



# Engaging Undergraduates in a City Treasure Hunt: an Eye-Opening CLIL Action-Research Project to Discover the Urban Environment

Francesca Ripamonti

University of Milan, Italy

## Abstract

*The attention recently paid by the Italian government to multilingualism, interdisciplinarity, and innovative university teaching (Ministry of Education "La Buona Scuola Law", 2015; and Ministry of Economy and Finance "National Recovery and Resilience Plan", 2021) has led to implementing an experimental CLIL module integrating the contents of Urban Geography with the English language addressed to forty undergraduates (CEFR B2) attending the "Environmental Humanities" degree course at the University of Milan. Being born as a pilot project aimed at activating linguistic and disciplinary skills by avoiding transmissive lessons, our primary objective was to get students to play an active part in their learning, guaranteeing solid cultural training alike. Therefore, after acquiring the foundations in urban geography and providing the supportive language scaffolding, the students were involved in an outdoor treasure hunt in search of the urban regeneration signs joining past and present in the Milan Portello area (former Alfa Romeo car plant). Unlike a real scavenger hunt, the goal was not to find an ultimate prize. Instead, following a series of clues, the participants (in groups or individually), were challenged to complete tasks seeking specific geographic marks in the area, and to report their findings (by photos, clips, audio, or narratives). The preliminary results all pointed to a positive way to "read" the urban surroundings with the language of/for/through learning: the core of CLIL methodology.*

**Keywords:** CLIL, innovation, language scaffolding, exploratory learning, outdoor teaching

## 1. Introduction

This study highlights a collaborative CLIL experiment carried out at the Faculty of Human Sciences of the Environment, Landscape and Territory of the University of Milan with the aim of showing the advantages of the CLIL methodology in relation to post-secondary education in Italy. We will try to demonstrate how considerable benefits have been achieved by implementing an innovative CLIL module combining the integration of urban geography and the English language with a pedagogical outdoor education model. For this, a practical treasure hunt has been designed involving a group of forty undergraduates whose tasks were to search Milan urban regeneration signs contemporarily applying geography contents and language skills in authentic moments of active learning.

The theoretical framework underlying the current project first started from the guidelines established by the European Commission (Barcelona Summit, March 2002), which gave a strong boost to the learning of languages and the maintenance of linguistic diversity in Europe, proposing CLIL (*Content and Language Integrated Learning*) among the methodologies to favor multilingualism in that pupils acquire the subjects of the study program while practicing and improving their language skills (European Commission, 2006). Second, the "Good School Reform Act 107" (Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research, MIUR, 2015), and the "National Recovery and Resilience Plan" (Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, 2021) were key drivers in setting new standards encouraging pilot practices and the experimentation of didactic innovation to guarantee learners' active participation and equal opportunities for educational success.

## 2. The CLIL Action-Research project

As its name suggests, action research is a highly interactive method particularly popular in educational settings that aims to investigate and solve issues in the form of a systematic inquiry while simultaneously bridging gaps between theory and practice. Action research is highly adaptable and empowering in that it allows molding analyses to individual needs, resulting in practical changes meaningful to the communities (Tegan, 2023). The CLIL action research model stemmed from the evidence-based diagnosis of our work setting: over the two previous academic terms (the pandemic years) English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Urban Geography (initially delivered in Italian) had



been taught separately as elective semester-long theoretical workshops in the second year of the bachelor's in Human Sciences. Witnessing recurring static lecturing standards, it was decided to evaluate how concepts were taught in-depth, focusing on the methods, tools, and approaches used by each teacher. It was found that year-over-year there had been few changes in how both disciplines were taught, with no incorporation of more modernized teaching methodologies or useful digital tools. It was thus resolved to take action implementing more modern techniques which could address our specific target: how to make the urban geography teaching and learning act "perceptual". CLIL methodology with its multiple focus; rich learning environment, authenticity, active learning, scaffolding, and cooperation (Mehisto et al., 2008) seemed the answer to our driving questions: a) how to get forty undergraduates to "read" their urban surroundings using the language *of/for/through* learning? b) how to promote the acquisition of urban geography with experiential language activities?. The task proved challenging other than necessary since our students were highly motivated to tackle authentic territory issues after two years of lockdown.

Our main purpose was to encourage lessons that took the form of a cooperative process with the primary and institutional objective of conveying the acquisition of contents and knowledge through the mediation of the foreign language. In this process, students were not passive entities undergoing the interaction and didactic action but, on the contrary, they became the real protagonists of a shared path of dialogues through which knowledge was constantly "constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed" (Wegerif, 2006:59). By implementing CLIL methodology we wanted to operate a reconsideration of our daily teaching practices from the presentational talk typical of top-down frontal classes to the exploratory talk, usual of the group work and of the laboratory activities which see the students as agents of the educational action even though they do not always express themselves in a perfectly coherent and complete way. The integration of contents and language alongside interdisciplinarity were kept central thanks to a wide variety of discourse typologies that covered the various phases and purposes of our didactic intervention: 1) the organizational talk: the moment that provided the general task settings; 2) the social talk: the moment of social interaction; 3) the critical talk: the dialogic phase of critical reflection, often guided by the use of thought-provoking questions; 4) the expert talk: the phase of pure explanation in which the experts' voices provided prompts and clarifications in a frontal transmissive way; 5) the exploratory talk: the speech that was the verification of the successful understanding by the learners; and 6) the pedagogical talk: that aimed to build a bridge between the daily social interactions and the more formal academic communication.

Appropriately balancing these types of discourse in our CLIL classes enabled us to differentiate our specific contents. Precisely, holding that "accessing knowledge is not possible without using the language and its functions" (Coyle et al., 2010: 36) we utilized Coyle's language triptych firstly to introduce the students to the basics of human and urban geography (language *of* learning, *i.e.*, the language pertinent to the thematic contents); then the learners were scaffolded to operate effectively in tasks and other classroom activities related to the Milan-Portello new residential and commercial area, formerly the Alfa-Romeo car factory headquarters (the language *for* learning, *i.e.* the language needed for asking questions, giving explanations, demonstrating cause-effect). These activities became the occasion for encouraging Bloom's lower thinking skills (LOTS: remembering, understanding, and applying) and the three higher level skills (HOTS: analyze, evaluate, and create) by debating, inquiring, comparing ideas on the Portello area urban plan, its reinterpretation, its new places, commercial units, and the practices which led to the more concrete meaning of urban regeneration.

As for the language through learning, *i.e.* the synergistic use of language (as an object of learning and a tool for learning) and content to build new knowledge through reflection (Coyle et al., 2010), our students were guided in an outdoor scavenger hunt in the Milan Portello area in search of the urban regeneration signs that joined the past to the present. Unlike a real treasure hunt, the goal was not to find a final prize. Rather, after being coached about the Portello complex (as part of the redevelopment project of the former Alfa Romeo industrial area, in the northwest of Milan, which includes a big park, a commercial mall, a cycle and pedestrian overpass and new residences, distributed in a line of towers and buildings characterized by a modern reinterpretation of hanging gardens), the participants (either in small groups or individually) were challenged with a five-dimensional exploratory analysis: 1) space analysis (to identify the localization of the area); 2) accessibility (to recognize the visible and invisible accesses to the complex: gates, means of transport, opening hours; pedestrian paths, bridges and other links); 3) historical analysis (to structure a timeline along the urban regeneration project designed by the architects and also to investigate the marks reminding the original car factory premises; 4) commercial analysis (to acquire useful data about



customers' variety and flows, commercial offer and preferences, and other shopping variables) and, 5) personal analysis (to determine whether the area had proved successful in its original attempt at urban

redevelopment). In this urban search, the “hunters” had to follow a series of clues; seek historic and geographic marks: find specific relationships; complete specific tasks and report their findings choosing the most creative manner: taking photos, filming clips, recording audios, and writing commentaries.

### 3. Conclusions

The gathered results all pointed to positive feedback for this CLIL module, not only in terms of the perfect balance of the CLIL four basic components: Content, Communication; Cognition, and Culture (in its broader sense of Citizenship and Community) but also because it allowed our students to learn about themselves and their city. In this way, they discovered that communicating and using the language is easier and more effective than if they were just to learn content alone.

From a qualitative point of view, the CLIL treasure hunt resulted in captivating learning experiences that stimulated curiosity about learning and chief motivation while playing the activities compared to frontal classes. Quantitative analyses conducted with feedback released by the participants have shown how learning the urban surroundings integrating language and contents is educationally involving other than an efficient way to unite an academic group both synchronously and asynchronously. The preliminary results all pointed to a positive way to “read” the urban surroundings with the language of/for/through learning: the core of CLIL methodology. Our action research project has also given positive input to the few CLIL university attempts practiced so far, which are still far beyond the national and European expected standards.

Acknowledgments to Gambazza G. , for the content collaboration during the project.

### References

- [1] Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). “CLIL: Content and language integrated learning”. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press
- [2] European Commission (2006). “European Commission Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) at school in Europe – , Publications Office of the European Union”, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/756ebdaa-f694-44e4-8409-21eef02c9b9b>
- [3] MIUR, Law 107/2015 (the Good School Reform Act), <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2015/07/15/15G00122/sg>
- [4] Mehisto, P., Marsh, D. & Frigols-Martín, M. J. (2008). “Uncovering CLIL: Content and language integrated learning in bilingual and multilingual education”. Oxford, UK: Macmillan Education.
- [5] Tegan, G. (2023), “What Is Action Research? Definition & Examples” <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/action-research/>
- [6] Wegerif, R. (2006) “Dialogic education: what is it and why do we need it?”, Education Review, 19(2): 58-66