

# CLIL: Teaching English or Teaching in English?

CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) has been a recent acquisition in our schoolbooks and a new challenge all English teachers will have to face in our schools. The idea is quite simple: it aims at introducing students to new content areas and concepts inside their traditional curriculum subjects, using the foreign language as the medium of communication instead of limiting their acquisition of knowledge only to information conveyed through the use of the students' mother tongue. In higher education at University level this practice has already become a rule especially in the study of scientific disciplines, where every student, while preparing his or her final exam, has to read books written in foreign languages (usually English) in order to have access to the latest news on the subject he is researching. It is in this logic that many university courses in Italy want to assess their students' knowledge of one or two foreign languages during their university course. However, while at university the foreign language is used only as a medium for the acquisition of new competences in the student's field of research, CLIL aims at improving the performance in both the content subject and the foreign language; in other words, it aims at reinforcing the pupils' learning experience by exploiting the synergies between the two - or more - subjects involved.

Although it may take a while for students to get used to the challenges of CLIL, once they are familiar with the new way of working, researchers say that they will progress at faster rates in both the content subject and the foreign language. Here are some of the advantages connected with the use of CLIL:

- collaboration among teacher, which should create stronger links within the group involved. Students will notice the effort made by their English teacher to understand chemistry and the effort made by their Chemistry teacher to speak in English: this could be an important message to the class, suggesting that everybody has still go a lot to learn if he/she is willing to do it.
- The students' awareness of the value of acquired skills and knowledge. Skimming, scanning, surfing the net, analyzing graphs, solving problems, reporting to the rest of the class in oral and/or written form: these are all abilities necessary to complete a CLIL project, to be developed both in the students' mother tongue and in the target language.
- A greater confidence and autonomy in the learners. Students who succeed in completing a CLIL project will benefit not only on the didactic level but also (maybe mainly) on the psychological one: enthusiasm and motivation will be greatly increased.

A successful CLIL lesson should combine the following elements:

- **COMMUNICATION:** CLIL's motto is: **Using language to learn whilst learning to use language**. Therefore exchange of information is the all-important matter, both in the written and in theatrical form.
- **COGNITION:** developing thinking skills and studying strategies is a very important result The students should feel their advancement in knowledge, skills and understanding related to some specific elements of their curriculum.
- **CULTURAL INTERACTION:** students will probably be exposed to different perspectives on a single problem or a particular historical event and will therefore learn to accept different opinions and to express their opinions to others.
- **CONTENT:** The content should always be the primary focus of any materials used in the CLIL classroom; CLIL should not be used as an opportunity to use texts limited to vocabulary lists, or to revise

concepts already studied in the mother tongue. The focus of the English lesson will move from grammatical and linguistic accuracy to comprehension and communication. However, it is impossible to transfer content subject lesson plans without modifying them to take into account the students' abilities in the target language. At the beginning, lessons will need to be challenging cognitively, with comparatively light linguistic demands.

Another aspect to keep in mind is **learners' motivation**. Students should always have the feeling that they are learning something, they are taking a new step towards some important results. That is why, especially at the intermediate level, students get often bored by language lessons: they have reached a sufficient confidence in the basic mechanisms of the language and they feel they are going nowhere: CLIL helps them create a new stimulating motivation to their language improvement. At present schools interested in developing CLIL projects have to design materials on their own to suit the needs of their learners, so most of the burden is as usual on the English teachers' shoulders. Some books have recently inserted a few pages of CLIL materials. Even if in no case can this material be considered a whole module or a project, it can be the starting point of a larger work. Another important problem is that the English teachers may lack a knowledge of the content subject, not only in reference to concepts, but also how that particular subject is worded in English. The best possible option is having the lesson held by the subject teacher, that is Maths, Physics, Philosophy, etc. This experiment has been done in many European schools in recent years. A very good example I personally know is the Nassau Schule in Breda, Netherlands, where about one third of the lessons are held in English. However, that is possible only if the teachers know English well enough, as it usually happens in Northern Europe. The situation is totally different in Italy where most teachers - in particular older ones - do not know English at all.

**What is the solution then?** To work together with the subject teacher. Is it possible in the Italian school System? Until a few years ago it would have been a very difficult experience, but now it is officially accepted even by our Ministero. I personally had a very interesting experience of team teaching, better known as "*copresenza*" in an Italian secondary school. The subjects involved were English Literature, Art, Latin, and in a second moment, History. We had three different "*copresenze*" in two different school years, and actually there was never team teaching English-Latin. However, the whole experience can be considered as a single project.

Everything was a consequence of the experimentation "*Autonomia*", which is in operation in Liceo Scientifico "Peano" in Rome. It includes some team teaching lessons where one subject is compulsory and the other can change from term to term. The compulsory subject was Art, which was taught together with Latin in the first term of the third year and with English in the second term. Therefore it was necessary to find a common "ground" to the three subjects. We found it in the theatre. During the first term the Art teacher and the Latin teacher organized a course based on the physical aspect of Greek and Roman theatres and its influence on the development of Latin comedies and tragedies. During this period there wasn't any direct connection with English literature and the lessons were obviously held in Italian. At the beginning of the second term, the team teaching with Latin finished, and that with English started. Our aim was to introduce the Elizabethan theatre in all its aspects, showing its relation to the classical theatre and highlighting their differences. The lessons were held primarily in English, even those regarding the Art of the Renaissance. First of all the students were guided to report what they had learnt about Greek and Roman theatre in English. So they described the aspect of those theatres, they spoke about the Aristotelic unities, and they mentioned some examples of Latin plays, in particular Plautine comedies and Senecan tragedies. As a preparation for their work, the students had already read Romeo

and Juliet in an annotated text during the first term, but they had been asked only the plot of the tragedy. Nothing had been explained to them about Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theatre. Our idea was to show them something which could demonstrate all the characteristics of this theatre. It was necessary to show them a "real" Elizabethan theatre during a performance. We decided to have them watch the film *Shakespeare in Love* (in the original language with English subtitles). The film was stopped at the end of every scene to ask them questions (which they had in a questionnaire in English) about the development of the story, the correspondences with Romeo and Juliet, and the characteristics of the theatre itself. At the end of the film they were taken to the computer room where they had the possibility to surf the Net in search of images of the Globe Theatre in London. Those who live in Rome may also have the opportunity to visit the Globe at Villa Borghese (which is unfortunately very often closed - in fact we didn't manage to visit it). Then the students had to compare the classical theatre to the Elizabethan one and, with the help of their teachers, notice how these differences influenced the plays. After that they also had the possibility to compare both theatres to modern ones. At the end a general test was given. It had questions both in English and Italian. The questions were about the Latin theatre and plays (in Italian), the Elizabethan theatre and Shakespeare (in English), and the differences between them (in English). The students were also asked to draw a picture of an Elizabethan theatre. The following year, for the new third class, the team teaching was even more complicated since some lessons were also held by the History teacher who - with my help - introduced (in English) the history of the Elizabethan Age not only following the traditional path of the lives of the English kings and queens, but also showing the importance of the development of the English middle class. This experience was possible thanks to this teacher's good knowledge of English (even though he didn't know some "technical" words). When the class watched *Shakespeare in Love* it was possible to demonstrate how these aspects were dealt with in the film, too.

As a final test, apart from the usual questions about the history and structure of Latin and Elizabethan theatre, the students had also to answer some questions about History. At the end of the experience, the positive aspects definitely outnumbered the negative ones: the students had improved their knowledge of the English language while studying three different subjects of their curriculum. To tell the truth, there were some drawbacks too: at the end of the year we had problems in evaluating the students in the different subjects. Besides, most of the students confessed that they were quite confused at the end of each lesson, as they said they weren't sure what subject they had been studying at the moment: they found it difficult to get free from the usual timetable, as if their brains worked in watertight compartments, switching from one to the other every 60 minutes. Moreover, some times there were three teachers in the classroom at the same time, speaking both English and Italian. However, is this a real drawback in the modern world of global communication?

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