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Pros and cons of CLIL in contemporary foreign language classrooms: suggestions from an Italian 'happy ending'

Abstract

After more than 20 years of experimentation and practicing in Italy, CLIL can be looked at as a proper teaching method and no longer as some kind of short-run project. Still, planning a CLIL path properly involves many elements, means and strategies which must be constantly monitored and adjusted to both the needs of the students and the didactic aims of the teachers. It can be thus said that CLIL represents one of the latest evolutions of cooperative learning, where cooperation implies the relationship between the teachers involved as well as between the teachers and the students.

In most part of the CLIL experiences carried out in Italy, English remains the target language, though projects in some of the other major European languages have been run in many schools, especially those where foreign languages represent the main topic in the curriculum.

Therefore, the analysis will focus on a concrete example of a CLIL path, involving several high schools of Italy and of other European countries; approved for two editions by the EU because of the effectiveness of its implementation; and yet still not widely acknowledged.

Keywords

CLIL, Italy, language learning, English, GLOCLIL projects.

1. *CLIL in the contemporary Italian language teaching contexts: brief theorical premises*

As well-known, the CLIL approach (Content and Language Integrated Learning) was firstly conceived in 1994 by David Marsh and Anne Maljers to indicate an integrated learning system which aims to provide the learner with a second or foreign language while teaching non-linguistic contents.

After almost 30 years from its birth, and also after 20 years of experimentation in Italy, CLIL can be looked at as a proper teaching method, and no longer as some kind of short-run project (Coonan 2002, 27; Coonan 2011; Cinganotto 2016, 84-100; Menegale 2023, 235-244). CLIL can be thus included among the communicative approaches in language teaching: but differently from the other ones, it involves that both students and teachers look at the foreign language as a means, a vehicle, and no longer as the main object of the teaching/learning process (Mohan 1986).

CLIL defines itself as a dual-focused education process (Marsh 2002, 66), since it requires teachers and students to pay attention to both non-linguistic subjects and the foreign language. As well-explained by Marsh and Nikula (1999,16):

> CLIL can be carried out by the foreign language teacher, just as it can be carried out by a non-language subject teacher, but both must accept a fundamental point, namely that CLIL is about integration of language and content to enhance certain aspects of language acquisition, and is far more than just 'using a foreign language'.

Speaking about a vehicular use of the foreign language, it's probably interesting to focus briefly on what the Common European Framework of Languages defines as a vehicular language. As stated in the Framework, it probably sounds a bit like a 'cover-definition', including several experiences of teaching not necessarily related to CLIL (i.e. bilingual education, Content based Instruction, Full immersion programmes: Fishman 1976; Abbaticchio 2020, 85-107), which can be easily looked at as the 'forefathers' of CLIL. Similar teaching experiences have indeed been run in countries, such as Canada and Switzerland, where the presence of a bilingual community is well established. Some 'smaller' examples can be traced also in Italy, in regions such as Valle d'Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige and Friuli-Venezia Giulia, where all subjects are taught in two languages all year long and through the entire school cycle (from primary school to high school: see Lucietto 2008; Balboni 1999). The right definition here is that of bilingual education rather than proper CLIL, as in bilingual communities one of the two vehicular languages is in fact, for some of the speakers, a second language and not a foreign language, since it's regularly used and spoken in the same area, thus more or less known to all the speakers.

As widely acknowledged, the main didactic aim of CLIL is to improve the quality of the language taught and learnt by increasing the time and the quantity of language exposure for all the students: but it can also lead to many more improvements in the educational process, if some requirements are observed. First of all, the foreign language adopted must be far more authentic than that taught in a traditional. 'grammar-shaped' language teaching context (where the linguistic situations presented to the students are very often of no practical use – i.e. role plays where students ask and give information about places where nobody needs to go or about things nobody intends to do). CLIL, instead, has to deal necessarily with the pragmatic needs of students in order to make them able to learn subjects such as maths or sciences or history; thus, the foreign language becomes

> (...) the medium whereby language is used to reach other, non-linguistic objectives [...] the foreign language absolves a 'natural' function (in the eyes of the pupils) acquiring therefore greater authenticity (Coonan 2005, 6).

A further requirement of CLIL deals with the familiarity that students should have already with the non-linguistic content in their mother tongue: since they know at least something of the subject they're going to learn in the foreign language, it will sound also easier and more interesting than the 'traditional' way of studying that foreign language they're used to: therefore, there's a good chance to avoid that sense

of deep uneasiness (known in Italian with the expression "filtro affettivo") which arises in students when they have to face something completely new, therefore difficult to cope with. Furthermore, students should be completely concentrated on the non-linguistic subject: and by doing so, according to Krashen's well-known rule of forgetting (1981), they'll give no importance to the fact that by studying the main subject in a foreign language they are, in fact, learning the foreign language itself.

2. *Planning a CLIL path in Italy: from fundamentals to variability of contexts*

Planning a CLIL path means keeping in consideration all the possible parameters, criteria and variables which could in a more or less relevant way influence the good end of the 'path' itself. Therefore, it becomes useful, but also necessary, to locate means and strategies in order to monitor all the teaching tools chosen for the whole duration of the project (Coonan 2002 and 2011). In order to give the CLIL path a coherent and logic aspect, the best didactic means of planning could be the curriculum, which puts all the didactic elements in a logic and coherent order and always keeps in consideration the importance of explaining the causes as well as the consequences of certain didactic choices (Balboni, Luise 1994).

In Italy as well as in many other countries, the planning of a curriculum for CLIL normally implies that at least two teachers (the language teacher and the non-linguistic subject teacher) are fully involved. These two 'characters' should work in pairs from the beginning to the end, following what in fact is an open didactic scheme (Freddi 1999). While planning a CLIL path, it becomes essential to focus on eight main elements:

- Context (real environment where CLIL takes place: sociological, cultural, economic and political aspects linked to the didactic context as well as the specific kind of school involved);
- Learning situation (role of the teachers and of their ability to work in pair, exact amount of usage of the foreign language and of the first language in teaching the non-linguistic subject: see Gilardoni 2023, 105-119);
- Didactic aims and scores (in the foreign language and in the non-linguistic subject);
- Needs (to be distinguished in perceived needs (as seen by the teachers from an objective point of view) and felt needs (as perceived and explicated by the students): Richerich, Chancerel 1977);
- Objectives (defined depending on the typology of students involved: adults, young learners, workers, curricular students and so on);
- Contents and means of linking foreign language and non-linguistic topics; this includes at least 3 possible approaches:
    a. Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (C.A.L.L.A.), which uses non-linguistic topics in order to teach the foreign language (Chamot, O'Malley 1987 and 1994);

b. Adjunct, which requires the students to gain some linguistic and non-linguistic pre-requisites (i.e. knowledge of the basic elements of both the foreign language and the non-linguistic issue) in order to take part to the learning process (Abbaticchio 2020, 85-107);
c. Integration of Language and Content in Second\Foreign Language Instruction (I.L.C.S.) which focuses on some peculiar linguistic aspects while teaching the non-linguistic subject (Snow, Matt, Genesee 1989).

- Teaching methodologies (approaches chosen for presentation of contents and so on);
- Assessment (of students and thus of the efficaciousness of the CLIL approach itself).

As we can see, planning a CLIL path properly involves many elements, means and strategies which must be constantly monitored and adjusted to both the needs of the students and the didactic aims of the teachers. A peculiar reflection should always be done on which extra-competences the teachers involved should develop. In an idealistic situation – unfortunately it stays idealistic, though the many specific training paths created for teachers in Italy- both the teachers should have a good knowledge of the foreign language involved, thus the ability to recognize the linguistic problems that students could develop. On the other side, the language teacher should be aware at least of the basic elements of the non-linguistic subject. It can therefore be said that CLIL represents a proper evolution of co-operative learning, where cooperation involves the relationship between the two teachers and between the teachers and the students. CLIL teachers should also be aware of the cognitive, psychological and sociocultural aspects involved in the learning process as well as of the possibilities offered by tech-nologies and interactive means (Coonan 2002). Thus, CLIL teachers are in constant need of updating courses which should provide them with the specific didactic techniques for both the foreign language and the non-linguistic subject. It is important to underline that these courses should make teachers aware that not all the means, contents and activities are suitable for all kinds of students: these should therefore be adjusted depending on factors such as age, social position, level of instruction and so on (Baker 1996; Snow, Brinton 1997).

The topic of the possible typologies of student deserves a bit more of discussion. The analysis of many CLIL Italian experiences has shown clearly that peculiar differences arise when teachers have to deal respective with very young, adolescents or adult learners. It's commonly known that children look at their learning experience always with genuine curiosity and never or very rarely have problems to admit their mistakes and to adjust their way of acting (see Knowles 1990). The same level of spontaneity can be detected in pre-adolescent students, who still relate to teachers and schoolmates in an unproblematic mood – that is, without any fear of making mistakes and with no shame of being corrected. Things become tough, instead, when it comes to the analysis of the learning situation of adolescents who

have moved on to high schools: while children and pre-adolescents are very concerned about what the teacher thinks about their school behaviour, the students of this second category, in some cases expect to be involved in every decision which concerns them, including the teaching/learning procedures, though they clearly don't have the didactic know-how and experience required to decide about the curriculum. Things become even tougher when teachers have to deal with adults – i.e. workers in need to improve their linguistic competence due to professional or family reasons, such as the search of a new job or the migration to a different country (therefore moved by an instrumental motivation: Gardner, Lambert 1972). This type of learners are even more difficult to cope with, since they agree very rarely on changing their points of view or on admitting their mistakes or lack of knowledge, especially if they have to do this in front of a younger person, even if it's a teacher with a considerable experience (Demetrio 1990). The more frequent risk in such cases is the arising of a psychological block, which has to be avoided as far as possible, since it can lead to a general refusal for learning. It has been observed that in similar problematic contexts the CLIL approach acts more efficaciously than other more traditional approaches: firstly because, since the foreign language is not the main objective of the learning process but is rather an instrument to improve some knowledge the learners already have, they see it as something useful in order to get better scores in their working environment. Even so, learners' motivation and positive attitude towards the learning process remain a basic element, together with the learners' acknowledgement that they've gained some concrete advantages through the learning process (Shiels 1993). Another useful means to avoid psychological blocks in the learning process (at least in the first stages of a CLIL path) can be that of grading the exposure to the foreign language depending on the learners' level of competence: i.e., if learners have a basic knowledge of the foreign language, the amount of linguistic structures will be inferior to the information concerning the non-linguistic subject; vice-versa, if the teacher is dealing with learners whose curriculum puts the foreign language as main subject, the exposure to the language could be more intense, even oriented to its peculiar varieties (i.e. the specific code of the non-linguistic subject: Balboni 2023) while the non-linguistic topics could be introduced gradually.

For the majority of the CLIL experiences implemented in Italy, English remains the target language, though projects in some of the other major European languages are being run in many schools, especially those where foreign languages are the main topics in the curriculum.

In the following paragraphs the analysis will focus on a concrete example of a CLIL path, run in 4 different high schools both in Italy and in other European countries, approved twice by the EU thanks to the effectiveness of its implementation.

3. *The GLO.CLIL experience: teaching English through disciplinary contents*

3.1 The project: general aspects and main aims

The Italian project known as GLO.CLIL ("Training teachers to design and share CLIL modules in a global village") was carried out from 2010 to 2011, in its first approval, and from 2012 to 2013, in its second approval, by an Italian high school (I.T.C. "Romanazzi", located in Bari, South Italy) as senior partner of a group of high schools of the same geographic area. The project was approved in the European Action "Leonardo da Vinci", more specifically in the peculiar project field meaningfully named "Training teachers to design and share CLIL modules in a virtual global village". This action is thus specifically addressed to teachers who concretely intend to develop a learning path by using CLIL methodology: therefore, the project GLO.CLIL aims at developing European VET teachers' professional expertise according to the assumption that human resources play a relevant role in order to obtain a better educational offer and promote mobility throughout Europe.

In GLO.CLIL as well as in GLO.CLIL 2 all the project activities, addressed to secondary schools with different characteristics, have of course been based on the CLIL method and dealt with related themes and topics in order to boost English learning by teaching a variety of subjects, especially vocational ones, in the foreign language. The project recipients were both subject-teachers and teachers of English from secondary schools. Some of the partner schools were members of ENIS-European Network of Innovative Schools, which share a long-standing expertise on European projects (www.gloclil.eu).

The project can be looked at as a special opportunity for learning English (mainly) and other European languages as foreign languages, but also for the acquisition of content-subject knowledge and competences and for cultural and intercultural learning. In Italy, especially in the South, teachers were (and are still) in need of materials and, above all, of a constant training on how to approach CLIL in a pragmatic way, and more specifically to use it in the class also as a means of developing a significant communicative competence in the students (Gilardoni 2023, 105-119).

The job profile for a bilingual subject teacher, comprising of subject-related scientific and didactical requirements, is still not very clear (cfr. Coonan 2011). A further aim of the project has been, therefore, that of developing initial and in-service training of teachers in CLIL with reference to language and methodological acquisition, as well as to strenghten the development of teaching modules on a variety of subjects which could be part of the "global village", in fact represented by a virtual village platform, expected to give CLIL-approach users the opportunity to get to know CLIL sources even in external contexts, such as in university courses with advanced-level students (Mazzotta 2023, 145-152).

The project also aimed to recognize and validate bilingual teachers' competences by adopting the Europass Mobility Certificate (as far as competences acquired by the participants are concerned) and by using a competence validating format which has been progressively designed and issued by Host partners of the project for the eventual use of local authorities, in order to indicate the competences acquired by

participants as CLIL teachers (with reference to methodology-related competences). In both its editions, GLO.CLIL aimed to make participants aware of the methodological roots and consequent advantages of content and language integrated learning, to work on and examine different existing modules and to provide the participants with techniques suitable to build their own CLIL modules.

A large part of the training has involved a critical evaluation of available existing materials, both in printed and digital format. Participants have been asked to produce materials of their own, consisting of modules on different subjects, particularly on those related to the vocational field. Feedback have been gathered from the training tutors and the participants, who have been exposed to new practical techniques and then invited to critically evaluate the aims, procedures and outcomes of these techniques (www.gloclil.eu). Sessions have been conducted through mini-lectures and discussions, and participants have been asked to actively take part in groups, pairs and plenary sessions. Participants have then been invited to try out the new techniques and activities and send back reports and comments to the host training institution; they have also been given some guidance on how to disseminate new information to colleagues or teachers' associations in formal or informal in-service sessions.

The project, as partially said in the introduction to this paragraph, has been approved in two editions: the first, started in September 2010, and ended in December 2011; the second (named *GLO.CLIL 2*) started in 2012 and ended in December 2013.

3.2 Teaching English in GLO.CLIL: an example of modules' structure and contents

In both the editions of the project, the teachers involved have been asked to produce concrete samples of what, according to the theoretical premises they'd been trained to, could be a CLIL module.

As proved from the contents of the project website, the modules realized by the teachers involved have touched all the different fields and subjects normally included in the students' educational path (from Aerotechnics to Art History from a Math Perspective, from Computer Science to Geography related to food agriculture, from Philosophy and Antropology to Economics and Psychology: see www.gloclil.eu and www.gloclil.eu|glo.clil2) and, consequently, also all the different varieties of English involved. That's why CLIL has been seen, in this specific 'path', as a quite useful instrument to teach also the specialized lexicons of a foreign language (Balboni 2002) also when the teaching/learning process is addressed to adults and professionals.

We will now introduce as an example one of the modules realized and personally analysed during a GLO.CLIL dissemination seminar. The module was on Psychology and was named "Underage drinking"; what follows is a part of the module, where the teacher who planned it explains the steps she followed in the classwork (www.gloclil.eu\glo.clil2):

1.

Brainstorming: I will tell students to sit in a semi-circle and I will name two secretaries who will jot down the brain-storming main ideas.
First I will show this picture:
and I will ask the following questions:

1) What are the most common addictions among youth?
2) Which organs are affected by alcohol?
3) How dangerous do you rate / consider alcohol addiction?

Separate the class in four groups divided by addictions and ask them if they know the signs of the chosen addiction and ask them to guess which they may be.
Each group produces a list and then they compare the four lists.

2.

Step 2: INTRODUCING NEW IDEAS (around 40 minutes):
Our students will be made aware of addictions other than smoking and drinking. alcohol. We'll introduce the terms WORKAHOLIC, SHOPAHOLIC & CHOCAHOLIC. We will ask them the following:
"Did you know there are people who are addicted to work, shopping and chocolate? And people who spend many hours in the gym".
Then write on the board the word Addiction and ask them if they know what it means. Ask them to give examples of various kinds of addictions, the possible causes and problems that can be caused. Ask students, What do you think addiction is? Comments and real-life anecdotes will be welcome.

These activities are, in our opinion, a concrete example of what working with CLIL implies in a 'traditional' class context. What is maybe more interesting from a linguistic point of view – apart from the full-immersion, also for the teachers, in the foreign language, even while instructing the students on what the activities will be – is the gradual, but progressive introduction of specific lexical terms ("workaholic", "shopaholic", "addiction": see Cardona 2008; Nitti 2015, https://www.dsu.univr.it/documenti/OccorrenzaIns/matdid/matdid866908.pdf), which are usually already known to students (at least in their mothertongue, but also in their English form) from their out-of-school experiences, but which they had probably never related to their school studies.

A second point of strength shown by these pages is the constant involvement of students in every phase of the lesson: of course this should be a main point also in a traditional learning path, but CLIL somehow obliges teachers and students to create a cooperative learning and teaching environment (Caon 2023, 35-42), since – and perhaps this module shows it more clearly than other ones – some elements dealing directly with adolescents' way of life are maybe better known to students than to teachers, and thus are a way

of motivating students strongly enough to participate actively in the whole teaching and learning process. This explains the teacher's intention to welcome real-life anecdotes, obviously referring to students' life out of the classroom.

4. *Conclusions: "a training for cooperative learning, an introduction to otherness"*

The advantages and the concrete improvements of integrating CLIL to the traditional teaching and learning processes have been stated and confirmed in more than one occasion. Still, some difficulties in planning and usage remain also after almost 30 years of training and practice with this methodological path, especially in some countries, when it comes to acknowledging CLIL as an official teaching method. Italy can represent an example of this partial "bad luck": indeed CLIL is still not yet officially inserted in the government educational programs, and should be gained from European actions and projects, which, good and well-organized as may be, are not long-lasting programs and can be renewed only in some cases (as it happened for GLO.CLIL project). Another problem concerns the role of teachers: since CLIL is not recognized as an official teaching path, teachers who gain the possibility of working with it (thanks to European projects) still have to do extra work in order to produce materials, since they can't do it during their normal job time. This, of course, affects also the economic pattern, since all the materials have to be produced and supported by the teachers in most cases, since the schools who can provide costless extra-material are still very few. Another question which stays problematic concerns the relationship between the teachers of the foreign language and the teachers of the non-linguistic subjects, who very often can't work together in harmony since they can't come to a compromise about what is more important in which moment of the learning path (Coonan 2002).

Still, the continuousness of reflections and studies on this methodological approach seems to confirm that adopting CLIL allows teachers and students to gain some meaningful advantages in terms of linguistic improvement as well as of better and positive acceptance of the intercultural dimension, which nowadays has become a turning point in planning every kind of educational program. With the words of Le Dreaux, CLIL can be therefore looked at as

1. A workshop about mobility
2. A training for cooperative learning
3. An introduction to otherness.

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