23.4% when the conventional prose was used to 43.7% when *Poireiton Khunthok* was used. So a difference of 20.3% was observed when using *Poireiton Khunthok* as the content. The reason of the increase in the learning level of language skills and content in the post-test might be attributed to the use of the indigenous cultural folk narrative which is familiar to the student participants. This is one of the characteristic features of CLIL where effective learning takes place with their existing knowledge as has been emphasised by Bruner's constructivism learning theory. Another observation is that the difference in the development level of the language skills in terms of application of the knowledge learnt is higher than understanding the knowledge of the content while using *Poireiton Khunthok*. This may be attributed to the use of the indigenous folktale thereby enhancing the cognitive level of the student participants.

Furthermore, according to Coyle's 4Cs Framework, in CLIL learning approach, to acquire knowledge of the subject, critical thinking and creativity are required and then the acquired language skills are used to communicate understanding of knowledge within the environment, culture and society. In the study, the tasks and activities used in the post-test enhanced the critical thinking and cognitive level of the student participants. This enables them to perform the tasks and activities with ease. It greatly enhances their motivation and creative skills. Further, the tasks and activities used in the post-test also helped the student participants to augment the application of the knowledge learnt in real life situations by a form of examining the various cultural traditions in the community. They enjoy as they learn the content. In the task to

speak on 'Culture of my community', the student participants interacted with their family and friends encouraging in applying the knowledge learnt in real life situations. In the writing and performing of the one-act play based on the story incorporating cultural elements drawn from the text, the student participants exercise their creative and cognitive skills. In the process they develop their writing, speaking and listening skills. In the activity to find, write and speak on the various folktales of the diverse communities of Manipur, they had a chance to explore and learn about the various communities residing in Manipur. This task made them reflect on the rich cultural diversity of Manipur. The folktales of the various communities bring out the cultural nuances and intercultural relationship of existence among different communities of Manipur. This in turn creates a platform of understanding other's culture and further leading to a peaceful co-existence among the various communities. In the process, they also enhance their language skills. These tasks and activities greatly increase their motivation level, critical thinking and creativity. One of the characteristic features of CLIL approach is that active learning of the content takes place based on the learners' existing knowledge. The student participants, in the study, were familiar with the indigenous culture. Undeniably, active learning can be observed in the study. Moreover, as environment plays a vital role in second language acquisition in CLIL approach, the use of indigenous folk narrative in the study is found to be effective.

Conclusion

The study illustrated that there has been concurrent learning of the language skills and content when the curriculum of BSEM and the folk narrative, *Poireiton Khunthok* was used. However, there has been an observance of the increase in the learning level

of the language skills and content when the indigenous cultural folktale was used. The findings thus show that the use of an indigenous cultural folktale as content in teaching English language has helped in enhancing the cultural knowledge as well as the language skills. The use of the cultural content has assisted in improving the motivation, cognitivity and creativity level of the learners. The preceding deliberations, therefore, establishes that the indigenous folktale, *Poireiton Khunthok*, representing significant cultural myths, using the CLIL approach assisted the student participants to augment the English language skills as well as to understand culture.

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