

CROSS THAT BRIDGE WHEN YOU COME TO ENGLISH: CLIL AS A NEW CHALLENGE IN ITALY

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the role of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) as one of the most experimental and challenging teaching and learning methods from primary through to adult and higher education. As demonstrated by the Council Conclusions on Language Competences to Enhance Mobility (Council of the European Union, 2011), CLIL is still on the agenda of the European Union. Crucially, its success will be determined by assessing a case study that involves the Italian education policy. The Italian Ministry of Education has mandated CLIL as an approach to be adopted for teaching non-lingua subjects in the last year of Italian secondary school and Italian technical high school by 2013. This policy moves Italian educators under the limelight of the international education arena where one of the main challenges is to move beyond traditional teacher-centered lecturing towards learner-centered ways of learning. Italian teachers should realize that educators across the world will be watching them apply “the CLIL-Potential” and outcomes from Italian CLIL classrooms will help define CLIL best practice. In the light of these premises, the research attempt here is

- a) to investigate Italian primary teachers’ feelings, attitudes and expectations toward the great potentiality of the CLIL approach thanks to a questionnaire to be administered to a selected schools located in Southern Italy;
- b) to discuss how selected authentic CLIL materials can be used and implemented in a primary and secondary education settings.

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Introduction

CLIL is an umbrella term adopted by the European Network of Administrators, Researchers and Practitioners in the mid 1990s. It encompasses any activity in which a foreign language is used as a tool in the learning of a non-language subject in which both language and subject have a joint role. CLIL operates along a continuum of the foreign language and the non-language content without specifying the importance of one over another. It was thus exclusive in explaining how a variety of methods could be used to give language and non-language subject matter a joint curricular role in the domain of mainstream education, pre-schooling and adult lifelong education. It may involve project work, examination courses, drama, puppets, chemistry practicals and mathematical investigations. In short, CLIL is flexible and dynamic, where topics and subjects – foreign languages and non-language subjects - are integrated in some kind of mutually beneficial way so as to provide value-added educational outcomes for the widest possible range of learners. CLIL is usually done through putting aside some time in the school week for learning subjects or special modules through another language. In CLIL the learning of language and another subjects is mixed in one way to another . This means that in the class there are two main aims, one related to the subject, topic, or theme, and one linked to the language. This is why CLIL is sometimes called dual-focused education. It can be done in many ways. For example it might involve 8 years old children having 30 minutes of languages showers per week, in which they sing songs or play games in the other language. Imagine learning to play a musical instrument such as a piano without being able to touch the keyboard. To learn how to master a musical instrument requires that we gain both knowledge and skill simultaneously. In other words , we learn effectively by experiencing both learning about instrument, and having hands-on practice at using the instrument, at the same time. CLIL doesn't only promote linguistic competence. Because of the different “ thinking horizons “ which result from working in another language CLIL can also have an impact on conceptualization, literally how we think. Being able to think about something in different languages can enrich our understanding of concepts, and help broaden our conceptual mapping resources. This allow association of different concepts and helps the learner go towards a more sophisticated level of learning in general. In CLIL, the development of the first language carries the utmost importance. Children will initially mix sounds and words when they are operating with more than one language. As the child learns to master two different languages there will be some degree of interference, which is what happens when elements of one language come into the use of another. Interference is part of the normal process of language learning and is not a sign of a problem unless it becomes unacceptably recurrent. This presentation aims to emphasize that participating in a CLIL lesson does

not require a student to already have a background in the additional language, like having lived abroad or used it with family members or friends. Each CLIL class should start at a level which is suitable for the students involved. Many classes start with the assumption that the students do not have any prior knowledge of the language. To make cognitively demanding lessons understandable for everybody calls for expertise and careful planning. Preparing a lesson in a foreign language does not mean additional work because I think that teachers through working together, content and language can share their individual knowledge and make it joint knowledge. Teachers because of CLIL implementation are likely to have increased opportunity for their professional development according to the idea that education is a “lifelong learning”. I would like to underline that thanks to the CLIL project it is possible to arouse pupils ‘curiosity and during the explanation of the lesson in the foreign language children are usual to set a lot of questions like: how do the pupils of the other countries study? How much do they study? How is their school? How are their teachers? Then they begin to ask to translate the name of the objects of the classroom in the language foreign object of the CLIL, that’s why this is an experience that should became a challenge for both pupils and teachers and all together can discover new opportunities that school can give for example learn to understand the words for what they are and not for their English equivalents. Although at the beginning of the language-learning process, one must translate concepts, words, and phrases into his own language, once you get a good handle on the new language, it is best to begin learning words for what they *are*, based on their context, rather than their equivalent in your own language. Learning content (inherent in naturalistic language learning) represents a meaningful, contextualized activity which increases interest and encourages students. On the other hand, being able to speak and reason about academic content in a language different from their own, gives students the chance to expand their cognitive skills and use more sophisticated language. Each time students read a discipline-based text, they learn something new about the English language and the academic discipline. The most important point is that all teachers are teachers of language and content. At this point, it must also be stated that the integration of language and content in the classroom is not without its shortcomings. In classes where content and language are integrated, the excessive emphasis on material simplification acts to the detriment of the development of the necessary skills for students to become independent learners. In contexts where an L2 is learnt through content, students are not offered enough chances to speak or initiate a conversation, hindering their speaking and writing outcomes. Simple arithmetic tells us that with 25 students in a class, if each has a say in a 50 minute lesson, their speaking time must be less than two minutes since the leader of the discussion also has to speak. Where students use English are very limited and that their creative use of English is also scarce or even non-

existent.

With its focus on structured group work, cooperative learning may help enhance CLIL contexts, cooperative learning, for its part, has been defined as “a body of literature and research that has examined the effects of cooperation in education. It offers ways to organize group work to enhance learning and increase academic achievement. Cooperative learning, used systematically in primary and secondary levels, has shown to improve students self-esteem, their understanding of tasks and of others as well as their teaching skills. Cooperative learning has also proved favorable to social cohesion and collaboration within the group, allowing students to overcome fear in front of other students or teachers. In the area of L2 teaching and learning, different studies and works feature cooperative learning activities and methods that have been successfully implemented in the classroom. The underlying assumption is that communication among students working in groups rises as they have a need to exchange information. The result is higher participation, lower level of inhibition and more possibilities for oral practice. Likewise, by engaging in face-to-face interaction with their peers, students use the L2 in a more creative way than when they have to speak in front of the whole class. Groups cater for the integration of reading, listening, writing and speaking by means of interaction and communication. Finally, cooperative learning promotes among students the ability and the inclination to work together beyond the classroom by making cooperation not just part of the how of learning but also part of the content.

The benefits of cooperative Learning in CLIL Contexts in small structured groups in the L2 classroom have been praised in the L2 literature, group work increases opportunities for practicing the target language, it improves the quality of conversations among students, since face-to-face communication in a small group is a natural communicative situation, it is the first step towards individualization in education, promotes a positive affective atmosphere and it is a source for student motivation. Quoting Vygotsky sociocultural theory, which states that learning is facilitated if observed as a social process, is implemented in cooperative learning lessons thanks to the frequent opportunities students have in their groups to speak and listen to the L2, limiting this way teachers talking time and focusing on content and fluency rather than on correction. Mistakes are natural when learners are focused on making themselves understood. Students are compelled, this way, to use language in real communication contexts, boosting the variety of speech acts normally used in class. By increasing the time students are using the language, their listening and speaking skills are also enhanced. With the help of language and supporting the Vygotskian language-thought connection, students develop higher level cognitive strategies so they are asked to plan activities, organize and defend ideas, find information, take decisions or solve problems. Pupils become more

independent in relation to their own learning since Cooperative Learning in CLIL Contexts they perform tasks originally fulfilled by the teacher (planning tasks, finding sources, explaining difficult points, summarizing a text or providing feedback to a classmate). Finally, group dynamics make cooperative L2 classes focus on the student and their interaction with peers. Through different cooperative learning techniques, students learn to develop social skills (active listening, turn taking, praising, giving opinions, encouraging others and the learning to think in a foreign language) which have interesting effects on students attention and on the teacher student relationship. Through the implementation of cooperative learning in CLIL contexts we are promoting not only better L2 and content learning and teaching but also the development of the individual as a whole.

The benefits of Content and language integrated approaches

Regardless of the degree to which the main objective of CLIL programmes is language, content teaching does not lose out. CLIL requires a slower pace, which often results in a need to work through syllabae at a different speed. Pedagogically, it also seems clear that CLIL has positive effects on teaching and learning. Teachers' efforts to be 'clearer' than usual, and students' efforts to follow lessons taught through the TL have a positive impact in the following directions:

- ◆ A cross-sectional approach to language learning comes into effect as language teachers are not the only ones responsible for languages
- ◆ Using language to communicate content is perceived as more motivating than using language to reflect on content
- ◆ Using a foreign language to deal with the learning processes characteristics of content subjects becomes important
- ◆ Using a foreign language to teach content subjects requires study skills to overcome difficulties
- ◆ Using the foreign language stems from intrinsic motivation to communicate, hence unconscious or implicit learning may take place

The challenges of bilingual education

The most obvious advantage of bringing the beginning of bilingual education forward is that students are younger, and therefore perhaps more receptive to foreign languages, most researchers agree that "the younger=the better in the long run". This may be explained by the rather obvious advantage that students who study in a bilingual mode from primary education onwards will be exposed to the foreign language for a much

greater amount of time than students whose bilingual education is limited to the last four or five years of their schooling. This, however, will only hold true in those cases where students are offered a follow-up programme in secondary education. If the bilingual programme finishes in the last years of primary education, then the greater exposure is not guaranteed, and the whole educational innovation may be purposeless. This is especially serious if students, on completion of the programme, are placed with others who have not previously profited from bilingual education, and therefore have to be taught the foreign language at a lower level than students who have completed bilingual programme. Young students who view the language as an end in itself, and only after several years of learning it (as yet another school subject) are given the chance of using it for a real purpose, may develop an attitude towards the foreign language which is already more learning-oriented than communication-oriented. Therefore, creating a real need to use the language from the very beginning will very probably exert a beneficial influence on students' attitude towards it. Bilingual education implies teaching the language as a vehicle for communication, rather than as an end in itself (Wildhage and Otten 2003). This approach thus sets the scene for more successful language learning that is meaning-oriented, communicative, and perceived as something relevant by the students. Since language in bilingual education is used as a vehicle for the communication of new ideas and concepts, students process is at a higher level. This is true for bilingual education at any level, it is extremely pertinent to bilingual education at primary level, because there is no preparation in terms of language learning prior to starting the bilingual programme, as is the case when bilingual education starts at secondary level.

The double challenge of bilingual education

In the bilingual education teaching-learning mode, students and teachers are faced with double challenge. The first challenge is related to the fact that new concepts are presented through a foreign language, thus doubling the cognitive effort students must make to deal with this twofold challenge. While this is true for all students involved in learning through a foreign language, it may be especially difficult for students who are still developing their cognitive abilities. Conversely, the cognitive development the learner makes through one language transfers to the other, so that when the student has learned how to organize or interpret information in his or her native language, he or she can transfer this knowledge to the second language. As a result, learning is valid for subjects taught in either language. The second kind of help teachers can provide to meet the double challenge of bilingual education is to work on learning strategies. Students need to make their learning more effective, and one way of doing so is by using the appropriate strategies. Work on strategies need to be complicated, and can start with topics such as how to memorise words, and move on to more complex

strategies such as how to activate selective attention in order to focus only on the relevant information and avoid getting distracted by unknown words. An added advantage of explicitly working on learning strategies is that students' learning will be transferred to other areas of their schooling, thus probably improving their general achievement. A difficulty related to learning through a foreign language concerns assessment, since it may well be that students understand the contents of the subject being taught, but are not able to express this knowledge appropriately because they lack the necessary language. It is therefore vital to find ways of assessing students' performance that do not rely exclusively on language. One way of doing this is to develop assessment tools that do not require students to produce a lot of language, such as multiple choice questions or exercises that entail short or no written answer. Furthermore, it is necessary to re-think the importance of accuracy when assessing students' progress in the content subjects.

The effect on the development of the students' L1

Since students are exposed to L1 for less time, and they are not learning all the content subjects in their mother tongue language any more, the worry is that they may not learn the language needed to talk about these issues in L1. On the one hand, most of the concepts dealt with in the first years of primary education relate to students' experiences, and therefore will probably be talked about outside school. However, the more complex the topics dealt with school, the less likely it is that specific vocabulary will be made available to students in their daily life. It is in this situation where teaching has to guarantee that students are exposed to the necessary language in both codes, the L1 and the L2. The main means for exposure is curricular integration: in other words, dealing with the same topic in different subjects adopting different perspectives and using a different language. Coordination between different teachers is especially suited to the primary curriculum, and to the students' perception of the world because both are, in principle, holistic. For younger students, it is especially important to be able to relate the things learnt in one subject to those learnt in another and to real life as fragmentary ideas are less memorable for them. Therefore, curriculum developers worldwide ask for the primary curriculum to be holistic rather than divided into separate, unrelated subject. This globalized curriculum should not, however, be repetitive: that is, the same topics taught in the same way, but through the two languages.

CLIL in Italy

Italy is one of the first country to enter the CLIL in sorting through the Gelmini reform (2008) of the second cycle of Education. Starting from the scholastic year 2012/2013 in all language schools will be taught lessons in CLIL, initially at the module level, beginning classes in third. The teaching will be developed in language schools, in a second foreign language and in a second discipline, from the fourth classes, for the school year 2013/2014. In all other high schools, the year of the CLIL is the 2014/2015 (fifth year classes), but there is nothing to prevent anticipate the development as is already happening in the paths of ESABAC¹ (issuing a double title: Italian and French) and in the paths of the schools "European" and "international" (for example, teaching of history in German, of sciences in English, of geography in China at the Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele II of Rome), but also at some technical institutes (for example the ITC Tosi Busto Arsizio) and professional (for example the IIS Frisi of Milan). The schools in which there is the possibility to offer teaching a subject in a foreign language (hereinafter indicated LS) or regional or minority such as e.g. in the Val D'Aosta, use for a long time methodologies CLIL, but now their spread arises from a pragmatic response to the European requirement to promote mobility and the integration of its citizens, breaking down the language barriers, educate young people to be able to move and act in a multilingual environment that poses new socio-economic challenges. The linguistic needs and training very diversified of the majority of European citizens, the promotion of bilingual skills if not trilingual the emphasis of the early teaching of a second language and the encouragement of teaching subjects non-linguistic by means of a second language or are the motor elements. The European reality comprises countries that support the learning of a language indigenous minority who are in border areas which include immigrants, children, or monolingual groups who simply want to expand their language skills. Multilingualism is one of the key goals for Europe. The European Commission's White Paper "Teaching and Learning: toward a learning society" (1995), places, between the five priority objectives for the education and training systems in member countries, the promotion of knowledge of at least two Community languages in addition to the mother tongue. The recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of December 18th 2006 concerning the key competences for lifelong learning inserts the communication in foreign languages among the eight key skills. The European Parliament resolution of the 24th March 2009, entitled "The multilingualism: a resource for Europe and a common commitment" recommends, among other things, "the Member States to include in their curricula optional study of a third foreign language, starting at secondary school level". The CLIL is considered as a possible solution to meet the

¹ ESABAC : binational italian –french graduation

demand for acquisition of community languages and cultural competencies to encourage integration and the European mobility, a methodology needed for a linguistic integrated education.

Conclusion

Although the challenges presented by bilingual programmes at primary level are considerable, many difficulties need to be analysed. Teachers need time to re-think their teaching from the perspective of the special characteristics of teaching in a bilingual programme. Teachers also need the tools and knowledge to understand what bilingualism in general, and bilingual education in particular, entails. The success of bilingual education depends on the daily work carried out by teachers in the classroom. Thus, if politicians want a programme to succeed, they will have to look carefully at ways in which teachers can be supported in their goal of bringing to life this pedagogic innovation. Teachers need time for reflection and training; they need to be provided with materials and other types of resources that make their teaching task easier.

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