E-Twinning for CLIL: The Experience of an Italian Lower Secondary School

MEMÈ Marianna (1)

Istituto Comprensivo di Corinaldo, Italy (1)

Abstract

e-Twinning is a free online community for schools in Europe which allows teachers to find partners and collaborate on projects within a secure network and platform.

The many functionalities of the platform allow for the implementation of interdisciplinary activities and virtual collaborations among students of different countries, along with innumerable opportunities of training and professional development for teachers.

Thanks to these features eTwinning is an incredibly useful tool for CLIL-based pathways, allowing to explore and put into practice the many potentiality of the methodology.

The paper outlines the experience realized in an Italian lower secondary school within a project called "Welcome to my place! Let's know each other by using English", highlighting the effectiveness of the tool in the achievement of subject-related and transversal objectives.

In particular it is described how CLIL and eTwinning help to realize a competence based teaching and learning, provide opportunities of authentic communication and support the acquisition of a "glocal" awareness by the students.

The role of technology and scaffolding strategies (necessary for the inclusivity of the lessons) are also reported and reflected upon, together with results of preliminary and final questionnaires administered to the students who took part in the project.

Keywords: *CLIL; eTwinning, language learning, competence-based learning;*

1. What is eTwinnnig?

E-Twinning is a free online community for schools in Europe which allows teachers to find partners and collaborate on projects within a secure platform. It is composed of a network of more than 550.000 teachers based in 36 different countries, with thousands and thousands of projects already implemented.

The many functionalities of the platform allow for the implementation of interdisciplinary activities and virtual collaborations among students of different countries, along with innumerable opportunities of training and professional development for teachers.

Once registered and logged in the platform, a teacher can find partners from schools in other countries and then plan and develop a collaborative project. The projects can address a specific subject or be interdisciplinary, and usually foresee the interaction of the students within the virtual environment provided.

The so-called "twin-space" offers the opportunity to share files, videos, pictures and to realize live events where the students can actually talk to each other.

One of the many advantages of this portal is that teachers and educators are provided with tips, frames and tools for realizing projects that can involve a high numbers of students in a very simple way and at absolutely no cost, allowing for the implementation of complex activities that would otherwise be very hard to put in practice.

Furthermore, the realization of such projects helps to develop a "European mindset" among students and teachers, and gives prestige to schools towards their community and parents.

2. eTwinning and CLIL

CLIL is the acronym of "Content and language integrated learning", and refers to a methodology that allows the students to learn disciplinary contents and at the same time improve their command of a foreign language.

This methodology is nowadays acknowledged as one of the most effective for the implementation of a competence-based didactics and for acquiring 21st century's skills. Among the many advantages offered by CLIL, we can highlight the fact that this methodology improves learners' performance in both

curricular subjects and foreign language, allows for the development of higher order thinking skills and encourages stronger links with values of community and citizenship.

It is easy to understand that the eTwinning platform and the CLIL methodology are a natural combination for the realization of significant projects from a disciplinary point of view which, at the same time, contribute to the improvement of language skills.

These are the premises from which we started for the implementation of the project "Welcome to my place! Let's know each other by using English" coordinated by the "Istituto Comprensivo di Corinaldo", a Lower Secondary School in central Italy. The partner schools were: "Fabian Legorboru" from Llodio, Spain; "CEIP José Garcìa Planells", from Manises, Spain; "CEIP San Roque", from Torredonjimeno, Spain; "Akabe Imam Hatip Ortaokulu" from Kataray, Turkey. The project took place during the 2017/2018 school year, from February to June.

3. The eTwinning project "Welcome to my place! Let's know each other by using English"

The students studied the history and monuments of their home town in English and realized virtual tours that then were uploaded on the twin space. The virtual tours are made up of pictures, videos, Power point presentations, etc...

Furthermore, after creating all these materials, the students communicated with each other through Skype conferences, asking and answering questions about the materials exchanged, but also about differences and similarities of life in their own country and town.

The activities related to the project were carried out through the collaboration among teachers of various disciplines, in particular History, Geography, Art, and English. Thanks to this project they managed to establish an effective collaboration, and exchange their experiences, ideas and points of view, that led to the creation of shared lessons plans inspired to the CLIL methodology.

The cooperative approach was also used for the realization of the classrooms activities: the students worked in group of three or four and were constantly encouraged to cooperate and exchange feedbacks.

Thanks to this project the pupils had the chance to know the history, traditions and characteristics of other towns in Europe and at the same time to increase the awareness of their territory by looking at it with different eyes. It is therefore possible to affirm that the activities described have contributed to developing an intercultural perspective and a mindset that we can define as "glocal", because it is open to the outside world and at the same time conscious and proud of its roots. We offered the students the opportunity to establish an authentic channel of communication with peers from different countries, and to develop a positive attitude and respect towards all the different experiences and life styles.

4. Competence-based learning, inclusivity and the role of technology

One of the main advantages of using the CLIL methodology for the implementation of an eTwinning project is that this choice allows for the realization of a competence-based teaching and learning.

The great cognitive challenge linked to the CLIL methodology is the need to think and work using another language. This necessity leads to a deep reflection on words and structures used both in the foreign language and in the mother tongue. The complexity of these cognitive operations encourages learners to use comprehension strategies that, once acquired, can also be used in the mother tongue and for all the other subjects.

For these reasons, the activities implemented within the project represented a good example of competence-based learning, as various scaffolding strategies were adopted to overcome the aforementioned difficulties.

Firstly, all the project activities were conducted using cooperative learning. This allowed all students, especially those with learning differences, to put their skills (technological, artistic, graphic, organizational and social) into play and to integrate them in their team, also as a compensation of weaker language skills.

Secondly, in order to create their own virtual presentations, the students had to develop the ability to communicate with words and images in a suitable and captivating way for the target audience.

Finally, in order to achieve what mentioned above, the students have learned how to use web tools that could be useful in a future workplace such as: Sutori, PowerPoint, Adobe Spark and other video making applications.

These kind of activities were intrinsically motivating and inclusive, because each student, including those with learning differences, had the opportunity to enhance their skills and attitudes and at the same time to receive the support of peers.

In addition, teachers have constantly promoted self-evaluation and metacognitive reflection processes, to ensure that the learners could recognize their difficulties and develop effective strategies to overcome them.

The use of digital tools has played a fundamental role, both for the opportunity to use extra-linguistic skills (technological, artistic, graphic), and because thanks to the integration of images and text and the structural possibility of cooperation and sharing, has provided support for the comprehension, production and re-elaboration of disciplinary contents.

What stated above is also confirmed by the results of the feedback questionnaires administered to all the participants: all the responded identified team work, communication with foreign peers and video making as the most appreciated components of the activities carried out.

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