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CLIL and interculturality: Bilingual strategies and English communicative competence in Ecuadorian higher education

CLIL e interculturalidad: Estrategias bilingües y competencia comunicativa en inglés en la educación superior ecuatoriana

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ABSTRACT

Ecuador recognizes itself as an intercultural State and requires English at its universities, since language teaching should be linked to the country's cultural diversity and to the content of each degree program. The study therefore aimed to analyze CLIL and interculturality, with emphasis on bilingual strategies and English communicative competence in Ecuadorian higher education. A descriptive and documentary methodology was used, taking as corpus 26 sources (2006-2026) organized by axes. The results showed that CLIL improves communicative competence when it integrates scaffolding, translanguaging and intercultural contact, while in Ecuador A1-A2 levels and scarce teacher training prevail. It was concluded that the cultural dimension must include Ecuadorian diversity and not only the English-speaking world.

Descriptors: bilingual education; intercultural education; communicative competence. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

El Ecuador se reconoce como Estado intercultural y exige inglés en sus universidades, por cuanto la enseñanza de la lengua debería articularse con la diversidad cultural del país y con los contenidos de cada carrera. Es así que el estudio se planteó como objetivo analizar el CLIL y la interculturalidad, con énfasis en las estrategias bilingües y la competencia comunicativa en inglés en la educación superior ecuatoriana. En este sentido se empleó una metodología descriptiva y documental, teniéndose como corpus 26 fuentes (2006-2026) organizadas por ejes. Entre los resultados se obtuvo que el CLIL mejora la competencia comunicativa cuando integra andamiaje, translenguaje y contacto intercultural, mientras en Ecuador predominan niveles A1-A2 y escasa formación docente. Entre las conclusiones se estableció que la dimensión cultural debe incorporar la diversidad ecuatoriana y no solo la anglosajona.

Descriptores: enseñanza bilingüe; educación intercultural; competencia comunicativa. (Fuente: Tesauro UNESCO).

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Research Articles Section

INTRODUCTION

When Argudo et al. (2018) assessed 121 fourth-, fifth- and seventh-semester students in the English Language Teaching program at the Universidad de Cuenca, they found that about 52% were at levels A1 and A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference, that only 10.7% reached B2 and 1.7% C1, and that speaking (42.1%) and listening (39.7%) were the skills the students themselves considered most difficult, even though their subjects were taught in English. In line with these data, the authors concluded that language was not developing alongside content, a conclusion that is especially worrying in a program that trains the country's future English teachers.

For its part, the content and language integrated learning approach, known by its English acronym CLIL, proposes precisely to teach a subject through an additional language so that both are learned at the same time, and Coyle (2007) organized it into four interdependent dimensions, content, communication, cognition and culture, so that intercultural competence has been part of the approach since its formulation. However, Gómez-Parra (2020), after consulting 76 Spanish secondary students and their school administrators, warned that the cultural dimension is the least developed in bilingual programs, because it depends on native-speaker assistants and exchanges that are scarce for administrative and budgetary reasons.

In the Ecuadorian case, the intercultural question carries particular weight, since the 2008 Constitution recognizes the country as an intercultural and plurinational State, and Quichimbo-Saquichagua & Pérez-Morales (2025) found among 589 teacher education students at the Universidad Nacional de Educación that this constitutional recognition obtained a mean of 4.01 out of 5, while the effective recognition of ethnic, social, gender and intergenerational diversity reached only 3.15. This indicates that interculturality is accepted as a principle but practiced with less intensity, and it raises the question of whether English teaching at universities helps close this gap or widens it by focusing only on English-speaking cultures.

But what bilingual strategies enable CLIL to develop both English communicative competence and an intercultural outlook that includes Ecuadorian diversity? Based on the above, the research aims to analyze CLIL and interculturality, with emphasis on bilingual strategies and English communicative competence in Ecuadorian higher education.

METHOD

The methodology used is descriptive and documentary, since the findings of published studies were described and the work was carried out exclusively with documents, whose content was analyzed by thematic axes defined on the basis of the objective. Accordingly, a corpus of 26 sources published between 2006 and 2026 was assembled, of which 25 are articles in peer-reviewed journals and one is a chapter of an international handbook on CLIL devoted to Ecuador, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Documentary review protocol*.

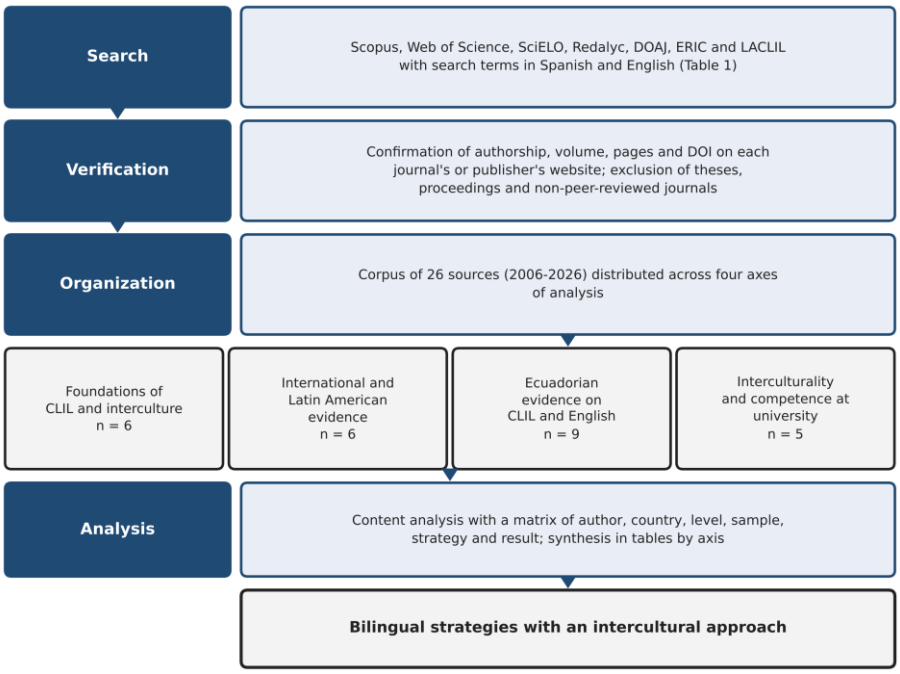
Element	Description
Type of study	Descriptive and documentary, with content analysis by axes
Databases consulted	Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, Redalyc, DOAJ, ERIC and LACLIL
Search terms	("CLIL" OR "content and language integrated learning" OR "English medium instruction" OR "AICLE") AND ("intercultural" OR "interculturalidad" OR "communicative competence" OR "competencia comunicativa") AND ("higher education" OR "university" OR "Ecuador")
Period	2006-2026
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed articles and academic chapters with a DOI or verifiable record on CLIL, English-medium instruction, intercultural competence or English communicative competence
Exclusion criteria	Theses, conference proceedings, press, blogs, non-peer-reviewed or predatory journals and duplicate records
Axes of analysis	Foundations (n = 6); international and Latin American evidence (n = 6); Ecuadorian evidence on CLIL and English (n = 9); interculturality and communicative competence in Ecuadorian universities (n = 5)
Analysis matrix	Author, country, level, sample, strategy and result

Note: developed in-house.

Regarding the procedure, the search was carried out in Scopus, Web of Science, SciELO, Redalyc, DOAJ and ERIC, and in the *Latin American Journal of Content and Language Integrated Learning*, and each record was verified on the journal's or publisher's website to confirm authorship, volume, pages and DOI, while theses, conference proceedings and journals of doubtful editorial quality were discarded. Subsequently, the corpus was organized into four axes, namely the foundations of CLIL and intercultural competence, international and Latin American evidence, Ecuadorian evidence on CLIL and English, and studies on interculturality and communicative competence in the country's higher education.

Finally, content analysis was carried out with a matrix that recorded author, country, level, sample, strategy and result, and the synthesis is presented in tables by axis, so that the proposed strategies for Ecuadorian higher education are set out as the authors' inference from that information. Figure 1 represents the route followed.

Figure 1. *Route of the documentary review*.



Note: developed in-house.

RESULTS

Foundations of CLIL and intercultural competence

First, CLIL emerged in Europe in the mid-1990s and differed from Canadian immersion in its flexible nature, and Dalton-Puffer (2011), in reviewing its development, showed that the approach moved from practice to principles without a unified theory, with favorable linguistic outcomes above all in comprehension and vocabulary, and less clear outcomes in grammatical accuracy and writing. In turn, Pérez-Cañado (2012) synthesized European research and warned of the scarcity of outcome-focused studies, while Cenoz et al. (2014) questioned the lack of a precise definition distinguishing CLIL from other forms of bilingual education and called for more rigorous research designs.

With regard to planning, Meyer (2010) proposed quality criteria for CLIL teaching and a flexible tool for designing materials based on Coyle's four dimensions, while intercultural competence found a consensus definition in the study by Deardorff (2006), who brought together recognized specialists and higher education administrators in the United States and documented for the first time an agreement on its elements, including knowledge, attitudes and skills that enable effective and appropriate communication in intercultural situations. This invites reflection on the complementarity of both frameworks, since the fourth dimension of CLIL provides the curricular space and Deardorff's model the criteria for assessing it.

International and Latin American evidence

Second, the evidence on outcomes is more modest than is often assumed, and Graham et al. (2018) examined 25 studies on CLIL and English-medium instruction and found mixed results, mostly positive or neutral compared with conventional classes, with methodological problems that limit the conclusions and with research concentrated in Spain. At the university level, Macaro et al. (2018) reviewed English-medium instruction in higher education and concluded that the evidence on its benefits for language and content is inconclusive, while teachers report linguistic difficulties and little pedagogical preparation for teaching in a second language.

Regarding bilingual strategies, Nikula & Moore (2019) analyzed recordings of CLIL lessons in Austria, Finland and Spain and showed that the alternating use of the mother tongue and the foreign language, known as translanguaging, responds to pedagogical and interpersonal motives, so that the first language should be recognized as a resource rather than as interference. In Latin America, Banegas (2012) pointed out from Argentina that the main challenges of CLIL lie in initial and in-service teacher education, and Tejada-Sanchez & Molina-Naar (2021) found at a Colombian university that English-medium instruction is linked to internationalization, curricular reforms and language support, although its sustainability depends on coordination among administrators, teachers and students. Table 2 brings together the synthesis of this axis.

Table 2. *Synthesis of international and Latin American evidence on CLIL and English-medium instruction*.

Study	Context	Corpus or sample	Finding
Banegas (2012)	Argentina	Teacher education experiences	The main challenge is teacher education
Graham et al. (2018)	International	25 studies	Mixed results, mostly positive or neutral
Macaro et al. (2018)	Higher education	Systematic review	Inconclusive benefits; underprepared teachers
Nikula & Moore (2019)	Austria, Finland and Spain	Recordings of CLIL lessons	Translanguaging serves pedagogical functions
Gómez-Parra (2020)	Spain	76 students and administrators	The cultural dimension is the least developed
Tejada-Sanchez & Molina-Naar (2021)	Colombia	Administrators, teachers and students	English-medium instruction accompanies internationalization

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Ecuadorian evidence on CLIL and English communicative competence

On the other hand, Ecuadorian research shows an approach that is present in the curriculum but poorly developed in practice, and Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023) reviewed the empirical studies conducted in the country between 2017 and 2021 and identified design omissions and the absence of studies on scaffolding in CLIL classrooms. In the province of Manabí, Barre-Parrales & Villafuerte-Holguín (2021) surveyed 70 English teachers from nine schools and found that CLIL implementation was around 46% in private institutions and fell to 13% in public ones during the pandemic, a difference they attributed to internet access, teacher training and institutional priorities. Similarly, Villamarín-Guevara & Fajardo-Dack (2022) studied English teachers in public institutions in the province of El Oro and found that CLIL is little known and little used, despite being included in the national curriculum, although those who applied it considered it innovative and recommended it with adapted materials and greater use of technological resources.

In higher education, the finding by Argudo et al. (2018) on the predominance of levels A1 and A2 is complemented by the observation of Sevy-Biloon (2021), who recorded in 20 virtual classes at the Universidad Nacional de Educación that between 60% and 90% of students kept their cameras off and that only about half participated actively, so that oral practice, the skill they most need, was the one least exercised. Likewise, Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023) recorded significant levels of engagement in online classes among 703 English students at the Universidad de Cuenca, a sign that motivation exists and can be harnessed with appropriate strategies.

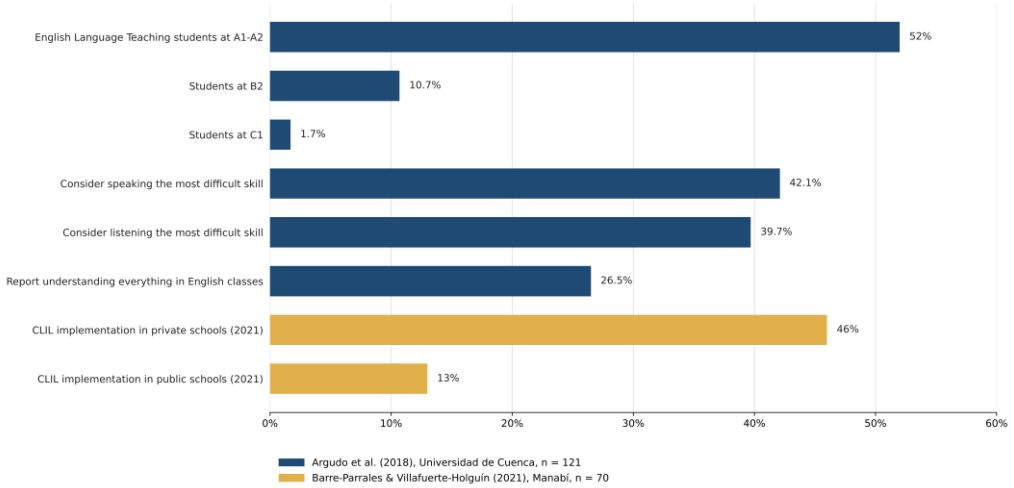
With regard to the curriculum, Maldonado-Marín et al. (2025) critically analyzed the official proposal for English teaching in Ecuador and the teaching practice that accompanies it, a discussion that refers back to the findings of Calle et al. (2012), who had already observed a teacher-centered approach and little interaction in the target language among 168 teachers in public schools in Cuenca. In turn, Reinoso-Montoya (2023) brought together Ecuadorian and Colombian experience with CLIL for writing in a documentary review and concluded that, when English serves as a vehicle for other subjects, students find a reason to learn it. Table 3 and Figure 2 bring together the data for this axis.

Table 3. *Synthesis of Ecuadorian evidence on CLIL and English communicative competence*.

Study	Level or location	Sample	Finding
Calle et al. (2012)	Public schools in Cuenca	168 teachers	Teacher-centered teaching
Argudo et al. (2018)	Universidad de Cuenca	121 English Language Teaching students	52% at A1-A2; 10.7% at B2
Barre-Parrales & Villafuerte-Holguín (2021)	Schools in Manabí	70 teachers from nine schools	CLIL in 46% of private and 13% of public schools
Villamarín-Guevara & Fajardo-Dack (2022)	Public schools in El Oro	English teachers	CLIL little known despite being in the curriculum
Sevy-Biloon (2021)	Universidad Nacional de Educación	69 students; 20 classes	Cameras off and low oral participation
Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023, MEXTESOL)	Universidad de Cuenca	703 students	Significant engagement in online classes
Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023, chapter)	Ecuador	Empirical studies 2017-2021	Design omissions and lack of studies on scaffolding
Reinoso-Montoya (2023)	Ecuador and Colombia	Documentary review	English as a vehicle gives meaning to learning it
Maldonado-Marín et al. (2025)	Ecuador	Curriculum and teaching practice	Critical analysis of English teaching

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Figure 2. *Indicators of English proficiency and CLIL implementation in Ecuador*.



Note: developed in-house from Argudo et al. (2018) and Barre-Parrales & Villafuerte-Holguín (2021).

Interculturality and communicative competence in Ecuadorian higher education

As regards interculturality, Fierro & Ochoa (2020) organized two focus groups with 22 representatives of universities, embassies and companies in Guayaquil and Quito, and found that intercultural competence is associated with tolerance, problem solving, adaptation and the ability to build networks, and that students with international mobility show more empathy toward the unknown. However, mobility reaches few students, which is why Martínez-Murillo (2025) proposed the design of a telecollaboration program among university students to develop intercultural communicative competences without the need to travel, an alternative that is relevant for universities with limited budgets.

As for strategies for communicative competence, Calderón-Delgado et al. (2025) analyzed approaches that combine face-to-face and online teaching to improve English proficiency in higher education, while Monterrosa-Villa (2026) addressed teaching strategies that strengthen oral competences in undergraduate students, the skill that Ecuadorian evidence identifies as the weakest. Thus, the corpus shows that the country has concrete proposals for oral skills, blended

learning and telecollaboration, although these have not yet been integrated into a CLIL model that includes Ecuador's cultural diversity.

Bilingual strategies with an intercultural approach for Ecuadorian universities

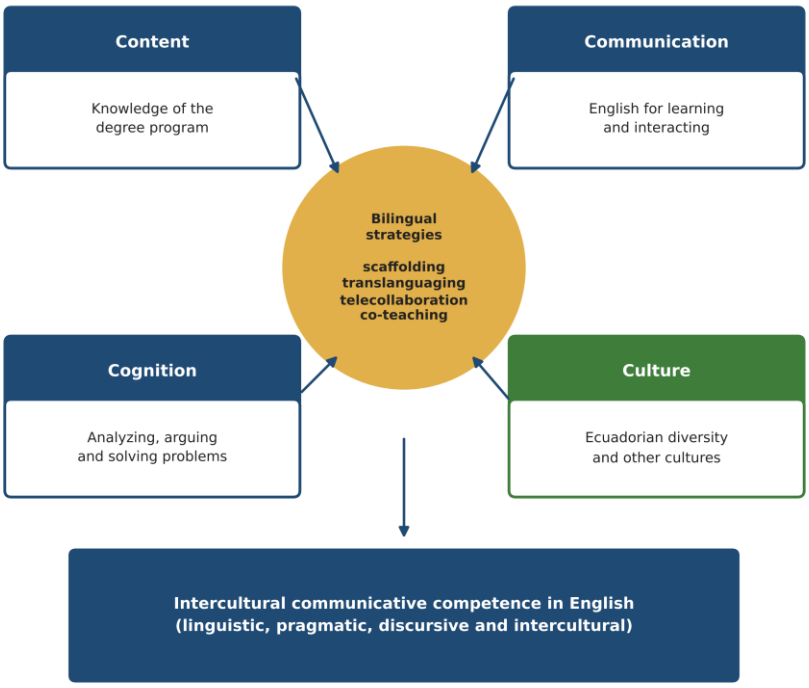
A joint reading of the four axes makes it possible to propose, as the authors' inference, a set of bilingual strategies that link the dimensions of CLIL with communicative and intercultural competence, as presented in Table 4, where each strategy is linked to the dimension it addresses, its contribution to competence and the source that supports it. This indicates that Ecuadorian universities do not need to import a closed model, since they can combine linguistic scaffolding, translanguaging, telecollaboration and content on national cultures in a design of their own.

Table 4. *Bilingual strategies with an intercultural approach for Ecuadorian higher education*.

Strategy	CLIL dimension	Contribution to communicative and intercultural competence	Support in the corpus
Linguistic scaffolding of content	Content and communication	Disciplinary vocabulary, discourse models and visual aids	Meyer (2010); Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023)
Planned translanguaging	Communication and cognition	Use of Spanish to negotiate complex meanings	Nikula & Moore (2019)
Oral interaction in tasks	Communication	Debates, presentations and case solving in English	Monterrosa-Villa (2026); Sevy-Biloon (2021)
International telecollaboration	Culture and communication	Contact with speakers from other cultures without mobility	Martínez-Murillo (2025); Fierro & Ochoa (2020)
Content on Ecuadorian diversity	Culture	Explaining the country's peoples, knowledge and problems in English	Quichimbo-Saquichagua & Pérez-Morales (2025); Gómez-Parra (2020)
Blended learning	Content and communication	Autonomous online practice and face-to-face classes for interaction	Calderón-Delgado et al. (2025)
Co-teaching of content and language	All four	Joint planning between subject and English teachers	Banegas (2012); Macaro et al. (2018)

Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Figure 3. *Links among the dimensions of CLIL, bilingual strategies and intercultural communicative competence*.



Note: developed in-house from the corpus reviewed.

Another aspect that should be examined is teacher education, since Banegas (2012), Macaro et al. (2018) and Argudo-Serrano et al. (2023) agree that CLIL fails when content teachers do not master the language and language teachers do not master the content, hence collaboration between both profiles is a prerequisite. In the same vein, the cultural dimension requires incorporating texts, cases and problems of the nationalities and peoples of Ecuador, so that students learn to explain their own diversity in English, instead of merely learning about the festivities and customs of English-speaking countries.

Consequently, the assessment of intercultural communicative competence cannot be reduced to a proficiency test, since Deardorff (2006) recommends combining quantitative and qualitative methods, including interviews, observation and self-assessment, and Gómez-Parra (2020) shows that intercultural learning requires its own instruments. In this regard, Quichimbo-Saquichagua & Pérez-Morales (2025) found a correlation of r = 0.706 between students' intercultural knowledge and their intercultural practices, which suggests that conceptual training has effects on practice when it is accompanied by spaces for reflection.

CONCLUSIONS

The objective of analyzing CLIL and interculturality, with emphasis on bilingual strategies and English communicative competence in Ecuadorian higher education, was achieved through the analysis of 26 sources organized into four axes covering foundations, international and Latin American evidence, Ecuadorian evidence and studies on interculturality. In light of the above, CLIL offers in its cultural dimension the space to link English teaching with the country's intercultural and plurinational condition, although this dimension is the least developed in practice.

The review shows that CLIL improves communicative competence when it integrates linguistic scaffolding, translanguaging, oral interaction and intercultural contact, while in Ecuador levels A1 and A2 predominate even in teacher education programs, implementation of the approach is low in public institutions and teacher preparation is insufficient. This indicates that the cultural dimension of CLIL should incorporate Ecuadorian diversity and not only the English-speaking world, so that students learn to communicate in English from their own identity.

Therefore, Ecuadorian universities are advised to form teams that bring together content and language teachers, to incorporate telecollaboration programs and to assess intercultural communicative competence with mixed instruments. Likewise, a challenge for future research is to measure, with quasi-experimental designs in different degree programs, the effect of these strategies on English communicative competence and on the intercultural attitudes of the country's university students.

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Non-monetary.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any individuals or institutions related to this research.

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