

CLIL in Practice: Maximizing Results through a Tasked-Based Approach

One of the main concerns of any foreign language teacher probably lies in the distance between the process of natural acquisition of the mother tongue and the artificiality of learning a language within the limits of the classroom, where an ever-growing number of students per class and a limited number of hours devoted to each, increase the complexity of the goal. Therefore it is common practice for language teachers to plan and carry out lessons which aim at creating contexts within which learners can practise and improve their communicative competences while focusing on real-life skills. The teacher's aim when engaging in these activities is to promote a shift from language as the focus of learning to the creation of a context in which the foreign language is used "to learn about other things" in a more natural, hence motivating, way.

Since the mid-90s the term CLIL has somehow encapsulated a long list of language learning approaches and activities which range from Bilingual Education to English for Special Purposes, from interdisciplinary projects to content-based modules. CLIL projects are nowadays widespread both in Europe and in Italy and an intense collaboration between scholars and experts offers us a broad overview of methods and practices.

CLIL has been defined as referring "to situations where subjects, or parts of subjects, are taught through a foreign language with dual-focused aims, namely the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign languageⁱⁱ".

The acronym CLIL is therefore quite self-explanatory: it implies the integrated learning of content and language, aiming at offering students opportunities for using the target language to expand their knowledge in various fields of study. This umbrella term encompasses having dual-focused aims (both language *and* content), a description of goals which, on one hand, explicitly define previous practices and, on the other, help to promote the diffusion of the approach itself. At the same time, CLIL is difficult to delimit precisely, as each experience will necessarily reflect the teacher's model of what learning subject matter means, and at the same time will be influenced by different approaches to language learning.

CLIL in practice: the “Green English” project

The best way I know to describe how CLIL can be put into practice, is to outline one of the projects I have firsthand experience of. Started in 1999 in collaboration with my colleague Damiana Covre at ‘Casa Archilei’ - a Centre for Environmental Education in Fano (PU) - the “Green English” project combines environmental education and EFL. The goals of the project are two-fold: on the one hand its aim is to provide authentic English practice, on the other to promote environmental respect and understanding.

The Green English educational programme, which is still running successfully, offers one-day experiences and short projects for primary and secondary schools, afternoon courses and summer camps for groups of students aged 6 to 17, lasting one or two weeks. All sessions are conducted entirely in English, and are held by native speakers. Activities take place within the green area of Casa Archilei, a nature preserve, which offers an alternative from the traditional classroom setting to both students and teachers. One of our main objectives, when planning the Green English project, was to provide students with the opportunity to extend their own knowledge and experience connected to ecology and science, while assimilating authentic, spontaneous and coherent linguistic material. The activities planned for classes and groups range from learning about alternative sources of energy to making paper, creating an organic kitchen garden to scientific experiments and observations of the natural world.

The focus of the Green English CLIL experience is primarily on “doing things” while using the target language for a communicative purpose. This way students are actually engaging in real life activities which make the use of language meaningful to them. By offering “hands-on activities”, as a means of acquiring content, the project focuses on a student-centred approach to learning and a task-based approachⁱⁱⁱ to language. Learning “content” is thus considered a discovery process and language learning is enhanced by the use of motivating tasks. This allows teachers the opportunity of acting in all spheres of learning (intellectual, sensory and affective), stimulating transversal skills (note-taking, observing, classifying, hypothesizing, etc.,) and social skills (listening, turn taking, cooperating) in real life situations. Each task involves both a pre-planned language focus, supported by an activity worksheet, and spontaneous, pragmatic interaction arising from the activity itself.

Over the years we had devised a great number of activities which we then transformed into a series of CLIL activity books. The “Hands On Language”^{iv} series published by ELI, includes “Green English” (environmental education), “Cook For Fun” (nutrition education) and “Watch Out” (safety education) and is aimed at children aged 7 to 12. Each title is made up of two sets of detachable worksheets and a teacher’s guide which includes evaluation grids, a vocabulary list, extra photocopy material and an audio CD.

When transforming the project into teaching material we knew that certain conditions were impossible to replicate within the classroom context. Nevertheless the one aspect which we wanted to transfer from the original format to the pages of the books, and thus to the classroom, was the focus on learning by doing. This is an aspect which, in my opinion, we should draw attention to in order to promote CLIL successfully, by concentrating not only on the integration of content and language, but on *how* this content is transferred.

CLIL in the Italian School Reform

The recent Reform of the Italian school system has introduced the possibility, in the last year of secondary education, to teach one of the subjects of the syllabus in a foreign language. The ministerial programmes refer to this as CLIL, therefore we must presume that the pedagogical project which underlies its formal introduction into Italian schools will concentrate on both content and language learning. CLIL will be adopted by subject teachers, who will be required to master a C1 level in order to teach their subject in a foreign language. No reference is made to collaboration with language teachers despite team-teaching being common practice in many secondary school CLIL projects. In spite of being conceived as a language learning approach, CLIL will be institutionalized without involving language teachers, while absorbing parts of the programme of study traditionally taught in the students’ mother tongue.

This last aspect needs to be considered carefully. The introduction of any new practice within the school system is certainly based on the conviction that it will improve students’ learning outcomes. Indeed we have evidence of successful CLIL experiences in all stages of education, from primary school up to secondary school, nevertheless it seems to me that the introduction of CLIL in the last year of the education system may require deeper monitoring and assessment in order to register the effects on content acquisition and at the same time to evaluate language learning.

The experts of the Ministry of Education have probably chosen the last year of secondary school because of the need to achieve an adequate level of language in order to master the “progression in knowledge, skills and understanding related to specific elements of a defined curriculum^v”. But could the introduction of a curricular subject taught in a foreign language result in oversimplification of content? Will students be able to attain the objectives required for their final exam? And will the teachers involved in these programmes be experienced in exploiting the linguistic potentiality which CLIL entails? What will be the object of evaluation: language, knowledge or both? Which teaching materials will be employed? I believe that the issue of how CLIL theory may translate into classroom practice is crucial and should foster further discussion concerning CLIL as introduced by the Reform.

Maximising results

Furthermore, we should bear in mind that the mere integration of language and content in the classroom is not necessarily a synonym for success. Many studies^{vi} have underlined how CLIL risks encouraging a teacher-centred approach, where the teacher is absorbed in the task of making language understandable to the students and consequently simplifying the subject matter, while the students’ role is reported to be often limited to focusing on passive skills (listening or reading) rather than on active production (speaking, interacting or writing).

Consequently, several experts underline the importance of promoting a more active role for students^{vii} within the CLIL framework. This means essentially looking at EFL teaching strategies and applying them to the subject being taught. This would call for cooperation between language teachers and subject teachers engaged in careful and systematic planning of language objectives as well as coordination of the language and content curriculum. If sufficient resources were to be invested in the introduction of CLIL, in terms of training programmes and investment on teachers, we could even hope for a radical shift from a teacher-centred approach, which still distinguishes part of the Italian school experience, to a methodology based on interactive tasks that the learner has to complete, becoming responsible for his/her learning.

ⁱ Marsh D. 2000 **Content and Language Integrated Learning: The European Dimension - Actions, Trends and Foresight Potential.**

ⁱⁱ Green English @ Casa Archilei http://www.archilei.it/green_english/index.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ Berton G: 2009 **Tasks, learning activities and oral production skills in CLIL classrooms**

^{iv} HandsOnLanguage <http://www.elionline.com/?q=en/node/277>

^v Coyle, D 2006 **Developing CLIL: Towards a Theory of Practice**

^{vi} Casal S. 2008 **Cooperative Learning in CLIL Contexts: Ways to improve Students' Competences in the Foreign Language Classroom** http://www.iaie.org/download/turin_paper_casal.pdf

^{vii} **CLIL references:**

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/clil-a-lesson-framework>

<http://www.icpj.eu>

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