

## The Role of Content and Language Integrated Learning (Soft CLIL) in Developing Academic Language Functions in Tertiary Education

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### Abstract

This paper explores the role of Soft Content and Language Integrated Learning (Soft CLIL) in developing academic language functions (ALFs) among tertiary level learners, focusing on speaking skills. Soft CLIL integrates language with subject-related content, prioritizing language development while introducing subject concepts lightly. ALFs refer to the specific language required for academic tasks such as describing, explaining, comparing, and arguing. This qualitative action research was conducted in a Sri Lankan state university, involving fourth-year students following the Bachelor of Arts (Honors) degree in Pali and Buddhist Studies, and their English language teachers. It employed a single-cycle action research design of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, to examine learner and teacher perceptions of Soft CLIL and its impact on developing ALFs. Multiple data sets were gathered for corroboration. To probe into learner perceptions, focus group discussions, reflective diary entries, and guided essays were utilized. Teacher perceptions were elicited through self-reflections and peer classroom observations. The analysis followed a deductive approach, and the interpretation was supported by Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. Though more demanding to plan than general English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lessons, the approach proved effective. The findings show that Soft CLIL positively impacted learner comprehension, interaction, confidence, and the development of ALFs. Learners showed progress in using key ALFs needed for their degree. Thus, this study highlights the need to promote Soft CLIL among curriculum developers and English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners. The findings offer insights for stakeholders, advocating for the wider adoption of the approach within the faculty and beyond to enhance ALFs among tertiary-level learners.

**Keywords:** Content and Language Integrated Learning; Academic language functions; Tertiary education; Sri Lanka; Action research

### Introduction

This study investigates the role of Soft Content and Language Integrated Learning (Soft CLIL) in developing academic language functions (ALFs) among tertiary-level learners at a Sri Lankan state university. The study responds to a pressing issue in the local context: despite the presence of compulsory English courses, many learners continue to struggle with ALFs, which are specific language skills required for academic tasks such as analyzing, evaluating, describing, explaining, defending, inferring and arguing skills essential for academic success in university programs. This single-cycle intervention study was implemented as a supplementary class series

integrating content from the learners' discipline of Pali and Buddhist Studies into English language instruction, with a specific focus on speaking skills. This approach was grounded in the principles of Soft CLIL, which prioritizes language development while using familiar, discipline-specific content to facilitate learning. In our teaching experience, final-year undergraduates struggled to apply ALFs in academic subjects. Additionally, the implementation of soft CLIL, specifically in a tertiary-level EAP classroom, remains an under researched area. This gap highlights the need for teaching that supports both language development and disciplinary relevance. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore how Soft CLIL can foster the development of ALFs. The following research questions guide the inquiry:

**RQ1:** How do learners perceive the use of Soft CLIL in supporting the development of ALFs in English?

**RQ2:** What do teaching practitioners observe and experience regarding learners' use of ALFs in a Soft CLIL classroom?

As elaborated by scholars such as Coyle, Hood, and Marsh, CLIL is a "dual-focused educational approach; and in the teaching and learning process, content and language are 'interwoven', even if the emphasis is greater on one or the other at a given time" (2010, p.1). CLIL can be implemented in two ways: Hard CLIL and Soft CLIL. In the content-language continuum, Soft CLIL leans towards language where language development is prioritized (Banegas, 2016). Soft CLIL integrates cross-curricular content into language teaching, enhancing both instruction and learners' cognitive development (Bentley, 2010; Esteban, 2015).

ALFs are the diverse roles that language plays in scholarly communication, with core tasks including explaining, arguing, analyzing, and evaluating. They support content learning, especially for English learners. ALFs are rooted in Halliday's functional linguistics and Cummins' Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) concept. CALP, more cognitively demanding than Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), refers to the academic language proficiency, which is "the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling" (Cummins, 2008, p. 67). Extending Halliday's ideas, Gibbons (2009) emphasizes the explicit teaching of ALFs to scaffold academic literacy across disciplines. According to Schleppegrell (2004), these functions facilitate the communication of complex ideas, constructing arguments, evaluating evidence, and other skills essential for undergraduate success. Several studies highlight CLIL's potential in supporting these functions. Esteban (2015) observed that integrating thematic content into English instruction for Spanish BA students enhanced both language learning and cognitive-communicative skills. Mencarelli (2016) observed that Italian secondary-level students improved in micro ALFs like hypothesizing when English was taught through scientific subjects. Mohan and Beckett (2003), in a Canadian tertiary English as a Second Language (ESL) context, applied a functional CLIL approach focused on Chinese socioeconomic content and highlighted how communicative tasks and causal explanations linked content with advanced language use. Similarly, Mårtensson and Östrand (2023) emphasize that CLIL and content-based instruction (CBI) boost learner motivation by linking content to interests, supporting sustained engagement. These findings informed the present study, which used a task-based framework to develop ALFs among final-year Pali and Buddhist Studies undergraduates.

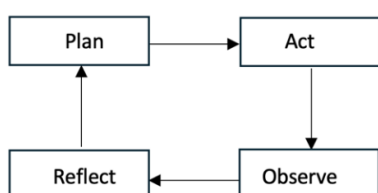
### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition, which explains how learners acquire a second language, aligns well with the context of this tertiary-level classroom. His five hypotheses: Acquisition-Learning, Natural Order, Monitor, Comprehensible Input, and Affective Filter, form a coherent framework in analyzing the study's findings (Krashen, 1981). Both Krashen's theory and the CLIL framework promote language learning through natural, meaningful communication rather than explicit grammar instruction, forming the theoretical basis of this study. In designing the lessons, Krashen's emphasis on comprehensible input and lowering the affective filters guided the selection of soft content and communicative activities that encouraged authentic use of academic language in an encouraging and relaxed atmosphere. CLIL, particularly in its 'soft' form, prioritizes language development while

introducing subject content in an accessible way, making it especially suitable for EAP contexts. Central to CLIL is the development of CALP conceptualized by Cummins, which refers to the ability to understand and use academic language that is cognitively demanding. This study draws on both the CLIL framework and the concept of CALP to support the development of ALFs. Additionally, it contributes to the limited research on Soft CLIL in Sri Lankan tertiary EAP classrooms by integrating a religious philosophy into English instruction.

## Materials and Methods

This is a “reactive action research”, where the first author, as the teaching practitioner, reacted to a problem encountered in her professional teaching setting (Craig, 2009, p.248). Reactive action research addresses a practical problem and improves professional practice, and the participants are actively involved in the study from beginning to end to solve this practical problem (Craig, 2009). The following figure illustrates the action research design adopted for this study, which was modeled by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).



**Figure 1**

*Kemmis and McTaggart’s (1988) Action Research Design*

This action research follows one cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to examine the impact of content integration. A single cycle was chosen due to time constraints- a 15-week semester with two lecture hours per week. Reflections from this cycle provide a foundation for future multi-cycle research. Content selection was guided by the course coordinator’s input and the researcher’s background in Buddhism. Various qualitative data were collected, as detailed in the table below.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Data Collection Tools and Data Sets*

Research question	Tool	Data set
RQ1: How do learners perceive the use of Soft CLIL in supporting the development of ALFs in English?	Reflective diary entries of the learner participants	Written diary entries
	Focus group discussions with the learner participants	Audio recordings, transcripts and translations
	Guided essays of the learner participants	Written guided essays
RQ 2: What do teaching practitioners observe and experience regarding learners’ use of ALFs in a Soft CLIL classroom?	Self-reflections of the class teacher/me	Written self-reflections
	Classroom observations done by peer teaching practitioners	Classroom observation protocols filled by peer teaching practitioners

Content included themes such as Right Endurance, Contemplation of Emotions, the Five Hindrances, the Senses, and the Middle Way, providing a strong basis for integrating subject content into language teaching. Activities, including speeches, discussions, debates, and presentations, targeted speaking-related ALFs and were supported by textual and audiovisual materials. Lesson plans incorporated both content and language objectives. The action was observed throughout. In the final reflection, the first author analyzed how effectively she supported ALF development through Soft CLIL and identified feasible remedial steps.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained by critically examining the dual insider-outsider roles, acknowledging how personal and institutional positioning influenced interpretations, and incorporating participant perspectives to challenge biases, to provide a transparent, ethically responsible, and contextually grounded account of the research.

## **Participants**

The participants were all final-year students (Students A–G) from the Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, i.e., four monks, two lay males, and one lay female, aged 22–26. All were Sri Lankan Buddhists, Sinhala-medium educated, with limited English exposure. Most are from lower-middle-class, semi-urban, or rural backgrounds. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to refrain from answering or withdraw were assured.

## **Procedure of data analysis**

Before analysis, the first author manually transcribed and translated all Sinhala audio recordings, diary entries, and essays into English for accuracy, while English texts were presented verbatim. Data were thematically coded and analyzed based on the two research questions. Guided by Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory, the analysis used a deductive approach that applied theory to the data to test it (Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022). It examined how Soft CLIL influenced the development of ALFs, focusing on language and content objectives, teaching and learning processes, activities and resources used, evaluation, and overall classroom management.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Learner perceptions of the use of Soft CLIL in supporting the development of ALFs in English**

Throughout the data collection, the participants demonstrated a positive attitude towards the innovative Soft CLIL classroom experience and emphasized the value of developing ALFs. In a focus group discussion (FGD), Student A remarked, "I am a communicator. I need to reach my audience through an international language. For that, I improved my dhamma preaching skills through this lecture series. I value the impromptu speaking opportunities I received during the program," while Student B added, "I like this updated method of teaching. I wish this program had been conducted from the first year onwards."

When participants were asked whether the repetition of discipline-related content in English materials caused disengagement, their responses suggested the contrary. Student A wrote in a guided essay, "Familiar content in these materials was the reason I developed an interest in attending this lecture." Student D noted that "prior knowledge in (their) subject area" helped them connect with the lesson. Student C said, "I'm not sure if Madam deliberately linked the materials to our subject, but it was very relevant to us; for example, the text on 'Ignorance' introduced us to different interpretations of it." In a reflective diary entry (RDE), the same student noted, "'The Right Endurance' lesson related to my subject. We learned new topic words, discussed ideas, and argued respectfully." Regarding materials, Student A said, "I will never forget the lesson on 'Sammuthi.' I could present my own interpretation and analysis of this Buddhist text in English, which I hadn't done in any previous English courses." Thus, integrating discipline-specific content helped learners engage in developing ALFs. These reflections

support Krashen's (1982) 'comprehensible input' hypothesis (i+1), where familiar content ('i') combined with English elements ('+1') facilitated language development beyond learners' current level. Materials such as articles, stories, dhamma talks, meditations, and dialogues provided meaningful, natural input supporting second language acquisition.

Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis explains how anxiety or low confidence can hinder learning. In this study, the filter was lowered by allowing code-switching, encouraging risk-taking, and creating a supportive environment that facilitated ALF development. Student F noted in an RDE: "We read the text, then learned how to disagree, agree, interrupt, etc. We had a fruitful discussion on 'Contemplation of Anger', with confidence and no fear of mistakes. Learners shared that content-integrated activities were key to developing ALFs. In a guided essay, Student E remarked, "Some dislike speaking, some are shy, but these activities enabled us to speak, at least with the little English we knew." Student C added, "Activities were fruitful; they developed speaking, presentation, and communication skills." These responses highlight how the choice of activities also promoted the development of ALFs.

Some learners showed conscious learning and self-monitoring during speaking tasks. Krashen's 'monitor hypothesis' states that fluency comes from acquired language, while learned knowledge aids accuracy (1981, p. 2). Student A noted in an RDE: "When I spoke about 'Pride, Conceit and Humility,' I stumbled on linking words. I took my time to choose correctly and talk about my subject." This reflects how learned knowledge supported editing in cognitively demanding tasks. Overall, learner perceptions suggest that Soft CLIL effectively supported ALF development in English.

### **Teacher perceptions of the use of Soft CLIL in supporting the development of ALFs in English**

The data revealed that teaching practitioners observed significant development in ALFs in the Soft CLIL classroom. The first author, as the main researcher, also maintained journal entries. She noted that planning a Soft CLIL lesson required more time and effort than a general EAP lesson, yet this is a skill that language practitioners can master with experience. Early on, she noted, "I had to spend more time aligning content and language objectives," but in the final reflection, she remarked, "In planning the lesson 'The Middle Way,' I successfully aligned content objectives with language objectives and learner proficiency." These entries reflect progress in content-language integration.

Peer observation protocols rated both planning and implementation as "excellent" or "very good." Lesson planning is also aligned with Krashen's 'natural order' hypothesis, providing input suited for second language acquirers rather than learners. As Patrick (2019, p. 40) notes, learners acquire language only when ready, and the teacher's role is to offer understandable input. The researcher aimed to observe this order and provide appropriate input accordingly.

The development of learner participants' ALFs, such as predicting, inferring, and expressing opinions, was evident during concept-checking questions posed before lessons. For instance, to set the context, when they were asked, "What is 'endurance'? How do you react to deeply felt emotions (e.g., worry, elation, anger)? What do you do when a negative thought arises? Do you indulge it or act out of it?" These questions prompted learners to describe and analyze their personalities, leading to deep discussions on emotions. This growth was also reflected in self-reflections: "A learner participant conducted a guided meditation during class, while others followed attentively. He did it with clarity and accuracy." This highlighted improved speaking skills and the ability to explain complex concepts in English. During lessons, learners supported their arguments with examples, details, and anecdotes. One reflection noted: "Learners used their prior knowledge, quoting Pali shlokās and Jātaka stories," showing how disciplinary content enriched language use; and another noted: "Learners paraphrased a story effortlessly," demonstrating their ability to comprehend and express complex ideas in English. These examples show how

content familiarity fosters deeper engagement and stronger academic communication. In the debate, the proposition and opposition teams collaborated closely, gathering evidence, preparing rebuttals, and learning from peers. The data also reveals how affective filters like confidence, fear, and anxiety influence language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). While the negative filters cannot be eliminated, they can be managed. Patrick (2019) notes that tasks promoting natural acquisition reduce stress, whereas explicit instruction may heighten it, linking affective filters to Krashen's acquisition-learning and comprehensible input hypotheses.

The first author's reflections indicated that learners met both content and language objectives, with new language effectively applied in activities. For example, "they used discussion functions of expressing opinions, giving reasons, seeking clarification, and connectors for addition, contrast, cause-effect, and summarizing during tasks like paraphrasing texts and quoting *Nikāyas* in presentations." These instances showed meaningful integration of content and language. Peer observation protocols confirmed teaching effectiveness, rating areas such as concept clarity, adaptability, classroom management, intellectual humility, and time allocation as "excellent," affirming the professionalism and success of the Soft CLIL approach.

## Conclusion

The results and discussion led to the conclusion that the implementation of Soft CLIL in this tertiary-level English language classroom had a positive impact on learner comprehension, interaction, confidence, and, most importantly, the development of ALFs. Although teaching practitioners acknowledged that planning a Soft CLIL lesson was more demanding than preparing a general EAP class, they noted that the overall effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, along with the course's high productivity and practical value, outweighed these challenges. As the teaching practitioner who conducted the lecture series, the first author observed significant improvement in the learners' ALFs. Through the task-based English language lessons covered throughout the semester, the learners mastered their language functions of analyzing, describing, explaining, expressing opinions, comparing, contrasting, arguing, defending, predicting, inferring, etc. These cognitively demanding ALFs were required for the learner participants' degrees, and as a result, the mastery of these functions was an investment for their overall academic performance as well. The implications of the study highlight the measures that should be taken by curriculum developers and English language teaching practitioners in tertiary education to implement similar programs in other contexts and emphasize the necessity of promoting the soft CLIL approach, especially in tertiary education.

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