

Some issues in implementing CLIL

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Carmel Mary Coonan

University of Ca' Foscari, Venice, IT

In this short article the intention is to highlight certain issues that are arising from the application of CLIL in "new" situations.

The concept of CLIL

The meaning of the concept CLIL (content and language integrated learning) refers to the integrated learning of language and content in situations of bilingual or multilingual education, in other words, in situations in which there are two (the historically traditional meaning) or even more vehicular languages of instruction (1) - one being the normal language of the school, the other(s) an L2 or LS (2). Other terms (in English) used are, to name but a few, "content based language learning", "content based language instruction", and "language enhanced content teaching" (see, for example, Nikula 1997; Wolff 1997). As Nikula states, the term CLIL "is broad enough to cover both immersion education where all instruction is conducted through a foreign language and other types of foreign language enhanced education where students only receive certain parts of their education through the medium of a foreign language" (1997:6).

Importantly, the term CLIL captures a feature of bilingual education that necessitates attention: namely that language development (in the L2) cannot be left to chance. It needs to be nurtured. Without such attention the risks are that i) the learning of the non-language subject matter will suffer due to L2 difficulties; ii) L2 language competence will not grow. As the choice of bilingual education is generally made in order to promote the L2 language (and culture), it would be paradoxical if this were not to occur (Snow et al. 1989; Swain 1985).(3) Thus CLIL can be seen as a concept that highlights the need to find the methodological means to reach two types of objectives, those of the content and of the L2, the one through the other. Only then will the language learning potential inherent (in terms of greater exposure to the language and better conditions (4) for language learning) in bilingual education programmes be released.

Change in focus

In the situation delineated very briefly above, the L2 is the vehicle whereby the *content objectives* are reached. In other words, the L2 carries out the same role as that of the normal language of the school as one or more school subjects are taught through it. However, such a situation *legally requires* a teacher fully qualified in the L2-mediated school subject, which is not always possible. Most higher education systems in Europe do not allow for a double teaching qualification in subjects that are not related. How then are countries, convinced of the value of CLIL learning, sidestepping the issue? We can take Italy as our point of reference. Two features will be mentioned and conclusions will be drawn about possible risks inherent in the choices.

a. Team teaching

One solution is to work in partnership: two teachers (the content teacher and the language teacher (5)) are physically present during the lesson. Ideally, the role of the L1 subject teacher is to teach the content in L2 and that of the L2 teacher to intervene to smooth out language problems and help in conducting group work, etc. However, in practice what are the risks? On the basis of a survey conducted in some high schools (6) (Pavesi and Zecca 2001), it would appear that the co-presence of the L1 content teacher and the L2 native speaker (language expert) can have potentially deleterious effects on the amount of time assigned to the use (by teacher and pupils alike) of the L2.

The survey found an overall tendency to present subject matter first in the L1 and for the students to use the L1 when dealing with content they found difficult. Basically speaking, the L1 tends to be used with (and by) the subject teacher and the L2 to be used with (and by) the L2 teacher. The reason might lie in the well-defined language role each teacher has institutionally. The need for the L1 subject teacher to “change” his/her language is felt less as there is another teacher there that can carry out that role. An overall danger in such a situation is that content is not mediated through the L2 to a sufficient degree for there to be the quantitative and qualitative benefits inherent in L2 vehicular learning. Furthermore, there is the risk that the L2 interventions be limited to a mere focusing on the language itself (in fact the job of the language expert co-present). Strictly speaking therefore the L2 is reduced in its vehicular function but amplified in its teaching function.

b. The L2 teacher

In our view, the root of the above problem lies in an inadequate overall preparation for CLIL teaching. Professional development courses to prepare the teachers for the specifics of the CLIL methodology are few and far between – both in Italy and other European countries. However, even when such courses are offered, they do not manage to reach the subject teacher.⁽⁷⁾ Those who rally are the L2 teachers eager to find out about this new language-learning environment. Some route must be found (subject specific journals, initial teacher education authorities, etc.) to capture the attention of the subject teachers, inform them of CLIL and prepare those interested.⁽⁸⁾ As things stand at the moment, in certain areas of the country there are groups of L2 teachers keenly involved in developing CLIL experiences – perhaps with subject specialist colleagues at school.

However, in parallel to this, there is a new development: the L2 teacher is practising CLIL. Profiting from the new law reform on school autonomy which assigns a greater degree of freedom to schools in managing their curriculum, the teachers, working closely with their subject colleagues, develop thematic modules of a disciplinary or interdisciplinary nature. Legally speaking the L2 teacher cannot shoulder responsibility for the discipline but can take on board contents which represent a further exploration or extension of what is done in L1 with the subject teacher. There can be potential problems with such a choice:

- i. from a quantitative point of view nothing is gained as the modules are carried out within the normal timetable assigned to the teaching of the L2. The idea behind the vehicular use of the L2 is that hours of contact with the language are increased by “spreading out” the L2 to areas of the curriculum different from (and in addition to) the actual teaching of the language.
- ii. from a qualitative point of view the language learning experience can be damaged if the professional expertise of the teacher takes the upper hand and s/he transforms the module into one of (E)SP.⁽⁹⁾ In this case, rather than the L2 being the vehicle for content learning, the focus is changed around and it is the content that becomes the vehicle for language learning. It is argued that even this is a form of CLIL because a form of integrated learning is promoted.⁽¹⁰⁾

However, in order to maintain the qualitative dimension inherent in CLIL (learning content and learning to learn through a L2) there is a need to guarantee that the student be involved, in L2, in the cognitive processes and the learning and study activities normally associated with the content. Thus, the authenticity and the meaning-based features of the content-based experience do not give way to the “pseudo-ness” so typical of the language classroom (see, for example, Wolff 1997:61-62).

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Notes

(1) For economy, "bilingual education" – the more traditional term - will be used to refer to situations where either two or more languages of instruction are used.

(2) Although the distinction is important for discussions of bilingual education, here we will use only the expression L2 to refer to both realities.

(3) The 1982 report by Swain and Lapkin and further work by Swain and associates highlight the need for greater attention to form in immersion situations.

(4) See, for example, Wolff 1997 for his arguments concerning the qualitative merits of immersion/content-based bilingual education /CLIL.

(5) In the Italian situation concerning the vehicular use of an L2, generally speaking such a teacher is the "language expert", a native speaker used to working in team – but in a subordinate role - with the "real" L2 teacher.

(6) The schools involved in the survey were those that are part of two Ministerial projects: the Liceo (Classico) Europeo and the Liceo (ad indirizzo) internazionale. All in all there are about 20 such high schools.

(7) Over the past four years the Department of Linguistic Sciences at the Università di Ca' Foscari has offered a year-long post-graduate course for teachers (future teachers) on the topic of CLIL but has had little success in attracting non-language subject teachers.

(8) IRRE Piemonte has set up a project for the teaching of science subjects through an L2. In order to participate the L2 teacher must be twinned with a science subject colleague.

(9) (English) for Specific Purposes.

(10) Indeed the acronym CLIL could refer to any learning situation where there is an integration of content and language. In the foreign language teaching field today there is an overall tendency to integrate L2 with content in order to expose the students to a more sophisticated register of language as well as the professional features of the language associated with the specialisation of the school they attend. Thus in a professional high school that prepares for jobs in the tourist industry, students will be exposed to themes and language associated with diverse aspects of the profession.