

2008-2009: GEOGRAPHY IN ENGLISH

As a teacher of humanities (Italian, history, geography) with a fairly good competence in English, I was informed that the European Commission allows and actually encourages teachers to carry out part of their school curriculum in English. I resolved right away that this was definitely a chance I should offer my students.

In the school year 2008-2009, I thus decided that part of year 7 geography curriculum would be tackled in English. Of the three subjects I teach, geography is the one that makes a larger structural use of graphic material: maps, charts, tables would be a precious aid in making up for the inevitable verbal difficulties. Moreover, in the school year 2006-2007, I had taught geography in English to students of the same age range in a private boarding school in China, and I would build on the experience I had gained there.

Undoubtedly, there were successful activities – one of which is included in the appendix below - but as a whole, the experience showed numerous flaws. I'll illustrate some here. First of all, time limits: in Italian middle schools, geography is only allocated one hour weekly, which is insufficient to make sure that all students acquire the basic notions and methodology to a satisfactory degree- let alone to complete the annual curriculum. Every CLIL activity necessarily requires a longer time than activities that are carried out in one's mother tongue. The paucity of time available caused me to make CLIL episodes few and far apart; it pressured me to drastically reduce preliminary linguistic preparation and follow-ups, to the point of making them inadequate.

One further obstacle had been easily foreseen- i.e. the general reluctance of students to speak English and thus expose themselves to ridicule, or the judgment of their peers or teachers- as they perceive it. In some cases such reluctance reaches the point of a veritable aversion. Added to this, was some students' antipathy towards geography. The result was that some, who loved the challenge of English, were discouraged by contents- whereas others, hostile to English, were falling out of love for geography, which they were otherwise fond of.

In addition, in order to make the whole experience more agreeable, and therefore (so I thought) more motivating, I preliminarily announced the students that there would be no evaluation whatsoever. This is not necessarily and in absolute terms a mistake, but it proved to be so in that class. Indeed, I already knew that their motivation to learning is generally scarce, and almost invariably instrumental to getting good marks. I did not bear in mind a motto that I have developed during my environmental activism: never give your interlocutor an excuse not to listen to you. On the other hand, this very mistake gave me a chance to ascertain a suspicion that I had long harboured. Because of pre-existing difficulties, upon hearing the very word "English", some students (this was their own admission) set their brains on the stand-by mode,

and give up even trying to understand. In some students, this mechanism has reached such a level of automatism that it tends to be activated even when proposed recreational activities, or topics such as sexual education- which is usually tremendously exciting for them. By announcing that there would be no evaluation, I had wiped out all possible hesitation in building up their communication shield: I had fully legitimized it.

By nature, I am averse to paperwork and formalities: I much prefer to carry out innovative activities and special projects under no formal aegis. In my case, this reduces pressure, allows me maximum flexibility and therefore optimizes my motivation and creativity. Such mechanism did not work for those students of mine, though: they perceived this as yet another off-the-record experiment of their possibly weird teacher- one that could be easily “sabotaged,” so that it would not be repeated. As a matter of fact, those students would have probably worked with a lot more zeal, had I involved the school, the headmaster, and the parents in some official capacity: any official status or formal “investiture” would have motivated them through official recognition and constructive pressure.

Throughout the year, I tried to build up on the good practice I had gathered whilst working in the Chinese middle school, but differences between the two experiences proved to be fundamental: at Huijia, geography was taught in English *by statute*, which is as official and rigid as it gets: no sabotaging or mucking about. Moreover, in my case - as with most foreign teachers - English was the only possible medium of communication, since my Chinese was rudimental and their Italian non-existent. On top of that, the bugbear of marks was a very powerful motivation for most Chinese students, as their performance in grade 9 examination is truly decisive for their future educational perspectives.

Most importantly of all, what I realized retrospectively was that during that whole CLIL experience, I had lost sight of what is my only real goal when teaching English. Unlike *proper* English teachers, in fact, I am luckily exempt from the obligation of teaching grammar rules- and even from the obligation of teaching vocabulary. My main motive in teaching English has always been to build a desire for communication and, through that, a genuine interest in learning the language.

I strongly believe that in learning foreign languages, communication comes first, correctness second, elegance third. If learners want to **make themselves understood**, and manage to, they’ve reached their primary goal – regardless of how many mistakes they make or how bad their pronunciation is. Only then, should they move on to more ambitious goals.

Meandering amongst geographic data, technical vocabulary, concern about the expanding curriculum, lack of time, verifying minimum objectives, trying to find more successful extrinsic motivators, etc, I had completely forgotten my most heartfelt purpose in teaching English: boosting intrinsic motivation - knocking down the defensive wall.

2009-2010: “FORGET GRAMMAR FOR A WHILE”

Treasuring all lessons learnt the previous year, during the current school year I have decided to repeat a CLIL project, but have changed its very nature: the greatest advantage humanities teachers have over other teachers is that they can tackle virtually all topics – politics, current affairs, sociological and psychological issues, emotional education, citizenship issues, jurisprudence, safety, road education, food and health, and more. This would give me virtually infinite opportunities to appeal to the diverse tastes and interests of students. This year, therefore, I have decided that CLIL would involve “lettere” and citizenship education in all its aspects.

I named the project “Forget grammar for a while,” and announced the students that their level of engagement and dedication would be evaluated – as opposed to benchmarking results. Of course, that was a bluff - I am not going to punish students for not getting motivated enough - but my bluff got rid of their previously best excuse not to listen.

Early on in the year, I decided that we would not spend an hour on CLIL activities every once in a while, on set occasions: we’d try to devote at least 5-10 minutes to tackling all topics in English every day. High frequency would bring familiarity, and with that English would be perceived less and less as an alien mass of complex sounds and words, and more and more as a friendly, familiar companion. That was by far the best decision I made: without their even realizing it, the students did indeed get more used to being exposed to English, and occasionally speaking it in turn. Of course, I did not stick to the daily frequency plan, and whole weeks have gone without speaking a word of English: but overall, frequency was such that it did build up some familiarity.

This year, too, the project has shown numerous flaws, but it has dramatically improved. With more than one student, it has reached its ultimate goal: motivating them to see English from a different perspective. Diminishing their inhibition and even hostility towards the language. Showing that English can be a readily available means to discover new worlds, to have access to a heap of otherwise unavailable information about their favourite topics: history, wars, medicine, music, scandals, gossip, the world’s jet set - you name it.

The highlight of this year’s CLIL project would be- and has been- a 4-day trip to London and its preparation. I am persuaded that as little as 4 days in a native environment can make a difference in approaching the language. And it proved to be so: students had to find their way around on the underground, they had to take initiative and ask locals for whatever information or item they needed, they keenly observed the multitude of new, exciting or peculiar things that surrounded them. A more detailed description of the trip’s didactic goals and activities is to be found below.

This year's activities have comprised, but have not been limited to the following (in bold are the activities they appreciated most):

- Some tricks on how to maximize the usability of their existing vocabulary (suffix –er, prefix under-, over-, etc)
- Map of London with grid; locating places designated through descriptions and circumlocutions
- **Smell & guess: smelling spices, herbs, essences (students blindfolded)**
- **Using Google images instead of a verbal dictionary to understand and memorize the meaning of words**
- Some songs' lyrics
- London tube and how it works
- Some traits of Chinese mentality; the issue of human rights in China
- Recommendations for London; baggage limitations and document requirements
- **Team competition: quiz on miscellaneous year curriculum (geography, history, current events, literature, grammar etc...)**
- Boycotting Nestle: reasons and results**
- Racism, discrimination in the US; the pink triangle; "If you can't use her comb, don't bring her home"**
- Health care reform in the US; debate**
- **Sexual education**
- Churchill's opening speech to the House, 14th May 1940 (the "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" speech)
- Make predictions on your classmates' future
- Eisenhower's Cross of Iron speech ("Every gun that is made (.....) signifies (...) a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.")**
- Searching the Internet for relevant material for their "tesine": picking the most interesting articles by grasping the main message of a text; selecting the most interesting parts; translating
- **4-day, 3-night trip to London**

GOALS AND ACTIVITIES OF LONDON TRIP

- Show the students that English is a real, living language, which can also be informal and fun
- Increase their desire and practical need to communicate; increase curiosity
- Maximize their “situational memory”
- Have a direct contact with everyday English (shop signs, special offers, catalogues, newsstands, estate agents, menus, etc
- Directly observe some aspects of British culture: supermarkets, food, theatres and musicals, pub culture, ethnic restaurants etc
- Introduce them to a more diverse, open society; encourage acceptance of diversity (in clothing, habits, ethnic background, culture, taste, etc...)
- Disciplinary notions and a different concept of museum: Science Museum, National Gallery, British Museum, Imperial War Museum

CONCLUSION

Here are some tips I have learned, and which I am happy to share with you for possible feedback and advice:

- We must keep in mind that some learners will develop a spontaneous, *a priori* “communication wall” against English: learning foreign languages is exacting indeed, and risking making mistakes in front of an audience – any audience - is not everybody’s dream; as professionals or lovers of English, chances are we did not have that psychological block about languages- but maybe we did about maths, or acting, or dancing.... Let us relate to that block and find a breach in every wall
- Intrinsic motivators are always better than extrinsic motivators: we must show students that English still is the best means to have access to all existing knowledge, to the most recent discoveries in all fields, and a lot more (fun, travels, etc...)
- We must not give our interlocutors excuses not to listen: we need to be flexible about extrinsic motivators and strategies (evaluation/no evaluation; rewards, even threats...): all is fair in love, war and dodgy dealings- including teaching...
- Find institutional support and “investiture” if constructive; give it up if it hinders or discourages learners

-With languages, "Familiarity does not breed contempt:" the higher the frequency, the deepest and longer lasting the results

APPENDIX

Here's an example of a fairly easy and efficacious CLIL activity for geography: the following table shows the maximum angular height of the sun throughout the year in three places located at significant latitudes (equatorial zone, temperate zone, polar zone); by finding out the maximum and minimum height in each place, and subsequently drawing the 6 resulting angles above the head of imaginary people standing on the earth at the three different latitudes, students get a clearer grasp of why latitude is such a powerful factor in affecting climate. In Monrovia, Liberia, at noon, the sun is never lower than 58.8°, and reaches as high as 90°. At the opposite end, at Ny-Alesund, Norway, the sun never reaches any higher than 51°, and for four months a year it does not rise above the horizon at all.

LATITUDE AS A CLIMATIC FACTOR

Maximum angular height of the sun (degrees ° above the horizon)- at **12.00 o'clock** (noon)
Equatorial zone, temperate zone, polar zone

JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	
58.8	63.9	72.1	90	74.5	70.8	71.8	78	90	75.7	65.8	59.5	Monrovia (Liberia, Western Africa) 6°20' North 10° 46' West
30.6	40	54	63	68	72	73	61.5	54	41	37	30	Los Angeles, California (USA) 33° 49' North 118° 9' West
/	/	1.4	12.7	23.8	31.2	32.6	26.9	17.4	51	/	/	Ny-Alesund, Norway (Europe) 78° 55' North 11° 56' East

Source: adaptation from MUSE website material (<http://ncisla.wceruw.org/muse/earth-moon-sun/materials/application/material3A/activities/p8.html>)

1) What is the maximum angular height of the sun in Monrovia? In what month?

Circle the correct answer in red.

And the minimum height (at 12.00 o'clock)? In what month?

Circle the correct answer in blue.

2) What is the maximum angular height of the sun in Los Angeles? In what month?

Circle the correct answer in red.

And the minimum height (at 12.00 o'clock)? In what month?

Circle the correct answer in blue.

3) What is the maximum angular height of the sun in Ny-Alesund? In what month?

Circle the correct answer in red.

And the minimum height (at 12.00 o'clock?)?

In what month?

Circle the correct answer in blue.

