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Integrating Content and Language: Applying the 4Cs Framework of Content and Language Integrated Learning to International Relations Education in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

With the increasing number of Chinese universities seeking to internationalize their curricula, the discipline of International Relations (IR) offers a particularly compelling venue for integrating English language development with thematic teaching. This article explores how to systematically apply the 4Cs framework of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) to the teaching of international relations for Chinese college students. It draws on the 4Cs framework that is already established by Coyle and places it in the specific teaching, institutional and sociolinguistic context of higher education in China. This paper first expounds the theoretical basis of the 4Cs framework, followed by the examination of the current situation of English teaching for IR students in Chinese universities. Against this backdrop, this paper further presents a continuous argument for the adoption of CLIL, discusses the teaching importance and implementation strategies, analyzes the challenges and limitations, and provides specific suggestions for educators and policymakers. We find that the 4Cs framework provides a coherent and adaptable structure for enhancing the language proficiency and disciplinary complexity of Chinese students majoring in international relations, provided that its implementation is sensitive to the institutional realities and cultural traditions of China's higher education system.

Keywords

CLIL, 4Cs framework, International Relations education, Chinese higher education

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the internationalization of higher education in China has been one of the most significant developments in global academic life. Driven by national policy directives, institutional aspirations and the demands of the global labor market, Chinese universities have rapidly expanded the

scope of English teaching, especially in disciplines with an international orientation. International relations (IR), as a research field, essentially focuses on cross-border phenomena, global governance, diplomatic practices, and the interactions among states, international organizations, and non-state actors, occupying a unique position in this landscape. Students majoring in international relations not only need to acquire disciplinary knowledge but also cultivate the ability to participate in major resources, academic debates and professional discourse, all of which are conducted in English. Therefore, the challenge is not merely isolated language acquisition or content dissemination, but rather more complex teaching tasks that promote the simultaneous development of these two fields.

It is precisely against this backdrop that Integrated Content and Language Learning (CLIL) has emerged as a particularly promising teaching approach. CLIL was initially developed in the context of European education. It refers to the use of a language other than the student's native language as a teaching medium for non-verbal topics in an educational environment. Its dual purpose is to develop content knowledge and proficiency in the target language (Marsh, 2002). The most widely cited theoretical statement of CLIL pedagogy is the 4Cs framework, which identifies four interrelated building blocks, including content, communication, cognition, and culture, as the fundamental pillars of effective CLIL practice (Coyle, 2007; Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). This framework has been applied across a wide range of educational levels and disciplinary backgrounds in Europe and is increasingly being used in parts of Asia and Latin America. However, the exploration of applying it to specific fields of IR education in the Chinese university system is relatively scarce.

The motivation of this article is to believe that the teaching of international relations in Chinese universities represents a case in which the integration of content and language is not only an ideal teaching innovation but also an intellectual and professional necessity. The discipline of international relations requires its practitioners to be able to read, analyze, discuss and produce complex English texts. Master the competing theoretical paradigms mainly formed within the academic tradition where English is the native language; And engage with an increasingly diverse and multi-polar academic community. The teaching approach that regards language learning and content learning as independent and continuous activities is insufficient to meet these demands. This article holds that the 4Cs framework offers a principled and practical alternative solution.

2. The 4Cs Framework of CLIL: Theoretical Foundations and Elaboration

In the 1990s, CLIL emerged as a teaching concept in Europe, initially in response to the European Commission's advocacy for multilingualism and the practical need to educate students in languages other than their mother tongue. David Marsh is widely credited with coining the term CLIL in 1994, and his subsequent work defined it as “a dual-focused educational approach in which an additional language is used for the learning and teaching of both content and language”. (Marsh, 2002, p. 15) From the outset, CLIL was conceived not as a rigid method but as an umbrella term encompassing a range of practices in which content and language learning are integrated to varying degrees (Mehisto, Marsh, & Frigols, 2008).

This flexibility has been both a strength—allowing adaptation to diverse educational contexts—and a source of criticism, as some scholars have argued that the term has become so elastic as to lack analytical precision (Bruton, 2013).

The theoretical foundations of CLIL draw on several distinct traditions in applied linguistics, educational psychology, and second language acquisition. From second language acquisition research, CLIL takes the insight that language is best acquired not through decontextualized grammar instruction but through meaningful communicative interaction in which learners are engaged with substantive content (Krashen, 1985). From educational psychology, and particularly from sociocultural theory rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978), CLIL borrows the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development and the related notion of scaffolding: the idea that learners can achieve higher levels of cognitive and linguistic performance when supported by more knowledgeable others, structured tasks, and mediating tools. From Cummins' (2000) influential distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), CLIL draws attention to the difference between everyday conversational fluency and the more demanding academic language competencies required for disciplinary learning. It is the development of CALP, rather than BICS, that is the primary linguistic objective of most CLIL programmers.

2.1 The Four Cs: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture

The most influential attempt to provide CLIL with a coherent theoretical architecture is the 4Cs framework developed by Coyle, first articulated in the late 1990s and subsequently refined in a series of publications (Coyle, 2007; Coyle et al., 2010). Coyle argued that effective CLIL practice requires the simultaneous consideration of four interrelated dimensions: Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture. None of these are regarded as independent components that need to be addressed in sequence, but rather as interrelated and reinforcing elements that should be woven together in curriculum design, curriculum planning and classroom interaction. This framework is explicitly designed as a planning tool, enabling teachers to design learning experiences that develop language and content in tandem, supported by appropriate cognitive challenges and enriched with intercultural awareness.

Content refers to the subject being taught. The 4Cs framework insists that content should not be diluted or simplified to the point of being unrecognizable simply because it is being disseminated in a second language. The integrity and rigor of the subject matter must be maintained, and engagement with the content should drive the learning process. As Coyle et al. (2010) emphasize, CLIL is not language teaching disguised as content-based instruction; it is truly about learning new knowledge, new skills, and an understanding of a subject. For international relations education, this means that students should strive to address substantive issues such as the nature of the international system, the causes of conflict and cooperation, the dynamics of international politics and economics, and the normative dilemmas of global governance, rather than merely practicing English vocabulary.

Communication under the 4Cs framework transcends the traditional understanding of language as a system of grammar and vocabulary. Coyle (2007) distinguishes between learning language, language

used for learning, and language acquired through learning. Learning a language refers to acquiring the specific terminology and discourse patterns required for specific subject content. In the context of international relations, this would include terms such as “sovereignty”, “balance of power”, “hegemony”, “constructivism”, and “norm diffusion”. Learning a language refers to the general academic language skills required for students to effectively participate in the learning process, such as the ability to formulate hypotheses, present arguments, participate in debates, ask clarifying questions, and collaborate with peers. Learning a language also refers to the spontaneous generation of new language when students are exposed to new content and are driven to express new understandings. This process is inherently unpredictable, emphasizing the dynamic and generative relationship between content learning and language development. This three-way communication model is central to the 4Cs framework, suggesting that CLIL promotes deeper and more authentic language learning than traditional language teaching.

Cognition is a dimension of the 4Cs framework, addressing the quality and depth of thinking that CLIL activities should foster. Based on Bloom’s classification of cognitive objectives and its subsequent revisions, Coyle (2007) argues that effective CLIL practice must go beyond lower-order thinking skills, such as recall, recognition, and comprehension, and engage students in higher-order thinking skills, including analysis, evaluation, synthesis, and creative problem-solving. The cognitive dimension is crucial because it provides the engine driving content learning and language development: when students are asked to analyze complex international crises, evaluate competing theoretical explanations, or integrate information from multiple sources, they simultaneously deepen their understanding of the subject and are driven to use language in increasingly sophisticated and precise ways. Therefore, CLIL classrooms should be designed to create what Meyer (2010) calls “cognitive-demanding tasks”, verbally supported by scaffolding, so that students are challenged but not overwhelmed.

Culture is the fourth and, in some respects, the most complex dimension of the 4Cs framework. Coyle (2007) uses the term broadly to encompass not only knowledge about other cultures but also the development of intercultural awareness and the ability to see the world from multiple perspectives. In the context of CLIL, the cultural dimension plays a role on several levels: it involves the recognition of the cultural embeddability of the target language, the appreciation of the cultural background in which the subject is generated, and the development of “multicultural citizenship” as Coyle et al. (2010) put it, which means the ability to function effectively and ethically in a culturally diverse environment. For international relations education, the cultural dimension is particularly resonant because this discipline is essentially related to the interaction of different political cultures, value systems and worldviews. Furthermore, the discipline of international relations itself has a cultural history mainly shaped by the Western academic tradition, and an increasing number of scholars are calling for greater diversity and the combination of non-Western perspectives (Acharya, 2014). Therefore, the cultural dimension of the 4Cs framework is directly linked to some of the most important contemporary debates within the IR discipline itself.

2.2 The Interconnection of the Four Cs and Relevance to Higher Education

A key feature of the 4Cs framework is that the four dimensions are neither regarded as independent variables nor as checklists processed one at a time. On the contrary, they are understood as fundamentally interrelated, and the quality of their integration determines the effectiveness of the CLIL scheme. The content provides thematic content that promotes communication. Communication is the carrier for obtaining content and developing cognition. Cognition determines the depth and quality of contact with content and language. Culture provides a broader context in which all three operate and gain meaning. Coyle (2007, p. 550) visually represents this integration as a chain framework, in which each C is associated with all other Cs, and no C occupies a hierarchical priority position. This integrity distinguishes the 4Cs framework from the approach that merely regards language and content as parallel trajectories, and makes it particularly suitable for disciplines such as IR, where the interaction of knowledge, language, critical thinking and cultural awareness is not only desirable but also a component of disciplinary competence.

Although the 4Cs framework was initially developed with reference to the educational standards of European schools, its core principles are applicable to higher education environments and those outside Europe. Some scholars believe that CLIL, especially the 4Cs framework, can serve as a valuable planning and quality assurance tool for college English teaching. In universities, the integration of language and content is usually hypothetical but rarely systematically pursued (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Yang, 2015). In many university courses, the focus of language development is overwhelming content, while language development is accidental or delegated to separate language support courses. The 4Cs framework corrects this trend, insisting that communication, cognition and culture must be clearly planned along with content. In the Asian context, especially in China, the application of CLIL has been explored in a few but increasing number of studies, although most of these works are still in the initial or exploratory stage (Yang, 2015; Zhao & Dixon, 2017). This article aims to contribute to this emerging working system by conducting a detailed and discipline-specific analysis of how to apply the 4Cs framework to IR education in Chinese universities.

3. The Current State of English Instruction for IR Students in Chinese Universities

3.1 Policy Context and Institutional Landscape

The teaching of English in Chinese higher education has been shaped by a series of national policy initiatives dating back to the early 2000s. The Ministry of Education's guidelines issued in 2001 and revised in subsequent years encouraged universities, particularly those designated as key or double first-class institutions, to offer at least 5% to 10% of their courses in English or bilingually, with special emphasis on disciplines related to information technology, biotechnology, law, and international affairs (Gil, 2016; Hu, 2008). The School or Department of International Relations, due to the global nature of its disciplines, is one of the earlier departments to adopt English as the medium and bilingual teaching. Major research universities have established English-taught or bilingual international relations courses,

often as part of a broader internationalization strategy, which includes enrolling international students, developing joint degree programs, holding international conferences and summer schools.

Despite these policy ambitions, the actual implementation of English teaching in the IR department is extremely unbalanced. At the most prestigious institutions, students can obtain courses taught entirely in English by teachers who have received education abroad or have rich international research experience. However, in less elite institutions, “teaching English” may merely use English textbooks, combined with lectures mainly in Chinese, and occasionally convert key terms into English (Hu, 2008; Zhao & Dixon, 2017). The gap between policy rhetoric and teaching reality is a persistent feature of China's English-medium teaching environment, especially important in disciplines like international relations, where the ability to participate in high-level English academic research and professional discourse is crucial for academic and career success.

3.2 Language Proficiency and the Gap Between BICS and CALP

Chinese IR students typically arrive at university with a substantial foundation in English, having studied the language for at least six years in secondary school and having passed the English component of the national college entrance examination. Many students at leading universities also hold certificates from the College English Test (CET-4 or CET-6) or from international proficiency examinations such as IELTS or TOEFL. However, as many researchers have demonstrated, the English proficiency of many Chinese college students, including those from elite institutions, is seriously inclined towards receptive skills - reading comprehension, and to a smaller extent, listening - while productive skills such as speaking and writing lag significantly behind (Pan & Block, 2011; Hu& McKay, 2012. More importantly, there is a significant gap between students' basic interpersonal communication skills and their cognitive academic language abilities (Cummins, 2000). Students may be able to have daily conversations in English or understand the general meaning of written texts, but they often have difficulty expressing complex analytical arguments, participating in ongoing academic debates, writing well-structured research papers, or handling the professional discourse of IR scholarships.

This gap is specifically manifested in IR education. Students may be able to define terms such as “realism” or “liberalism” but find it difficult to compare and contrast the ontological assumptions of competing international relations theories in English, or to critically evaluate the argumentative structures of journal articles by scholars like Alexander Winter. They may be able to read policy documents from the United Nations, but it is difficult for them to write a policy brief in English that meets the professional standards of clarity, coherence and persuasiveness. The root cause of this problem does not lie in students' lack of effort or motivation, but in the teaching methods that historically separated language learning from content learning, treating them as distinct activities carried out by different teachers in different classrooms with different goals.

The dominant English teaching model in Chinese universities remains the general English course “College English”, which is a compulsory course for the first two years of undergraduate study. It is taught by English teachers from the language department and mainly evaluated through standardized

tests. The content courses of students' majors, including international relations, are usually taught individually by subject experts who may or may not teach in English. They are typically neither trained nor authorized to participate in students' language development (Zhao & Dixon, 2017). This structural separation has led to a situation where language learning is detached from context and from the intellectual attention that inspires students as international relations scholars, while English content learning is not supported in terms of language, often leaving both teachers and students feeling frustrated. This separation has produced several consequences. Firstly, students believe that college English courses have nothing to do with their academic and professional interests, which may weaken their motivation to learn English. Secondly, when students encounter courses taught in English, they may suddenly feel confused by the increase in language requirements without adequate preparation or support. Thirdly, the development of academic literacy in a specific discipline, including the ability to read, write and discuss IR topics accurately and complexly in English, largely depends on opportunities and individual initiative rather than systematic instructional design. The CLIL method, especially the 4Cs framework, is precisely designed to address this series of issues.

4. The Case for CLIL in International Relations Education in Chinese Universities

The argument of applying CLIL to international relations education is based on a fundamental observation: in the discipline of international relations, content and language are not only parallel issues but also closely intertwined. The concepts, theories and debates that constitute the academic field of international relations are mainly expressed in English, and the professional vocabulary and discourse conventions of this field are components of its knowledge content. In an important sense, studying international relations is learning the language of international relations, not merely in the sense of obtaining terms, but in a richer sense, developing the ability to think, debate and communicate within the disciplinary discourse community. This means the integration of content and language learning, as a defining principle of CLIL, is not an optional teaching enhancement for IR education but a mandatory one.

The 4Cs framework provides a particularly appropriate perspective for conceptualizing this integration. In terms of content, international relations offer a rich knowledge system, including international political theory, the history of state systems, the operation of international institutions, and the analysis of contemporary global challenges ranging from climate change to cyber security. In terms of communication, international relations not only require proficiency in general academic English, but also in the professional types and registrations of the field, including analytical papers, policy briefs, diplomatic language, as well as the discourse conventions of academic conferences and seminars. In terms of cognition, IR is a discipline that essentially requires high-level thinking skills: students must analyze complex causal relationships, evaluate competing theoretical claims, integrate information from different sources, and apply abstract concepts to specific cases. In terms of culture, international relations may be the most culturally influenced among all social sciences, as it deals with the interaction of

different civilizations, political systems, and normative frameworks, and increasingly confronts challenges beyond its own Westernized origin of knowledge (Acharya, 2014).

4.1 Content: Maintaining Disciplinary Rigor

The Content dimension of the 4Cs framework requires that CLIL instruction maintain the integrity and rigor of the subject matter, even as it attends to language development. For IR education, this means that the adoption of a CLIL approach should not lead to a dumbing-down of the curriculum. Students should still be expected to engage with canonical texts in the field and to grapple with the full complexity of contemporary global issues. The change in the CLIL teaching method lies not in the difficulty of the content, but in its mediating approach: through carefully designed tasks, a clear focus on the language requirements of the content, and teaching strategies that support students in acquiring and generating complex subject-specific knowledge in English.

In practice, this may involve the selection and sequencing of course reading materials. Not only should their intellectual significance be noted, but also their language accessibility. Starting from conceptually important but relatively easy-to-understand texts in language, as students' proficiency improves, it gradually develops into more demanding materials. Pre-reading activities that activate students' existing knowledge and introduce key vocabulary can also be designed, as well as post-reading activities that require students to prove their understanding through analysis and application rather than just recall. As Coyle et al. (2010) emphasized, the key principle is a content-driven learning process: language learning is for understanding and participating in substantive subject content, not the other way around.

4.2 Communication: Developing Disciplinary Literacy

The communicative dimension of the 4Cs framework, due to its distinction among language acquisition, language learning, and language mastery, serves as an exceptionally powerful tool for designing IR courses that systematically cultivate students' subject literacy. The language used in studying international relations encompasses not only specialized terminology but also grammatical patterns, rhetorical structures, and genre conventions, reflecting both the academic and practical dimensions of international relations. For example, students need to learn how to construct theoretical arguments, how to limit their claims, and how to use restrictive language and modalities appropriate to academic discourse. The language skills taught in the international relations course include communication techniques, enabling students to participate in seminars, ask and answer questions, collaborate on group projects, and express their ideas both orally and in writing. These are all general academic skills, but in the context of international relations, they carry distinct disciplinary characteristics: for instance, participating in Model United Nations requires not only general oral proficiency but also familiarity with the procedural language of international organizations, the conventions of diplomatic speeches, and the ability to negotiate and compromise in English.

From a teaching perspective, learning a language might be the most exciting aspect, as it refers to the new language that students acquire incidentally and organically when engaging in challenging content. When a student majoring in international relations is analyzing the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and encounters

and has to understand phrases such as “sunset clauses” or “quick recovery mechanisms”, they are learning the language in a way directly related to meaningful content, and thus are likely to be retained and transferred to other contexts. Dalton-Puffer (2011) holds that this incidental language acquisition is one of the most powerful findings in CLIL research, and it has a clear correlation with content-rich disciplines like IR.

4.3 Cognition: Promoting Higher-Order Thinking

The cognitive dimensions of the 4Cs framework are closely related to the teaching objectives of IR education, which has long emphasized the importance of cultivating students' abilities of critical analysis, independent judgment, and creative problem-solving. In the educational context of China, this dimension is particularly important, as there is extensive documentation of teacher-centered and communication-based teaching approaches in which students are expected to absorb and replicate information rather than inquire, evaluate, and synthesize it (Hu & McKay, 2012).The 4Cs framework focuses on systematically enhancing higher-order thinking skills, providing a clear principled foundation for adopting more interactive and student-centered teaching approaches.

In practice, fostering higher-order cognition in the CLIL course on international relations may involve the use of case studies, requiring students to analyze complex international crises by identifying relevant actors, interests, and structural dynamics, evaluate the explanatory power of different theoretical frameworks, and propose policy recommendations that consider multiple perspectives and trade-offs. It may include structured debates that require students to argue from a perspective that may not be their own, thereby fostering the ability to think and understand from others' viewpoints. It may involve a research project that requires students to formulate a research question, identify and evaluate relevant sources, construct a coherent argument, and defend their conclusions against critical scrutiny. In all cases, the cognitive demands of tasks serve as the driving force behind content acquisition and language development: students must not only recall information in English but also think critically about complex problems using the language. In doing so, they not only developed expertise in specific disciplines but also enhanced their academic language skills.

4.4 Culture: Intercultural Competence and Disciplinary Self-Awareness

The cultural dimension of the 4Cs framework resonates strongly with the knowledge focus of international relations as a discipline and with the specific circumstances of China's international relations students. At its most fundamental level, the study of international relations is essentially an exercise in cross-cultural understanding: students must learn to comprehend and evaluate the perspectives, interests, and values of actors from diverse cultural and political backgrounds. The 4Cs framework emphasizes the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness and multi-angle thinking ability, which directly reflects the requirements of this discipline.

On a deeper level, the cultural dimension of CLIL is related to the increasingly prominent debate within the discipline of international relations itself: criticism of the Western-centered knowledge base in the field and calls for a more genuine global international relationship, including non-Western perspectives,

concepts and historical experiences (Acharya, 2014). This debate has resonated with international relations students in China. They are required to study a subject mainly shaped by the Western academic tradition. Using English as a language is both a practical need and a cultural carrier. The CLIL approach based on the 4Cs framework can help students cope with this situation by clarifying the cultural embedding of IR knowledge, encouraging critical reflection on the relationship between language, power and knowledge production, and creating space for the expression of Chinese and other non-Western perspectives on international affairs. In this way, the cultural dimension of CLIL transcends mere cultural consciousness and encompasses a more critical and reflective form of cross-cultural competence, which is in line with the most advanced academic ideas in this field.

5. Pedagogical Implications and Implementation Strategies

Applying the 4Cs framework to IR education requires a systematic curriculum design approach that regards content, communication, cognition and culture as comprehensive, common and equal goals. This represents a significant deviation from the traditional curriculum design process of IR departments in China. Traditional curriculum design usually begins and ends with content and regards language as a non-issue (in Chinese courses) or as an assumed ability that students expect to bring into the classroom (in English courses).

5.1 Curriculum Design Principles

The course design process based on cli will start with determining the core content theme of a given course, such as international security theory, the political economy of globalization or multilateral diplomatic practice, and then systematically map out the communication, cognitive and cultural needs related to each theme. For the international Security theory unit, the course designer would ask: What specific vocabulary, grammatical structures and discourse patterns do students need to access and participate in these contents? What communication activities will the students engage in? What kind of language support do they need to participate effectively? What cognitive operations are students expected to perform and how can tasks be designed to promote progression from lower-order to higher-order thinking? And what cultural dimensions are embedded in or connected to this content, for instance, the cultural assumptions of Western security discourse, the experiences of security in the Global South, the Chinese concept of “harmonious world” and how can students be helped to develop critical intercultural awareness?

This kind of integrated curriculum planning is time-consuming and demands a high level of pedagogical expertise, but it is essential if the 4Cs framework is to be applied in more than a superficial way. Coyle et al. (2010) provide a range of planning tools, including the “4Cs Planning Matrix”, that can be adapted for use in higher education contexts.

5.2 Scaffolding and the Zone of Proximal Development

A core principle of CLIL teaching derived from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is the concept of scaffolding: providing temporary, structured support to enable learners to complete tasks they cannot

accomplish independently (Vygotsky, 1978).In CLIL instruction for international relations, scaffolding-based teaching operates across two dimensions: linguistic and cognitive.

A language scaffold explicitly provides linguistic support to help students acquire and generate subject discourse. These may include a vocabulary list of key IR terms along with examples of their definitions and usage in context; sentence openings and discourse frameworks to help students organize analytical arguments; Model texts that illustrate the genre conventions of IR writing, such as policy briefs, literature reviews, or case study analyses; In collaborative activities, students utilize each other's language resources to jointly process and produce complex texts. Llinares et al. (2012) have demonstrated that explicitly focusing on the linguistic features of academic discourse is a crucial component of effective CLIL instruction, particularly at the higher education level where language demands are most pronounced.

Cognitive scaffolds consist of task designs that provide structured support for higher-order thinking. For example, rather than simply asking students to analyze the causes of the Cold War, it is more effective to use framework-based tasks that break down the analysis process into a series of steps: first, identify the key actors and their positions; second, determine the structural factors (economic, military, ideological) influencing their actions; third, compare and evaluate two theoretical explanations for the origins of the Cold War (e.g., realism and constructivism); fourth, develop and defend your own assessment. This task design clarifies cognitive requirements and provides a pathway for students to gradually develop their analytical skills. It also creates diverse opportunities for language use across varying levels of complexity, ranging from descriptive recall to evaluative argumentation.

5.3 Task-Based and Problem-Based Learning

The 4Cs framework is highly compatible with both task-based and problem-based learning approaches, both of which have been proven effective in fostering deep content engagement, authentic communication, and higher-order thinking (Mehisto et al., 2008). In the context of international relations, task-based learning may include simulation exercises such as simulating UN debates, crisis management scenarios, or role-playing in peace negotiations. These tasks are essentially meaningful to IR students because they replicate the various activities carried out by IR professionals. They need to have continuous English communication around substantive content. They need to exercise complex cognitive skills, including analysis, negotiation and strategic thinking. In addition, these courses are also rich in cultural connotations because students must accept and represent the viewpoints of different international participants.

Problem-based learning offers another promising approach. In the CLIL course of international relations, the problem-based learning module may present students with a complex, real-world international issue, such as the challenges of governing cyberspace, the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, or the geopolitics of climate change, and require them to study the problem in a team-based manner, identify key stakeholders and their interests Analyze the problem from multiple theoretical perspectives and formulate a set of policy recommendations. This method integrates all four Cs: it involves students in substantive

IR content; It requires students to communicate in English for a series of purposes (research, discussion, argumentation, speech). It requires higher-level cognitive skills; It exposes them to the cultural and normative aspects of addressing international issues.

5.4 Assessment Strategies

The CLIL course assessment based on the 4Cs framework must reflect the integrity of the learning objectives. This means a shift from isolated assessment tools that test language and content, such as vocabulary tests or multiple-choice content quizzes, to evaluations that require students to demonstrate their ability to participate in IR content using English in a cognitively demanding and culturally conscious manner.

Appropriate assessment tools for the IR CLIL course may include analytical essays, in which the quality of students' arguments (content and cognition) as well as the accuracy, clarity and appropriateness of English (communication) are evaluated; Oral presentation, followed by the Q&A session; Portfolio assessment records students' progress over a period of time and includes a reflective section on their own learning process. The group project concluded in the form of both written and oral reports. Formative assessment is particularly important in CLIL Settings as it enables teachers to diagnose and address language and cognitive difficulties before they become deeply entrenched (Mehisto et al., 2008). Nikula, Dalton-Puffer, and Llinares (2013) have argued that the quality of classroom discourse itself can serve as an important form of formative assessment in CLIL, as it provides real-time evidence of students' ability to use language for disciplinary thinking.

5.5 Teacher Collaboration and Team Teaching

One of the most significant implications of the 4Cs framework for IR education is the need for collaboration between content specialists (IR scholars) and language specialists (English language teachers). No single team possesses all the expertise required to design and deliver effective CLIL instruction. Scholars of international relations possess a profound understanding of this discipline, yet they may lack the systematic training and skills to focus on students' language development. English teachers possess professional expertise in language instruction, but may lack subject-specific knowledge, making it difficult for them to engage with IR content at the required depth and complexity.

The 4Cs framework proposes several models to address this challenge. One approach is team-based instruction, jointly designed and delivered by experts in international relations and English language proficiency. International relations experts are responsible for content and understanding, while language experts handle communication and provide the linguistic framework. Another approach is collaborative course design, where two expert teams jointly plan the curriculum and develop teaching materials, yet deliver them independently under a clear coordination mechanism to ensure a comprehensive solution to the 4Cs challenges. The third model focuses on the professional development of international relations teachers, equipping them with fundamental CLIL competencies while continuing to receive intensive language support from language experts. Each model has its own advantages and challenges. The

appropriate selection depends on the specific institutional context, available resources, and faculty willingness to engage in interdisciplinary collaboration.

6. Challenges and Limitations

6.1 Institutional and Structural Challenges

The implementation of a CLIL approach to IR education in Chinese universities faces a number of formidable institutional and structural challenges. Perhaps the most fundamental issue is the deeply rooted separation between language departments and academic departments, which is reflected in the institutional structure, budget system, teaching load and academic career paths. Bridging this gap requires not only goodwill and a teaching vision, but also specific institutional mechanisms, which are currently rare in Chinese universities (Zhao and Dixon, 2017). The administrative structure of most Chinese universities is organized around disciplinary silos. Creating conditions for cross-departmental collaboration required by the 4Cs framework will need leadership at the institutional level.

A related challenge is the examination and assessment system. The English proficiency of Chinese college students is largely evaluated through standardized tests such as the CET-4 and CET-6. They emphasize acceptance ability and knowledge of discrete grammar and vocabulary. These tests have had a powerful counteraction effect on teaching and learning, motivating students and teachers to focus on exam preparation rather than on the development of comprehensive academic language skills (Hu, 2008). Until the assessment system is reformed to reward the kinds of competencies that CLIL aims to develop, there will be a tension between what CLIL pedagogy demands and what the wider institutional environment rewards.

6.2 Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

The second major challenge is the preparation made by IR teachers and English teachers for implementing CLIL. As mentioned above, IR teachers in Chinese universities may possess strong disciplinary expertise. In many cases, they have international research experience and a relatively high level of personal English proficiency. However, they usually have received little or no training in language education, and they may be reluctant to take on what they consider to be the additional burden of caring for students' language development in addition to the responsibility of content teaching. Studies on English teaching in Chinese universities have consistently found that content teachers tend to focus only on subject knowledge and regard language issues as problems beyond their professional capabilities and responsibilities (Zhao & Dixon, 2017).

For English teachers, they are confronted with a complementary challenge. They have professional knowledge in language teaching, but may lack subject knowledge and thus be unable to effectively participate in the IR content. Their training is usually in preparation for General English teaching or English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses, neither of which can be fully mapped to the comprehensive approach of content and language required by CLIL. Furthermore, compared with content teachers, English teachers in Chinese universities tend to have a lower status, a heavier teaching burden, fewer

research opportunities and lower institutional prestige, which may make interdisciplinary cooperation difficult to maintain (Pan & Block, 2011).

Addressing these challenges requires continuous investment in professional development programs, enabling both groups of teachers to be exposed to the principles and practices of CLIL, providing opportunities for collaborative planning and reflection, and creating an institutional culture that values and rewards teaching innovation. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2010) hold that teacher education is the sole and most crucial factor influencing the success or failure of CLIL programs, and this view is fully applicable to the university environment in China.

6.3 Student Factors

Students themselves offer both opportunities and challenges for the implementation of the CLIL teaching method. In terms of opportunities, as mentioned earlier, Chinese international relations students are often highly motivated, academically competent, and aware of the importance of English for their future careers. These qualities provide a solid foundation for CLIL. However, in terms of challenges, students may become accustomed to a passive, teacher-centered learning approach and may initially resist the more interactive and participatory methods required by CLIL. Emphasizing student-generated discourse, collaborative learning and critical argumentation is at the core of the 4Cs framework, which may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for students who have already integrated into a teaching culture that values respecting authority and accurately replicating the knowledge they have received (Hu & McKay, 2012).

There is also a heterogeneity issue in students' English proficiency. In any given international relations course, the scope of English proficiency can be very broad. Some students have spent some time abroad or attended bilingual high schools, while others only have English proficiency cultivated through standard school teaching and the national college entrance examination. The CLIL teaching method emphasizes scaffolding and differentiated support, and there are strategies to address this heterogeneity. However, their effective implementation requires skills, time and resources, which may not always be available. Bruton (2013) warned that if CLIL programs are more suitable for high-level students and offer insufficient support to those struggling, they may unintentionally exacerbate inequality.

6.4 The Risk of Instrumentalism

A more subtle but important risk is that of instrumentalism. It refers to the situation of reduction of CLIL to a mere technique for improving students' English test scores or employability, stripped of the deeper pedagogical and intellectual ambitions of the 4Cs framework. In a higher education system that is heavily oriented toward quantitative metrics, there is a real danger that the adoption of CLIL will be driven by institutional branding and competitiveness rather than by a genuine commitment to integrated learning. If CLIL is implemented superficially, as a label attached to courses that continue to operate according to traditional pedagogical principles, it will fail to deliver on its promise and may even discredit the approach. Cenoz et al. (2014) have warned against the CLIL bandwagon effect, in which the popularity of the term outstrips the quality of its implementation, and this warning is particularly pertinent in the

Chinese context, where the pressure to internationalize can sometimes lead to form taking precedence over substance.

7. Conclusion

This paper argues that the 4Cs framework for integrated content and language learning provides a coherent, principled, and highly adaptable framework for enhancing the quality of international relations education in Chinese universities. The framework's four dimensions—content, communication, cognition, and culture—are closely aligned with the core competencies sought in international relations education: profound disciplinary knowledge, mature academic and professional communication skills, critical and creative thinking abilities, as well as cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity. This article points out that the current English teaching model for students majoring in China's international relations exhibits a severe separation between language acquisition and content learning. Such a teaching model imposes high demands on the integrated content and language proficiency of international relations practitioners, yet it falls short of meeting the requirements of the international relations discipline.

However, applying the 4Cs framework to IR education in Chinese universities is neither a straightforward nor problem-free endeavor. This document identifies a series of challenges that must be addressed to effectively implement CLIL. These issues include the entrenched separation between language and content departments, the dominance of standardized tests, a shortage of CLIL-trained teachers, the heterogeneity in students' English proficiency levels, and the risk of superficial implementation driven by institutional branding rather than genuine teaching commitment. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated actions at multiple levels: curriculum designers must systematically plan the integration of the 4Cs principles; it is essential to support teachers in developing new teaching competencies and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration. Institutional leaders must provide the resources, incentives, and structural conditions necessary to enable CLIL; decision-makers must establish an evaluation and accountability framework that rewards rather than penalizes comprehensive learning.

This effort carries a high risk. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a major player in international trade and finance, a participant in global governance on issues ranging from climate change to public health, and an increasingly important voice in academic debates on the nature of the international order, China is playing an increasingly important role in international affairs. This means that the influence of the quality of international relations education in Chinese universities goes far beyond the classroom. Cultivating a generation of Chinese scholars and practitioners of international relations, enabling them to participate in global debates with confidence and critical thinking, communicate effectively in English, and address the challenges of the 21st century from a unique Chinese perspective, is a goal of national and international significance. The 4Cs framework of CLIL, if carefully considered and strictly implemented, can make a meaningful contribution to achieving this goal.

Finally, it is necessary to review the fundamental viewpoints that drive the CLIL teaching method: content and language are not separate and competing priorities, but rather fundamentally interdependent

learning dimensions. This view has particularly resonated in the discipline of international relations. To understand the dynamics of international politics, one must be familiar with the composition of international politics and the discourse, arguments, narratives and conceptual frameworks of its debates. Cultivating the ability to participate in these discussions is not only about acquiring a useful skill, but also about entering a practical community that transcends national boundaries, languages and cultures. The 4Cs framework of CLIL offers a principled and practical approach to helping Chinese international relations students embark on this journey. Its potential contribution to the internationalization and intellectual enrichment of China's higher education deserves continuous attention from educators, researchers and policymakers.

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