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## **The Impact of Creative Literacy Activities on the Reading Motivation and Reading Comprehension of Young Learners: Evidence from CLIL and EFL Settings**

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### **Abstract**

This study attempted to investigate the impact of creative literacy activities on the reading motivation and reading comprehension of young Iranian learners in the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and EFL contexts. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods study was designed in which 65 Iranian female young learners in two different English language settings took part. In the quantitative phase, both groups received the reading comprehension and reading motivation scale as both pre and post-tests. Likewise, the experimental groups received training in terms of creative literacy activities. In the qualitative phase, the learners from both groups were interviewed to explore their reading motivation. Findings revealed that the learners in the CLIL context outperformed their counterparts in the EFL context both in reading and reading motivation. The findings of the study also proved that learners in the CLIL context had a more positive attitude toward L2 reading. Teachers' reflective journals further revealed the superiority of the CLIL context over the EFL context in developing young learners' (YLS) L2 reading and reading motivation. The findings have implications for the L2 teachers and curriculum designers when deciding the type of activities and the amount of L2 exposure for young learners.

*Keywords: CLIL; Creative Literacy Activities; EFL; Reading Comprehension; Reading Motivation; Young Learners*

## 1. Introduction

Motivation plays a significant role in L2 development for all learners of all ages (Dornyei, 2020). However, it is a key factor in improving reading comprehension among young EFL learners (Chou et al., 2016). Knowing how to motivate young learners, teachers can provide an exciting and relaxing environment to increase their learners' L2 development (Smith, 2018). A growing number of studies has focused on the relationship between young learners' reading motivation and their reading comprehension (Ahmadi et al., 2013; Butarbutar et al., 2019; Edmunds & Bauserman, 2006; Jamshidi, 2013; Zandian, 2015).

Research on L2 motivation shows that young learners' motivation correlates strongly with their language achievement (Murphy, 2014). Other studies have suggested that young learners who start learning a foreign language early in life have higher chances of developing positive motivational attitudes (Munoz, 2017; Ushioda, 2009). This provides strong support for introducing the L2 early in schools (Fenyvesi, 2018). As motivation has proved to be a dynamic construct predicting L2 achievement, it is believed that the type of education provided for young learners plays a crucial role in shaping it (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). As a result, research findings on young learners' motivation provide useful insights into a better understanding of this construct. Despite such findings, Boo et al., (2015) believe that there is a "virtual absence of systematic research on the motivation of primary school pupils" (p. 156).

Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) programs are among the educational curriculums that are claimed to enhance motivation as well as promoting L2 proficiency (Banegas, 2013). However, the body of research focusing on L2 achievement in CLIL context is much larger than the number of studies on motivation. In other words, a scarce number of studies have examined young learners' motivation in a CLIL setting (Pladevall-Ballester, 2018).

In the last decade, the number of CLIL programs in Iran has experienced dramatic growth. However, research on young learners' motivation is scarce and even scarcer in CLIL context. To address these gaps, the present study sets out to examine young learners' reading motivation after implementing creative literacy activities in both EFL and CLIL contexts. The study also explores young learners' reading competence in EFL and CLIL contexts.

## 2. Review of the Related Literature

The history of L2 motivation theory has witnessed three major phases (Dornyei & Ryan, 2015; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). In the first phase, motivation was described in terms of learners' desire to learn the second language for a particular purpose –instrumental motivation– or their desire to integrate into the L2 culture



–integrative motivation. In the second phase, motivation was viewed as a psychological construct that led to the development of the theory of possible selves proposed by Markus and Nurius (1986) and the theory of self-discrepancy introduced by Higgins (1987). In the third phase, a more comprehensive approach to motivation was adopted by the researchers and it was at this stage that the impact of factors such as the teacher, the grades, the curriculum, and the type of activities was acknowledged (Lázaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2021). Dornyei (2009) proposed the theory of the L2 Motivational Self System (LMSS) highlighting the dynamic nature of motivation and the key role of context.

The role of motivation in YLs' L2 learning was investigated by a small number of studies. For instance, Pladevall-Ballester (2018) examined YLs' motivation using the LMSS theory. The findings suggested that this theory can be relevant for YLs too. In another study, Munoz (2017) studied Spanish YLs over a period of 10 years, (6-16 years old). Findings revealed that learners began to acknowledge the role of English in findings jobs as they grew older.

Emerged from a sociocultural perspective, Content and Language Integrated Learning has provided a context in which young learners are exposed to the foreign language alongside learning other school subjects. CLIL is considered a potentially influential meaning-oriented approach to content and language learning that enhances young learners' interest and motivation toward the foreign language (Banegas, 2013; Doiz et al., 2014).

One of the main benefits of CLIL programs which has been proposed by several studies is believed to be the positive impact they have on motivation (Dalton-Puffer, 2011; Sylven & Thompson, 2015). However, not many studies have approached this belief from an empirical perspective (Heras & Lasagabaster, 2015) especially, on YLs (Pladevall-Ballester, 2018). Studies exploring motivation in CLIL contexts have primarily focused on secondary school learners with the majority of the results indicating a higher level of motivation in CLIL context (Coyle et al., 2010).

In a study on learners aged 11-15 years, Bower (2019) suggested that CLIL learners who were studying German and French showed higher motivation, involvement, and achievement. On the other hand, some studies have raised doubt about the long-term motivational effects of CLIL programs (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013). Another issue that has been highlighted in CLIL programs by several studies is that the studies have been conducted in contexts where CLIL was optional; therefore, it is not easy to draw a conclusion about the motivation being the result of CLIL programs. That is, motivation could pre-exist in the learners who participated in these programs (Mearns et al., 2020).

Due to the many variables that may play a role in YLs' motivation, it is often difficult to attribute the variations which are identified between CLIL and non-CLIL learners to the features of CLIL programs exclusively (Pladevall-Ballester, 2018). Within this context, different studies have reported rather contrasting results for primary school learners. For instance, Seikkula-Leino (2007) conducted a study on YLs in Finland suggesting that motivation to learn L2 was higher in CLIL learners compared to the non-CLIL learners. However, this study also reported the detrimental effect of the CLIL program on YLs because they viewed themselves as very low English learners due to the high demand for the CLIL program.

In another study conducted in Spain, Pladevall-Ballester (2018) examined YLs' motivation in a year drawing on Dornyei's (2005, 2009) LMSS theory. The results indicated that CLIL learners had a higher level of motivation only in L2 learning experience dimension of the motivation. While these two studies have reported a moderate result confirming the link between CLIL and motivation, other studies have not found any difference between CLIL and non-CLIL programs. Therefore, it can be concluded that research on the impact of CLIL programs on YLs' motivation is scarce and relatively inconclusive.

On the other hand, creative literacy activities have been employed increasingly in the educational context in the past two decades, and recently, they have found their way into language learning classrooms as motivating factors (Chow et al., 2018). Creative literacy paves the ground for L2 learners' development in relying on critical thinking abilities, self-directed learning abilities, and self-regulation practices (Boulton, 2017). It is argued that "English and literacy pedagogies are critical for our social and emotional wellbeing as well as our academic success and readiness for creative lifelong learning" (Ewing, 2019, p. 7).

There are a variety of creative literacy task types including extended reading games (Cheng & Cheng, 2016), book cards (Chou et al., 2016), songs and verses (Kim, 1995) that could be used to enrich the classroom content with respect to all four skills, especially reading and writing. Connolly (2020) contends that creative literacy activities in the language classroom can be introduced through teaching creative reading and writing to L2 learners. In fact, "such activities not only are useful for their language development, but also they can be considered as an ethical practice because these types of creative tasks celebrate diverse voices using English in interesting and surprising ways" (p. 1). Hence, creative literacy activities can be integrated into L2 classroom through a) elective courses, b) process-oriented reading and writing courses, c) creating a sense of community in the language class, 4) interesting texts to the class (Connolly, 2020).

Few attempts have been made to study creative literacy techniques and



activities in the development of L2 reading and reading motivation among Iranian young EFL learners. Chow, Hui, and Chui (2018) developed creative literacy activities to promote a positive reading attitude in children learning EFL. They specifically referred to using bookmarks, reading incentives, and innovative reading materials. Likewise, Lantz, Myers, and Wilson (2020) focused on digital storytelling and young children and found that transforming learning could be possible through the creative use of technology. Meanwhile, they relied on activities showing initiatives, themes connecting curriculum areas, and imaginative scenarios, which could be used both in the technologically and virtually supported classes and real classes.

To address the above-mentioned gaps, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Is there any significant difference between the reading comprehension development of young learners in the CLIL and EFL settings under the impact of creative literacy activities?
2. What are the feelings of young learners about reading before and after receiving creative literacy activities in CLIL and EFL contexts?

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Design of the Study*

The present study employed both qualitative and quantitative measures of data collection, therefore, it was a mixed-methods research. In terms of variables, teaching creative literacy activities was considered an independent variable, while reading motivation and reading comprehension of young learners were considered dependent variables. Likewise, the two CLIL and EFL settings were in fact the controlled variables as both of them had their own experimental groups. In addition, the gender of the learners, who were only females, was controlled in the present study. In the quantitative phase of the study, data were collected through tests and questionnaires while in the qualitative phase, the study relied on collecting data through both an interview with the study participants before and after the course and teachers' reflective journals.

#### *3.2 Context and Participants*

The present study was conducted in two different contexts: the first context was a private, bilingual primary school, in which all the courses and books were taught in both Farsi and English by two professional teachers. This context was considered as the CLIL setting. However, the second context in which the experiment was conducted was another private English institute, in which English

was considered an extracurricular subject taught as a foreign language. Participants of the present study were 65 third-grade female learners (aged between 10 and 11) at the basic level of English (starters) randomly selected. The CLIL group comprised 32 YLs from two classes who were randomly placed in experimental group I (n=32). The EFL Group comprised 33 YLs from two classes who were randomly placed in experimental group II (n=33). The two CLIL classes were being taught by one teacher while the two EFL classes were being taught by two teachers

### *3.3. Instruments*

Five instruments were employed in the process of data collection. An original version of the Cambridge Young Learners of English test was used as a test of homogeneity. It comprises three specific levels namely, starters, movers, and flyers which evaluate the YLEs in different proficiency levels. The test enjoys the “total reliability of  $\alpha=.80$ . The starter level was used in the current study because it fitted the participants’ level. To test YLs’ reading comprehension, the reading comprehension section of the Cambridge YLE test which has 25 items was used as both pretest and posttest. Additionally, the reading motivation of the participants, both before and after the course, was measured by Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS) developed by [McKenna and Kear \(1990\)](#). In the qualitative phase of the study, interviews were conducted with the participants to explore their feelings about the reading activities. The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey was used as the main framework of the interviews and a few items were added by the researcher. Finally, Teachers’ reflective journals were written on a weekly basis for both CLIL and EFL groups documenting the critical incidents in their classrooms.

### *3.4. Data Collection Procedure*

Data were collected in three phases; pretreatment, treatment, and post-treatment. The Elementary Reading Attitude Survey was administered to all participants before the treatment. Then YLE test was administered to all participants at the beginning of the treatment as the reading comprehension pretest. In addition, five students from each group were selected randomly and interviewed to evaluate their feelings about reading in different situations.

The learners in the EFL group attended three ninety-minute sessions a week and the study lasted for three months. In both of the experimental groups; the CLIL and the EFL, the learners received similar extra training including creative literacy activities and tasks. During creative literacy activities, students worked on creative language learning materials that generated interesting and new questions. The creative literacy activities implemented as the treatment included



creative and novel activities such as working with *book cards*, *incentives*, *reading more for children*, and *extended reading games* such as *role plays*.

At the end of the treatment, the YLE posttest and ERAS were administered to young learners. In addition, the five students who were interviewed in the pretest were interviewed again. The teachers’ reflective journals were written weekly to explore YLs’ feelings about different creative activities from the teachers’ perspective.

### 3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The quantitative data were fed into the SPSS software, version 25, and the results were checked against the research questions and hypotheses. Also, the qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. Transcriptions of the interviews along with teachers’ reflective journals were content analyzed through which the codes and themes were extracted. To improve the credibility of the findings and reach a valid inter-coder agreement, the coding was checked by two experts in this field, who were TEFL Ph.D. holders.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Addressing Research Question One

The first purpose of the study was to investigate any significant difference between the reading motivation and reading comprehension development of young learners of English in the CLIL and EFL settings under the impact of creative literacy activities. The data were analyzed using an independent-samples t-test and one-way ANCOVA. Normality of the data is an assumption of these statistical techniques. Since the computed ratios were lower than +/- 1.96 (Field 2018), it was concluded that the normality assumption was retained.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics and KR-21 Reliability Indices*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance	KR-21
YLE	65	9	49	30.60	12.110	146.650	.94
Pre-Reading	65	1	20	11.29	4.585	21.023	.73
Post-Reading	65	2	25	15.51	5.339	28.504	.83
Pre-Motivation	65	20	68	41.06	10.288	105.840	.82
Post-Motivation	65	16	80	49.26	15.846	251.102	.94

Table 1 reveals the descriptive statistics and KR-21 reliability indices for the YLE, and pretests and posttests of YLE reading comprehension and motivation (ERAS). The reliability index for the YLE test was .94. The pretest and post-test of YLE reading comprehension enjoyed reliability indices of .73 and .83. The reliability indices for pretest and post-test of motivation (ERAS) were .82 and .94 respectively.

The YLE test was administered to the CLIL and EFL groups in order to substantiate the homogeneity of the two groups in terms of general language proficiency before starting the main study. Independent-samples t-test was employed to compare the two groups' mean scores on the YLE test in order to ascertain the two groups' homogenous general language proficiency before administering the treatment.

**Table 2**  
*YLE Test by Groups*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
YLE	CLIL	32	30.78	11.856	2.096
	EFL	33	30.42	12.533	2.182

Table 2 displays the results of the descriptive statistics for the two groups on the YLE test. The results showed that the CLIL (M = 30.78, SD = 11.85) and EFL (M = 30.42, SD = 12.53) groups had almost the same mean scores on the YLE test.

Table 3 indicates the results of the results the independent samples t-test. Homogeneity of variances is the assumption of independent-samples t-test. As shown in Table 3, Levene's test non-significant (F = .313, p > .05) substantiated the homogeneity of variances of the two groups on the YLE test. Therefore, the first row of Table 4.4 related to "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

The results of the independent samples t-test (t (63) = .118, p > .05, r = .015 representing a weak effect size<sup>1</sup>) displayed that there was not any significant

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<sup>1</sup> The r effect size was computed using the following formula;  $r = \frac{t^2}{t^2 + df}$  (Field 2018, p 609); and it should be interpreted based on these criteria; .10 =



difference between mean scores of CLIL and EFL groups on the YLE test. Therefore, it can be concluded that the two groups were homogeneous in terms of their general language proficiency prior to the administration of the

**Table 3**  
*Independent-Samples t-test; YLE Test by Groups*

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.313	.578	.118	63	.907	.357	3.028	-5.694	6.408
Equal variances not assumed			.118	62.963	.906	.357	3.025	-5.689	6.403

*Q1: Is there any significant difference between the reading comprehension development of young learners in the CLIL and EFL settings under the impact of creative literacy activities?*

To answer the first research question, a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run to compare the mean scores of CLIL and EFL groups on reading comprehension post-test after controlling for the effect of their pretest reading comprehension ability.

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics for reading comprehension posttest scores of the two groups. Based on the results, it can be claimed that the CLIL group (M = 18.27, SE = .756) outperformed the EFL group (M = 12.82, SE = .744) on the posttest of reading comprehension after controlling the pretest effect.

**Table 4**  
*Posttest of Reading Comprehension by Groups with Pretest*

Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
CLIL	18.277 <sup>a</sup>	.756	16.766	19.789
EFL	12.822 <sup>a</sup>	.744	11.334	14.310

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Pretest = 11.29.

Weak, .30 = Moderate, and .50 = Large.

The results of one-way ANCOVA ( $F(1, 62) = 26.02, p < .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .296$  representing a large effect size) indicated that the CLIL group significantly outperformed the EFL group on the post-test of reading comprehension after controlling for the effect of the pretest. Thus, the null hypothesis as “there was not any significant difference between the reading comprehension development of young learners in the CLIL and EFL settings under the impact of creative literacy activities” was rejected.

#### 4.2. Addressing Research Question Two

*Q2: What are the feelings of young learners about reading before and after receiving creative literacy activities in CLIL and EFL contexts?*

To answer the second research question, transcriptions of the interviews along with teachers’ reflective journals were coded and the themes were extracted. The results substantiated the positive effect of creative literacy activities in transforming YLs’ motivation toward reading. Although all YLs demonstrated a certain level of change in their motivation toward reading activities, this was more prominently observed in the CLIL group. YLs thus appeared to develop a certain positive attitude and gained a sense of how and why they should read.

The two general themes extracted from the interviews with YLs and teachers’ reflective journals were *recreational reading* and *academic reading*. Before the course, YLs in the CLIL group had slightly positive feelings about academic reading; however, their feelings about recreational reading were less positive. As for the EFL group, a similar pattern was observed although YLs’ motivation for academic reading was lower than the CLIL group.

Both groups displayed higher levels of motivation with regard to the recreational activities after the course; however, the creative literacy activities seemed to impact the CLIL group more than the non-CLIL group. While the CLIL YLs incorporated the reading techniques and activities in their real life, the EFL group did not seem to change their recreational reading habits outside the classroom.

The difference in motivation towards academic reading activities and contexts was observed in both CLIL and EFL groups with the CLIL group showing more changes after the course. One of the instances where YLs in the CLIL group displayed improvement after the course was using the dictionary. The majority of YLs in the CLIL group did not have the experience of using dictionaries before the course. However, they reported many examples of using the dictionary in the second interview and stated that this helped them in many ways. YLs in the EFL group also showed improvement in the use of dictionaries though they reported fewer instances of using it compared to the CLIL group.



## 5. Discussion

This study has provided evidence that the instructional setting (CLIL vs. EFL) appears to affect YLs' motivation toward reading. The difference in motivation towards the reading was more significant, and, in general, terms, revealed higher motivational levels for the CLIL group. The first research question of this study aimed at finding any significant difference between the reading comprehension development of YELs in the CLIL and EFL settings under the impact of creative literacy activities. The results of one-way ANCOVA to compare the CLIL and EFL groups' post-test reading comprehension after controlling for the effect of their pretest reading comprehension ability showed that the CLIL group outperformed the EFL group significantly on reading comprehension post-test.

This result is in line with the findings of the previous studies using a CLIL environment in their training procedures such as [Skogen \(2013\)](#) who compared reading in CLIL and EFL classes. He found that the CLIL instructional group outperformed the regular EFL group "with regard to levels of reading proficiency, motivation for reading and reading strategy use" (p. 3). The findings also align with [Ahmadi's \(2017\)](#) study suggesting that learners exposed to interesting and challenging reading materials could develop L2 reading comprehension faster than their counterparts receiving simple texts. [Albayrak and Şener \(2021\)](#) reported similar results highlighting that extracurricular activities such as watching films and reading story books could significantly affect learners' reading motivation.

The second research question was an attempt to investigate the feelings of YELs about reading before and after receiving creative literacy activities in the CLIL and EFL contexts. The results of interviews with YLs showed the positive effect of creative literacy activities in transforming YLs' motivation toward reading.

However, the analysis of learners' views after the instruction showed that CLIL students had well benefitted from the creative literacy instructions, while the EFL group had moderately or weakly benefitted from those instructions. Such findings are in line with [Jamshidi's \(2013\)](#) study on the effect of Iranian young EFL learners' awareness of reading purposes on their motivation to read which highlighted that reading for enjoyment and reading for information would make the learner more interested in reading.

## 6. Conclusion

The results of the study revealed that the mean score of the CLIL group was significantly higher than the EFL group on the reading comprehension post-test. Additionally, it was found that positive feelings of the CLIL group increased more

than those of the EFL group under the effect of creative literacy activities. The present study demonstrated that employing creative literacy activities in the CLIL context can have an effect on Iranian young learners' reading achievement and reading motivation. Therefore, based on the results of the present study, some implications for EFL teaching and learning through utilizing CLIL context enriched by creative literacy activities can be suggested:

The positive effects of using songs, short stories, reading books, and bookmarks, in the CLIL/EFL classrooms can provide learners with an atmosphere in which they can expand their second language reading skills enthusiastically in a less stressful and more friendly environment (Tulgar, 2020). The motivation advanced in the classroom environment among the learners through reading short stories, story books, and extended reading games can create an atmosphere of trust and encouragement in which the young learners can feel at ease (Artieda et al., 2020). The present study focused on the young learners of primary school learning English. Further research is suggested to explore the effect of creative literacy activities on young learners of secondary school to see if reading motivation remains the same as learners get older.

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